

# Colours, Colour Symbolism, and Social Critique in Halldór Laxness's *Salka Valka*

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ABSTRACT: Halldór Kiljan Laxness is one of the most successful and renowned authors in all of Iceland. The Nobel Laureate has written many well-known works, one of which is his early novel *Salka Valka* (1931-1932), a political romance that follows the life of a young girl in a remote Icelandic fishing village from age ten to age twenty-five. An interesting feature of *Salka Valka* is Laxness's use of colours and colour symbolism. While Laxness employs a wide variety of basic and non-basic colour terms throughout the novel to describe various people, objects, and natural phenomena, most interesting is his use of grey as opposed to other colours. Laxness uses grey to portray the dreary life and destitute people in the desolate and remote Icelandic fishing village of Óseyri, which he juxtaposes against colourful descriptions of the vibrant and flourishing lives of wealthy individuals both within and outside the village. This article examines these and Laxness's other uses of grey as opposed to other colours in *Salka Valka*, particularly as they relate to the social and economic critique that, as scholars have noted time and time again, define this novel.

RÉSUMÉ: Halldór Kiljan Laxness, lauréat d'un prix Nobel, est l'un des auteurs à succès islandais les plus renommés. Le roman *Salka Valka* (1931-1932), une romance politique figurant parmi ses premières œuvres, retrace la vie d'une jeune fille dans un village de pêcheurs reculé d'Islande, entre l'âge de dix et vingt-cinq ans. Une des caractéristiques importantes de *Salka Valka* est l'utilisation des couleurs et de ce qu'elles symbolisent. Alors que Laxness emploie une grande variété de couleurs pour décrire les différents personnages, les objets et les phénomènes naturels tout au long de son roman, son utilisation du gris, avec lequel il décrit la vie morne et la misère des habitants de Óseyri, contraste de façon intéressante avec les descriptions colorées de la vie des personnages plus aisés. Cet article se veut une étude de la palette de couleurs utilisée par Laxness dans *Salka Valka*, en s'attardant plus particulièrement au lien qu'entretiennent les couleurs avec la critique sociale et économique, un aspect fondamental de ce roman.

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The many and wide-ranging works of Iceland's Nobel Laureate Halldór Kiljan Laxness (1902-1998) have been the subjects of numerous analyses by literary critics. Scholars have mined Laxness's novels, stories, plays, poems, and essays for what they reveal about his development as a writer, examined his political and religious views, assessed the extent to which they reflect Icelandic and foreign literary trends, and investigated his positions on a variety of topics, including hero-worship, nationalism, poetry, and Hollywood. Laxness's writing style in particular has been much studied; it is a style so unique that two adjectives have been coined to adequately describe it: *laxneskur* and *kiljanskur*. More than anything else, scholars have analyzed the way in which Laxness's writing style, particularly in *Íslandsklukkan* (1943-1946) [*Iceland's Bell* 2003] and *Gerpla* (1952) [*The Happy Warriors* 1958], imitates the terse and objective style employed by the authors of the *Íslendingasögur* [Sagas of Icelanders]. This article seeks to examine through an analysis of *Salka Valka* (1931-1932; English translation 1936) one aspect of Laxness's style that has not yet been considered: his use of colour terms. *Salka Valka*, one of Laxness's earlier and best-known novels, lends itself particularly well to such an examination, since it is considered to be much richer in images, similes, and descriptions than any of Laxness's later works (Hallberg 1956 529).

*Salka Valka*, a political love story, follows the life of a young girl in a remote Icelandic fishing village from age ten to age twenty-five. *Salka Valka* was the second literary work written after Laxness's return to Iceland from America, and in *Salka Valka* Laxness's readers begin to see something new: a focus on current issues and, in particular, on Marxism and class antagonism. As stated by prominent Laxness scholar Peter Hallberg,

[Laxness] is thinking of his own times rather than of the past. The ordinary people's conditions are regulated in our society by the same laws now, under home government, as had applied before, under foreign rule. In Laxness's next novel, *Salka Valka*, Arnaldur, the socialist, is made to express himself with more direct relevance to the situation; as far as we can judge he reproduces the author's own opinion: 'But what was it that happened in 1874, when our finances were separated from those of Denmark? All that really happened was this: the exploitation of the people was brought into our own country. The robbers simply changed their nationality.'<sup>1</sup>  
(1971 69)

Laxness was becoming fully aware of the class issues and economic exploitation that was present in early twentieth-century Iceland. He began to see a large divide between the haves and the have-nots and did not hesitate, using Arnaldur Björnsson as his mouthpiece, to voice his grievances concerning what he saw as

the major economic and social problems of contemporary Iceland in this popular and, in many ways, groundbreaking work.

In this politically charged novel, Laxness employs a wide variety of basic and non-basic colour terms to describe people, objects, and natural phenomena.<sup>2</sup> There are nine basic colour terms (*svartur* [black], *hvítur* [white], *rauður* [red], *grænn* [green], *gulur* [yellow], *blár* [blue], *brúnn* [brown], *grár* [grey], and *bleikur* [pink]) and more than 150 non-basic colour terms accounted for in Modern Icelandic.<sup>3</sup> In *Salka Valka*, Halldór Laxness makes use of all nine basic colour terms and approximately 40 non-basic colour terms.<sup>4</sup> Of the latter, two are not found in the standard Modern Icelandic lexicon. These terms include *ebenvíði* [ebony] and *hrollgrár* [cold grey].<sup>5</sup>

The colour terms in *Salka Valka* are carefully chosen and follow consistent patterns that are applied throughout the work. Particularly interesting is Laxness's use of grey in opposition to other colours, particularly as this use of colour relates to the political and, more specifically, socialist overtones of the work as outlined by Hallberg. Laxness has generally been known to work in strong contrasts, seen in the extreme character types found in many of his novels (for example Steinþór and Sigurlína in *Salka Valka*), and his use of colour symbolism is no exception (Hallberg 1971 76). Laxness uses the adjective "grey" and varieties of grey throughout the novel to portray the poor, working-class people and dreary life in the desolate and remote Icelandic fishing village of Óseyri on the Axlarfjörður, which is seen in contrast to colourful descriptions of the people and vibrant life outside the village as well as to portrayals of wealthy individuals within the village. Furthermore, Laxness often uses grey when describing times of death, suffering, and loss, but bright colours when describing situations involving love and life. This juxtaposition of grey to other colours illustrates the general living conditions in a small, desolate fishing village and in doing so underscores Laxness's focus on economic difference and the plight of the working class, topics that, as scholars have noted time and time again, both define this novel and reflect Laxness's political inclinations at the time of its composition.

## Grey and Social Criticism in *Salka Valka*

Grey, the intermediary between black and white, is often considered boring, uninteresting, and dull (Kouwer 131). Deriving its meaning from ashes, grey symbolizes neutralization, indifference, and depression (Cirlot 54); in the medieval period, grey signified penance, humility, and poverty and was associated with the drab clothing worn by medieval peasants (Blanch 74). Grey also symbolizes bad weather and dreariness, and can represent death (Kouwer 131). Drawing from this symbolism, Laxness describes the homes belonging to the poor, working-class villagers of Óseyri, which are referred to as *þurrabúðir* (cottages) and are portrayed

elsewhere as merely the remains of old fisher huts with little decoration other than leafless and flowerless plants, as grey, desolate run-down shacks that are hardly fit to be called homes: “þessar gráu lánmæddu þurrabúðir sem klúktu hér einsog gleymdur reki á afskektum sjávarbakka—þær voru orðnar að herbúðum” [the grey, sorely tested fisher cottages, strewn like forgotten heaps of wreckage on a lonely shore, had become the tents of an army] (II 88; 264).<sup>6</sup> This use of grey in describing the buildings, which are seen more as piles of wreckage than abodes fit for living in, brings forth notions of dreariness, lifelessness and poverty and both gives a sense of what life is like in such an impoverished and hopeless place as Óseyri on the Axlarfjörður and visually sets the stage for Laxness’s social critique on economic injustice in early twentieth-century Iceland.

In contrast, Laxness uses colours other than grey (most of which are bright and vibrant) to describe foreign settings and the homes of prosperous villagers—the most prosperous of whom, it should be noted, is a Dane. Colour, or at least more colour than is present in the cottages in Óseyri, is alluded to when Salkva Valka speaks of traveling to Reykjavík in the beginning of the novel: “Altaf síðan við lögðum á stað hef ég verið að hlakka til að koma suður og sjá þessi stóru máluðu hús og þessar fínu stofur og myndir á veggjunum, einsog þú talaðir um mamma. Ég vil eiga heima í soleiðis stofu” [Ever since we started I’ve been looking forward so much to getting to the south and seeing those painted houses and pretty rooms with pictures hanging on the walls, which you told me about. I want to live in a cottage like that] (I 13; 14). Although no specific colour is mentioned in Salkva Valka’s statement, the description of the houses in the south conjures up images of brightly painted houses whose inhabitants want for nothing. Within the village, the homes belonging to the few wealthy villagers are brightly coloured. The home of the rector and rural dean is green, which is commonly associated with vigour and life (Luckiesh 115); white and red, colours also associated with life (Cirlot 54, Gummere 3–4), are used to describe the Kof estate, which belongs to Arnaldur’s aunt Herborg. Such descriptions make the houses in the south and these two painted homes stand out against the grey, lifeless buildings found throughout Óseyri, but more importantly for Laxness’s purposes emphasize the difference in the standards of living through the contrast between these beautifully coloured homes and the bleak and desolate circumstances in which the majority of Óseyri’s citizens are forced to live.

The contrast of the grey and bright colours as a means through which to convey and criticize an extreme difference in social and economic status between the upper and working classes is most clearly seen when we compare the grey, run-down shacks of Óseyri’s villagers to the estate of the Danish merchant Johann Bogesen (referred to as the only “real” house in the village<sup>7</sup>):

... hið skrautlega steinhús Jóhanns kaupmanns Bogesens sjálf, snjóhvítt einsog mjöllin yfir heiðunum, rislaust, með ótal ferstrendum tökkum uppúr þakbrúnum

í líkíngu við forna virkismúra. Þar sást hvergi frostrós á rúðu, en gul silkitjöld dregin til hálfis fyrir glugga á báðum hæðum.  
(I 37-38)

[Johann Bogesen's splendid cement villa, a building white as the mountain snows, with a flat roof and innumerable castellations along each side, in the style of an old fortress. Here not a single ice-flower was to be seen on the window-panes, against which yellow silk curtains were drawn halfway across on both floors.]  
(32)

In this description and in many others of Johann Bogesen and his family, it is clear that the Bogesens' living standard is much higher than is the village average (Sønderholm 147). The use of colour substantiates this notion, and stands out against the otherwise grey setting of Óseyri. White is a pleasant colour associated with light, cheer, health, and goodness (Gummere 3-4); it is also associated with harmony, stability, and peace (Kouwer 99). Laxness's description of the Bogesen estate touches on many of these concepts, not least stability. The description of the curtains as yellow draws on the association of yellow with luminosity and the way in which yellow is extravagant, joyful, and enlivening (Luckiesh 109), and also on yellow's association with magnanimity and intellect (Cirlot 54). Laxness sarcastically associates magnanimity with Johann Bogesen, who at every opportunity reminds the poor villagers, who he condescendingly refers to as "his children," of how well he has treated them.<sup>8</sup> This stark contrast between the grey cottages and Johann Bogesen's white mansion shows both the economic gap between the rich and the poor and the general standard of living in the village, and drives home Laxness's social and economic critique on early twentieth-century Icelandic society as previously defined by Hallberg; while Johann Bogesen, representative of the members of the upper class Icelandic government who established themselves following Iceland's achievement of independence, lives comfortably and happily in his white villa with yellow curtains, the impoverished villagers, representative of the exploited "ordinary" Icelandic working-class citizens, live dreary and hopeless lives in their run-down, grey shacks with little to look forward to other than their funerals, which, Laxness is sure to emphasize, they are expected to pay for themselves with years' worth of their own hard-earned wages.

Laxness uses grey not only to portray the desolate living conditions in the village of Óseyri, but also its poverty-stricken citizens. This is seen most clearly in the grey clothing worn by the working-class characters in the novel, which recalls the grey worn by peasants in the medieval period and as such reflects the villagers' impoverished state. Grey is also one of the colours of non-dyed sheep's wool (along with brown and black), and wool has been one of the most commonly used fabrics in Scandinavia since the Viking period and most likely before (von

Bergen and Mauersberger 150, Ewing 132-33);<sup>9</sup> this was surely the case in Iceland as well. Wool was also most certainly the most affordable and readily available fabric in rural Iceland during the early twentieth century. Colourfully dyed fabrics of other materials had to be imported, and clothing imports were one of the most expensive imports during the early twentieth century (Mead 140); the impoverished villagers in Óseyri would hardly have had access to such a luxury as imported fabric, especially on the meager allowances given to them by Johann Bogesen. Salka Valka, who is poor throughout most of the novel, wears brown trousers and a grey sweater as a child: “Það var eitt kvöld um vorið, að telpan kom neðanúr bænum í mórauðum buxum og grárrí peysu” [One spring evening the little girl was walking home, wearing brown trousers and a grey woolen jersey] (I 137; 101).<sup>10</sup> As a full-grown woman, Salka Valka still wears grey; she wears “gráar buxurnar” [grey trousers] and later is clothed “í grárrí þykkri peysu” [in a thick grey jersey] (I 137; 360). Although Salka Valka herself is lively, strong, and ambitious, she is still a proletarian, and her clothing reflects this role.

This grey costume is worn not only by Salka Valka, but also by the majority of the impoverished citizens of Óseyri. Salka Valka's mother, Sigurlína Jónsdóttir, wears an old grey dress and grey stockings. Even her face is grey (from seasickness) at the beginning of the novel. Steinþór Steinsson (who is also has steel-grey eyes) wears grey, although interestingly he also wears blue trousers and a red handkerchief (see below). The elderly people of Mararbúð with whom Sigurlína and Salka Valka find lodging are very poor, and the blind old man of the house, Eyjólfur, wears a grey shirt:

Sigurlína sagði af léttu um þeirra hag, en bráðlega kom húsbóndinn, sköllóttur maður með gráan skegghýúng, gulur einsog bókfell af innisetum, og handhnýttur eftir gamalt erfiði, í grárrí skyrtu, með stóra flókaskó á fótum; hann hélt postullega á netjariðli í hendinni; mæðgurnar geingu fyrir hann og heilsuðu honum.  
(I 71)

[Sigurlína embarked on her story, and soon the master of the house came in, a bald old man with grey wisps of beard as yellow as the inside of parchment and with hands knotted by past toil. He wore a grey shirt and had large felt shoes on his feet; he had a netting-needle and mesh in his hands, which made him look like an apostle. Mother and daughter went up to him and said good-day.]  
(55)

In the second book, after he becomes a poor and starving communist, Arnaldur Björnsson wears predominantly grey clothing; he is said to be clad in a grey, shabby suit, the only smart thing about which was a red tie (sundurgerð var ekki í klæðaburði hans önnur en slaufan, hún var rauð) (II 105), which Salka Valka thinks is “positively absurd.” Since the red of Arnaldur's tie in this instance clearly does not carry with it any kind of upper class connotation or implication of

privilege that comes with owning a scarf of bright colour, it instead likely represents Arnaldur's passion for the communist movement in Óseyri, as communism is traditionally connected to the colour red (Luckiesh 100).<sup>11</sup>

Foreigners and prosperous villagers, on the other hand, wear bright and colourful clothes in order to signify their social and economic status. It could certainly be argued that this is one of Laxness's early attempts to draw on saga motifs, since coloured clothing was often linked to prosperity in the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>12</sup> In *Salka Valka*, the women who arrive on boats from the south wear multicoloured clothes upon their brief stops in Óseyri, "einsog taglið á norðurljósunum" [like the streamers of the northern lights] (II 67; 251). During one of their lessons, Arnaldur tells Salka Valka that his mother, the beautiful woman beyond the blue mountains, wears blue, a colour which symbolizes expensiveness and luxury (Jacobs and Jacobs 30): "Hún er í blárrí kápu og eins falleg og konurnar í útlendu myndablöðunum sem kaupmannsfrúin fær, nei þúsund miljón sinnum fallegrí" [She wears a blue cloak, and is pretty as the women in the foreign illustrated papers the merchant's wife has sent to her; no, a thousand million times prettier] (I 105; 78). Young Arnaldur has romanticized ideas about his deceased mother, and in his imagination has her clad in the most beautiful and luxurious clothes possible, represented by his choice of the colour blue. One may also see in Arnaldur's description of his divinized mother associations with the Virgin Mary, who is often portrayed in mantles of blue (Jacobs and Jacobs 29).

Within the village, the members of the prosperous Bogesen family are, of course, colourfully clad. Johann Bogesen's wife, for example, wears a green dress. She is so striking and grand in her green dress that she is even perceived as royal (Luckiesh 115): "Rétt á eftir birtust frúin sjálf í eldhúsinu, klædd í grænan sparikjól, og svo tíguleg og fögur að hún minti á drotningar í spilum" [Immediately afterwards the mistress of the house appeared in the kitchen, wearing a green walking-dress, and so dignified and handsome that she suggested a queen on a playing card] (I 118; 87). Ágantýr Bogesen, Johann Bogesen's spoiled son, wears a blue suit, symbolizing luxury; after all, he is the son of the mighty Johann Bogesen, presumably the eventual heir to his father's wealth, and even engaged to a girl in Copenhagen. As a young adolescent, Arnaldur Björnsson, who lives with his dignified aunt Herborg at Kof and whose father lives in Reykjavík, on several occasions wears a blue suit, just like the merchant's son. Even Salka Valka wears this luxurious blue on one occasion, namely after Johann Bogesen has found her crying in the street and has had her bathed and clothed and sent home in a hand-me-down dress: "Telpan kom heim um kvöldið þvegin og greidd, södd og sæll, klædd í ljósbláan kjól" [Salka Valka came home in the evening washed and combed, well-fed and cheerful, wearing a light-blue frock] (I 119; 88). Salka Valka's brush with the upper class provides her with the only piece of fine clothing she has as a child, and when wearing it she feels happy, as though she can but for a moment escape who she really is and play dress-up as a member of the upper

class; however, after wearing it every day, Salka Valka's new dress eventually becomes worn and tattered and she is forced to return to reality and the position to which she has been assigned in society—a stinging commentary on the possibility of social mobility in such a culture.<sup>13</sup> Steinþór Steinsson seems to be the only person in Óseyri who is able to move up in social class, although he does so through illegal acquisition of wealth. As noted above, he wears blue trousers and a red handkerchief and after his return from abroad, he has on a blue Cheviot tweed suit and new brown boots; in addition to the aforementioned signification of blue, these descriptions draw on the association of brown leather with luxury and expensiveness, and the association of red with passion and sentiment, which is appropriate for this local hero whose vigour and whose passion for Salka Valka define him throughout the novel (Cirlot 54).<sup>14</sup>

The scenery in Óseyri is predominantly grey and underscores the hopelessness and bleakness of the village and, more specifically, the plight of its economically oppressed citizens. Erik Sønderholm has noted that the weather in *Salka Valka* plays a significant role; it is most often dismal and provides an excellent background both for the economic realities of the village's inhabitants as well as for the tragic scene at the end of the novel when Arnaldur departs for America on a cold and damp autumn evening, leaving Salka Valka alone in her desolate homeland (163). Not only are the clouds above the village grey, but also the sky; rarely does the sun shine in Óseyri and rarely is the weather favourable. Even the dawn is grey: “En með gráu morgunsárinu sem fælir sætustu draumana burt” [It was not till the grey of dawn, which scares away the sweetest dreams] (I 148; 108). This grey dawn reflects a complete loss of hope and warmth; not even dreams can survive in this desolate place. The fjords also take on the greyness of the village in order to emphasize the lifelessness and utter hopelessness of Óseyri and the social and economic reality it represents, and their presence is so lifeless that they are seen as an obstacle to imagination, which cannot function where hope does not exist.

## Other Uses of Grey in *Salka Valka*

Laxness uses grey not only as a tool for political and social commentary, but also in order to illustrate some of the most tragic scenes within the novel—those of loss, suffering, and death, all of which are seen predominantly against the backdrop of grey weather and scenery. The scenery is *kaldgrár* [cold grey] on the morning that Steinþór flees Óseyri, leaving behind Sigurlína, his lover, and Salka Valka, whom he had just attempted to rape: “En maðurinn vatt sér útúr dyrunum í sama mund of hinir aðkomnu ruddust inn og var þegar horfinn í kaldgráu morgunhúminu” [But the man slipped out of the door as the others pushed in, and disappeared instantaneously in the cold grey morning twilight] (I 150; 110).

Seen within this grey description is Salka Valka, who has just experienced the loss of her innocence, and Sigurlína, who has just experienced the loss of her lover, first to her daughter and second to Steinþór's decision to flee. Later in the first book, Steinþór returns, and he and Sigurlína are engaged and are to be married at a "hallelujah wedding";<sup>15</sup> however, days before the joyous event, Steinþór flees once again. Sigurlína is depicted as sitting and staring over the fjord and into the grey rain when she realizes that Steinþór has abandoned her once again. She has lost her lover for the second time, and the sorrow of this loss is epitomized in the grey, rainy day.

Laxness also uses grey in depictions of death.<sup>16</sup> The most poignant example is probably Sigurlína's suicide. Because she kills herself on Easter Sunday, scholars have noted that Sigurlína's life and indeed the entirety of *Þú vinnviður hreini* "er en passionsskildring, hvor den lidende ikke er Jesus, men mennesket, konkretisert i Salka Valkas moders skikkelse og skæbne" [is a passion portrayal, where the one who suffers is not Jesus, but the human being, concentrated in Salka Valka's mother's form and fate] (Sønderholm 141). Similar to the passion of Christ, Sigurlína's tragic "passion" is clouded in darkness, and her surroundings are primarily grey, an adjective more specific, more dreary, and more hopeless than darkness.<sup>17</sup> Laxness brings together grey clothing, scenery, and weather to depict this event. The weather is grey upon the discovery of Sigurlína's body, setting the scene for this tragedy and for Salka Valka's loss of the mother she simultaneously loved and despised: "Svo héldu menn áfram að rölta afturábak og áfram um flæðarmálið í gráu páskaregninu" [And everyone went on searching up and down along the shore in the grey Easter rain] (I 289; 203). Washed up alongside Sigurlína on this grey day is a piece of flotsam, which is also grey, so that even nature reflects this lifeless and sorrowful scene. Sigurlína herself wears an old and ragged grey dress with grey stockings, stressing both her poverty and her lifelessness.<sup>18</sup> It is also no surprise that Sigurlína, whose futile existence is best symbolized by the hopeless, indifferent, and depressing colour grey, ends her life almost entirely in greyness. In recounting the passion of Christ, there is some hope as he is resurrected on what is now Easter Sunday in a scene in which he wears white and dazzling clothing;<sup>19</sup> for Sigurlína, however, there is no resurrection, a tragic conclusion to her dreary and hopeless proletarian existence.

Seen in contrast to loss, suffering, and death as grey are love and life, which are often portrayed colourfully. This is epitomized in the romantic relationship between Arnaldur and Salka Valka, arguably the only happy time in the novel. For once, the weather is good, and as Sønderholm notes, only in this paradise-like section of the novel does the weather deviate from its usual grey dreariness (163). Green, the colour of fertility, spring, and life, is the colour of the natural landscape during the high point of Arnaldur and Salka Valka's relationship. This is initially seen in nature during the first walk Arnaldur and Salka take together and the point at which they begin to fall in love:

Næst settust þau niður í grænum hvammi, grasi vöxnum að neðan, en lýngi og blóðbergi að ofan, ánganin var megn í þvölu næturloftinu, hver andardráttur sameinaði brjóstin dýpra töfrum moldarinnar. Þau settust fast hvort uppvið annað, heit og rjóð, ljómandi augum, ölvuð af vorilminum úr fjallinu.

(II 263-64)

[They sat down in a green hollow with grass at the bottom and heather and thyme covering its sides. They sat down close together, warm and red, with glowing eyes, intoxicated by the spring fragrance from the mountain side.]

(377)

Happiness, growth and love are abounding in this colourful description; the green, flourishing grass reflects the growing love between Salka Valka and Arnaldur during this beautiful spring day in the mountains. The sky, which is predominantly grey throughout *Salka Valka*, is a noticeable greenish blue (*hinum græna bláma jónsmessuheiðríkjunnar*) after Salka Valka and Arnaldur make love for the first time, and like the green hollow, it brings forth notions of life and heavenliness, again reflecting the joy, life, and love represented in the relationship between Salka Valka and Arnaldur. Finally, the sunrise and the sunset are red immediately before Salka Valka and Arnaldur realize their love for one another, drawing on such associations of red with love and passion (Kouwer 106). While dawn has previously been described almost exclusively as grey, the red sunset and dawn stand out to reflect this rare occurrence of happiness, love, and life in the bleak and impoverished world of Óseyri.

## Conclusion

The contrast of grey to other colours in *Salka Valka* works to portray the dreary life of loss and suffering in Óseyri as compared to life in the outside world and the rare occasions of happiness and love within the village; more importantly, the use of grey as opposed to other colours emphasizes the economic and class issues that define this novel. Laxness draws on long-standing associations of grey and other colours such as white, blue, yellow, red, and green in *Salka Valka* and uses these colours to describe people, clothing, buildings, scenery, and the weather in order to portray two dichotomous worlds: one of desolation, poverty, and despair and the other of comfort, prosperity, and happiness. Though the plot would not be altered without such colour descriptions, their presence works to bolster Laxness's political and social agenda and gives the reader a visual picture of what it means to live in a place such as Óseyri on the Axlarfjörður, a place where "menn sjái speglast hver í annars augum sannfæringuna um fánýti þess að vera til" [people see reflected in each other's eyes the conviction that existence is futile] (I 10; 11).

## NOTES

1. The novel now known as *Salka Valka* originally came out in two parts, the first *Þú vínviður hreini: saga úr flæðarmálinu* (1931) and the second *Fuglinn í fjörunni: pólitísk ástarsaga* (1932). The passage quoted comes from *Fuglinn í fjörunni: pólitísk ástarsaga* 257.
2. Basic and non-basic colour terms refer to the definitions of Brent Berlin and Paul Kay in their seminal work on colour, *Basic Colour Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*.
3. According to Berlin and Kay's standards, Modern Icelandic lacks basic colour terms for orange and purple.
4. The non-basic colour terms used in *Salka Valka* comprise *berjablár* [berry blue], *blágrár* [bluish grey], *bláhvítur* [bluish white], *blárauður* [bluish red], *deyrrauður* [blood red], *drifhvítur* [snow white], *dumbrauður* [dark red], *dökkblár* [dark blue], *ebenviði* [ebony], *eirbrúnn* [coppery brown], *eirlitaður* [copper coloured], *eirrauður* [coppery red], *fagurbrúnn* [bright brown], *fagurgrænn* [bright green], *fagurrauður* [bright red], *fjólublár* [violet], *gullinn* [golden], *hárauður* [bright red], *himinblár* [sky blue], *hrollgrár* [cold grey], *jarpur* [auburn], *kafrijóður* [crimson], *kaldgrár* [cold grey], *kolsvartur* [coal black], *kvöldroðinn* [dawn red], *ljósbrúnn* [light brown], *ljósblár* [light blue], *móleitur* [light brown], *mórauður* [rust brown], *morgunroðinn* [sunset red], *rauðjarpur* [reddish auburn], *rjóður* [ruddy, rosy-cheeked], *roði* [redness], *silfur* [silver], *skjallhvítur* [snow white], *skolrauður* [light red], *snjóhvítur* [snow white], *stálgrár* [steel grey], *vatnsblár* [watery blue], *vatnslitur* [water coloured], and *þakbrúnn* [light brown].
5. These findings are based on *Orðabók Háskólans*, <http://www.lexis.hi.is/indexny.html>. One of the colour terms not found in the standard Modern Icelandic lexicon, namely *ebenviði*, is defined as “íbenviður, harður, dökkur viður” in Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir og Margrét Guðmundsdóttir (34).
6. Here and in the following I quote the 2005 editions of *Salka Valka I: Þú vínviður hreini* and *Salka Valka II: Fuglinn í fjörunni*. They are abbreviated as I and II respectively. Here and elsewhere I use the 1936 Lyon translation of the novel.
7. “Í húsum? Hvaða hús eru hér? Það er ekki nema eitt hús hér, þetta sem þér standið í á þessari stundu” [Houses? What houses? There's literally only the one you're in at the moment] (I, 38; 33).
8. One should note here the degrading manner in which Johann Bogesen, as the social and economic “superior” in the village, describes the villagers of Óseyri. They depend on Bogesen the same way as a child is dependent upon a parent, and in this way the status quo of the village is maintained.
9. C.P. Biggam notes that “undyed woolen clothes would have looked grey or greyish because of the use of mixtures of the natural colours [brown, black, white, and grey], and the quick discoloration of white through farm-work as well as the use of naturally grey wool” (136-37).
10. The use of brown in this description in many ways complements the occurrence of grey, as it can also be the colour of non-dyed sheep's wool and is considered to be a dull, neutral colour also associated with the peasant class (Kouwer 130).
11. Laxness, who typically places his characters in a larger social pattern, expresses powerful social forces and concepts through his characters, and Arnaldur Björnsson

is no exception (Hallberg 1971 91). Another symbolism of red is social revolution (Katz 17); communism appealed to the commoner and Arnaldur, dressed in grey, represents this commoner who embodies the communist ideal, symbolized by the starkly contrasted red tie.

12. Thor Ewing (2006) argues that this is the case in, for example, both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Njáls saga*, and makes specific comments regarding coloured clothing and status in poetry (he notes, for example, that “red clothing also seems to be a status marker in poetry, as in *Guðrúnarkviða* II st.19 or *Haraldskvæði* st.19, for example, where red cloaks combine with other luxury items to indicate wealth and status” (2)). He also argues that the association of coloured clothing with status has been verified by archeological findings. I am grateful to Birgitta Wallace for confirming this observation.
13. Salkva Valka wears blue on two other occasions in the novel, both times as an adult, but this blue is in both instances coupled with grey and due to this mixing of two colours, one symbolizing costliness and luxury and the other poverty, it does not bring forth the same notions as, for example, Ágantýr Bogesen’s blue suit. Salkva Valka’s goal throughout the novel is to get out of poverty; however, she never truly escapes her proletarian roots, even when she is the owner of Mararbúð, because even then she is dependent upon Steinþór, her benefactor. Therefore, she can wear blue, but it is always mixed with drab grey to demonstrate that even if she may come into contact with money and temporary prosperity and happiness, she never can deny who she really is, namely a poor fisher girl who ultimately belongs in Óseyri.
14. While brown is typically associated with poverty, mourning, strength, and earthly things (Blanch 76-79) seeing it in connection to leather brings forth notions of expensiveness and luxury.
15. The “hallelujah wedding” is the wedding celebration at the local Salvation Army, an affective spiritual institution (deemed a place of blasphemy and foolery by the rural dean) focused on God’s overflowing love, individual salvation, vivid testifying, and many kinds of celebration in the name of Jesus Christ, primarily singing and praying.
16. It should be noted here that grey is often used to describe death in the Icelandic Sagas (Turville-Petre 57), and that as previously noted Laxness frequently drew on saga motifs in his own works.
17. Matthew 27: 45, New Revised Standard Version (“From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon”), Mark 15: 33 (“When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon”) and Luke 23:44 (“It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed”).
18. Sigurlína’s one open eye is watery blue (*vatnsblár*) and looking toward heaven, her teeth are black and stumpy, and she is said to have a bright brown (*faðurbrúnn*) piece of seaweed on her face; however, these uses of colour are overshadowed by the predominance of grey.
19. Matthew 28: 3 (“His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow”), Mark 16: 5 (“As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed”), and Luke 24:4 (“While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them”).

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