

The Symbolic System of Satin Clothing and Characters' Fate in A Dream in Red Mansions

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ABSTRACT The descriptions of velvet and satin clothing in A Dream in Red Mansions construct a symbolic system that implies the characters' destinies and the rise and fall of society. Through meticulous descriptions of textile texture, color, and patterns, Cao Xueqin transforms clothing into a symbolic carrier of fate prophecy and character representation. Velvet and satin clothing function not only as markers of status within the feudal hierarchy but also as material signs through which luxurious textures and color changes allude to the decline of the Jia family. This paper analyzes the construction of the symbolic system of velvet and satin clothing and explores its artistic value from three perspectives: cultural connotation, relationship with characters' fates, and narrative function. The study shows that satin and velvet textiles in the novel form a dual reference system connecting material and spiritual dimensions, as well as appearance and essence. Clothing descriptions therefore become an important narrative device for revealing identity, foreshadowing fate, and deepening thematic meaning.

INDEX TERMS a dream in red mansions, satin clothing, textile symbolism, fate trajectory, narrative function

I. INTRODUCTION

A Dream in Red Mansions is a pinnacle of classical Chinese novels. Its artistic achievement lies not only in its grand narrative structure and profound ideological content but also in its meticulous pursuit of detail. Cao Xueqin, with the delicate touch of a fine-brush painter, elevates the description of clothing to the realm of symbolic art, making it a means of understanding the characters' fates and the essence of society. Satin, silk, and velvet, as the primary textile materials for Qing Dynasty aristocratic clothing, appear repeatedly in the novel; their luxurious textures, rich colors, and intricate patterns form an exquisite symbolic network. The description of clothing is not merely a simple embellishment of scenes but also functions as a cultural metaphor and a foreshadowing of destiny.

II. THE CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS AND SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF VELVET AND SATIN CLOTHING IN A DREAM IN RED MANSIONS

A. THE HIERARCHICAL SYSTEM AND IDENTITY MARKERS OF VELVET AND SATIN CLOTHING

In A Dream in Red Mansions, satin and other luxurious textiles play a strict role in class identification, reflecting the rigid social order of feudal society. Different velvet materials, clothing colors, and dress norms for various occasions form a complete system of identity. The Jia family is wealthy and powerful, and its members' clothing

strictly follows the feudal etiquette system. The order of masters and servants, legitimate and illegitimate children, and seniority is expressed through the texture of clothing. The finest satins and silks, delicate and smooth with rich colors, are exclusively used by core family members such as Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang. Second-class velvet is distributed to illegitimate children and senior servants. Ordinary fabrics serve as clothing materials for common servants. Such a hierarchical clothing system is both a display of material wealth and a manifestation of power relations [1]. Overstepping the bounds of the hierarchy in clothing represents a challenge to the hierarchical order, and downgrading clothing implies a decline in status. Cao Xueqin's detailed descriptions of the differences in the hierarchy of velvet clothing expose the internal mechanism of feudal society, which relies on material identification to maintain class barriers. Clothing thus becomes a code for interpreting the social status and power structure of characters [2].

B. CULTURAL METAPHORS IN THE COLORS AND PATTERNS OF SATIN

The colors and patterns of velvet clothing carry rich cultural connotations and become an important aspect of meaning generation in the novel. The color system follows traditional Chinese color aesthetics: red represents joy and vitality,

yellow signifies nobility and majesty, cyan symbolizes purity and indifference, and white carries dual symbolism—it represents purity and transcendental elegance in literati aesthetics, while also signifying mourning and sorrow within the feudal ritual system. Black is associated with solemnity or misfortune. Different velvet colors often foreshadow a character's personality or fate [3]. Pattern designs also contain profound meanings. Dragons and phoenixes symbolize power and status, floral patterns express aesthetic taste, and auspicious patterns (such as Ruyi or cloud motifs) embody traditional blessings and cultural continuity. These patterns, ranging from the intricate floral embroidery favored by the young ladies to the formal motifs on official robes, are not only decorative elements but also visual translations of cultural symbols and social status. Cao Xueqin cleverly integrates color theory and the cultural semantics of various motifs with the characters' fates, making every clothing description a code of personality and a prophecy of fate. The contrast between warm and cool colors reflects the closeness or distance in the characters' relationships, and the transition from vibrant, flourishing floral patterns to sparse or worn-out motifs suggests the ups and downs of fate [4].

C. THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN SATIN TEXTURE AND CHARACTER TEMPERAMENT

There is a subtle correspondence between the texture of velvet and a character's temperament, which shows Cao Xueqin's artistic ingenuity in using objects to represent people. The soft and delicate texture of velvet, with its warm luster, often symbolizes a person's gentle and kind character; the heavy and luxurious texture reflects a person's steady and dignified character; the light and flowing texture (such as silk gauze and thin silk) represents a refined and elegant temperament, often associated with seasonal luxury and poetic grace. The correspondence between texture and character is not a simple analogy, but rather a stable association mechanism established in the reader's mind after repeated descriptions and reinforcement [5]. Changes in the texture of clothing often foreshadow changes in a character's spiritual situation. The transition from luxurious velvet to coarse cloth reflects the ups and downs of life—from wealth to poverty and from pride to loss. Cao Xueqin uses tactile imagery to express personality, transforming abstract traits into tangible material forms and making the characters' images three-dimensional. The texture of velvet, as a metaphorical carrier, connects the material and spiritual worlds [6].

III. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN VELVET AND SATIN CLOTHING AND THE FATES OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS

A. THE SYMBOLISM OF JIA BAOYU'S CLOTHING CHANGES AND HIS SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

The changes in Jia Baoyu's clothing serve as a visual narrative of his spiritual growth and destiny. In the early period, Baoyu wore gorgeous velvet, bright colors, and complicated

patterns, symbolizing his carefree childhood and reflecting the Jia family's prosperity. The clothing descriptions during this period highlight luxury and refinement, showcasing Baoyu's status as the second son of the Rongguo mansion and his pampered life [7]. As the plot develops, Baoyu's clothes become simpler and more elegant; the colors change from dark to light and from ornate to plain, coinciding with his spiritual awakening. The process of simplifying clothing symbolizes Baoyu's shedding of material constraints and pursuit of spiritual freedom. When the Jia family declines and Baoyu becomes a monk, his clothing transcends the hierarchy of luxurious textiles, abandoning the velvet and satin system to embrace the humble cotton or linen robes of monastic life, thereby completing his transformation from noble young master into one who has renounced the secular world. This is not only Baoyu's personal journey but also a metaphor for his spiritual change—from obsession with prosperity to enlightenment [8]. The comparison of the clothing characteristics and fate trajectories of the main characters is shown in Table 1.

B. COMPARISON OF LIN DAIYU AND XUE BAOCHAI'S CLOTHING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THEIR FATES

The contrast between Lin Daiyu's and Xue Baochai's clothing is one of the most symbolic descriptions in the novel, revealing two completely different philosophies of life and destinies. Daiyu's clothing is mostly plain and simple. She prefers cool-toned velvet in colors such as blue and white. The patterns are simple and sparse, and the texture is light and flowing, presenting a transcendent beauty. Her clothing choices align with her life as a dependent of low status. They also truly reflect her aloofness, pride, and unwillingness to be tainted by worldly pursuits. Daiyu's plain colors symbolize the fragility and brevity of life, foreshadowing the tragic end of a beautiful but ill-fated woman [9]. In terms of aesthetic trends, Baochai's clothing is dignified and generous, with warm and calm colors, regular and luxurious patterns, and heavy and exquisite texture. Everywhere, it reflects the temperament of a lady who conforms to feudal ethics. Baochai's clothing reflects her obedience to worldly rules and her weighing of real interests, foreshadowing her fate of marrying Jia Baoyu and becoming the mistress of the household [10]. The statistical table of symbolic meanings of clothing colors in *A Dream in Red Mansions* is shown in Table 2.

C. THE REFLECTION OF THE RISE AND FALL OF WANG XIFENG AND OTHERS THROUGH CLOTHING DESCRIPTIONS

Wang Xifeng's clothing reflects the historical process of the Jia family's decline from prosperity, becoming a symbol of the family's rise and fall. When Fengjie first appears, she is dressed in a riot of colors, with embroidered velvet and pearl-studded ornaments, exuding power and prestige. This shows her high status within the Jia family and reflects its prosperity. The splendor of her clothing is directly propor-

TABLE 1. Comparison of Clothing Characteristics and Fate Trajectories of Main Characters

Figure	Early Clothing Characteristics	Later Clothing Characteristics	Clothing Trends	Destiny Trajectory
Jia Baoyu	Luxurious velvet satin, brightly colored and intricately patterned	Monk robes, simple, unadorned, and plain	Luxurious → Simple → Material → Spiritual	Aristocratic young master → Monk: Freedom from material constraints, spiritual awakening
Lin Daiyu	Cool-toned velvet satin, light, flowing, elegant, and understated	Wearing simple white clothing during illness, more elegant and understated	Maintains a simple and plain style, gradually becomes melancholic	Aloof and proud → Fading away like a flower, fragile and short life
Xue Baochai	Warm-toned velvet satin, heavy, exquisite, dignified, and luxurious	Matriarch's attire, neat, dignified, in accordance with etiquette	Maintains a stable style, enhances status	Young lady from a respectable family → Baoyu's wife, gained formal status by conforming to worldly rules
Wang Xifeng	Flowers in full bloom, colorful embroidery, dazzling pearls	Simple, unadorned, gloomy, withered, worn out by illness	Magnificent → Dim → Decline	Powerful and influential → Death from illness and decay, dissipation of power—a microcosm of family rise and fall

TABLE 2. Statistical Table of Symbolic Meanings of Clothing Colors in A Dream in Red Mansions

Color Categories	Cultural Symbolism	Representative Figures	Personality Traits	Fate Hints
Red	Joyful, vibrant, full of life	Wang Xifeng (early stage), Jia Baoyu (young stage)	Passionate, flamboyant, energetic	Scene of prosperity and glory turns to sorrow (overemphasis)
Blue	Aloof, detached, otherworldly	Lin Daiyu	Aloof, untainted by worldly affairs	Life is fragile, lonely, desolate
White	Purity and transcendence (literati aesthetic); mourning and tragic death (ritual system)	Lin Daiyu (in illness), Qingwen, etc.	Innocent, aloof, tragically lonely	Omens of an untimely death
Yellow	Symbol of nobility and imperial power	Grandmother Jia, Yuan Chun (Visiting Her Family)	High status, great authority	Pinnacle of power: family glory
Warm colors (pink, orange, etc.)	Gentle, calm, easy-going, inclusive	Xue Baochai, Lady Wang	Dignified, generous, conforms to worldly customs	Obtains status and position by conforming to etiquette
Black	Solemn, ominous	Mourning clothes, monk's robes	Solemn, rigorous	Disaster strikes, birth

tional to the expansion of her power, and every exquisite description reinforces her identity as the de facto manager of the Jia family [11]. However, as the plot progresses, Fengjie's clothing gradually loses its luster, and the gorgeous velvet is replaced by ordinary clothes. The former jewel-encrusted outfits become plain and simple, in sync with the Jia family's economic difficulties and Fengjie's deteriorating health. The decline in her clothing marks the dissolution of power and the exhaustion of life. When Fengjie ultimately dies of illness, her clothes have lost their former splendor, completing the cycle of fate from splendor and ostentation to dimness and decay [12].

D. THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION AND ARTISTIC VALUE OF VELVET AND SATIN CLOTHING AS A SYMBOLIC SYSTEM

The symbolic system of velvet clothing in the narrative function of A Dream in Red Mansions presents systematic and hierarchical characteristics. Its operation mechanism can be illustrated by the following flowchart (see Figure 1).

E. CLOTHING DESCRIPTIONS FORESHADOW AND METAPHORICALLY REPRESENT CHARACTERS' FATES

There is a close correspondence between changes in clothing and a person's fate, as shown in Figure 2, where different clothing transformation patterns correspond to different fate trajectories.

Satin clothing plays an important role in predicting fate in A Dream in Red Mansions and is an integral part of

the novel's prophetic system. Cao Xueqin cleverly weaves the characters' future fates into material descriptions of the present by using the symbolic meaning of clothing colors, the metaphorical reference of texture, and the special nature of the occasions in which they are worn. This allows readers to gain a vague perception of the characters' endings while appreciating the beauty of clothing. Predictive colors are often used in clothing descriptions. While white satin in a ritual context is a predictive color of tragic death, its appearance in daily wear highlights a character's aloofness and spiritual purity, though still tinged with an air of desolation. Excessive red is a sign of joy turning to sorrow, and a sudden change in color indicates a sudden change in fate. Changes in texture also have a prophetic nature: a transition from gorgeous to plain signals a decline in status, a change from heavy to light suggests the fragility of life, and inappropriate textures often correspond to a misalignment of fate [13]. Descriptions of clothing being worn out, dirty, lost, or in other unexpected conditions are direct warning symbols of fate, meaning that characters are about to encounter danger or disaster. Cao Xueqin turns clothing descriptions into a visual means of prophecy, and material appearance has a transcendental referential effect. This foreshadowing not only makes the narrative more intense and profound but also reflects the aesthetic tradition of Chinese classical novels in using objects to convey meaning and express ideas. It organically combines realistic detailed descriptions with romantic symbolism, producing a unique narrative effect. When readers reflect retrospectively, they can feel

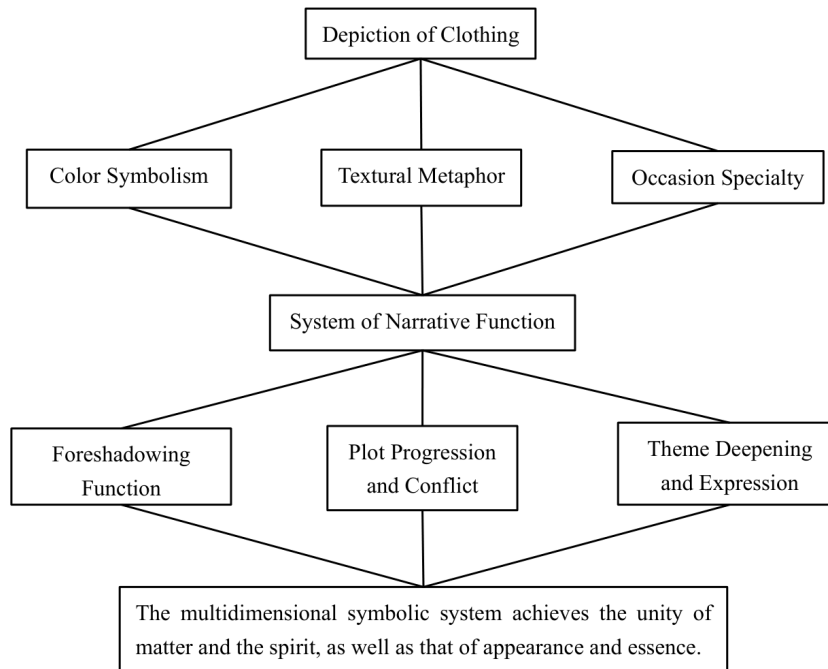


FIGURE 1. Flowchart of the symbolic narrative function of velvet clothing

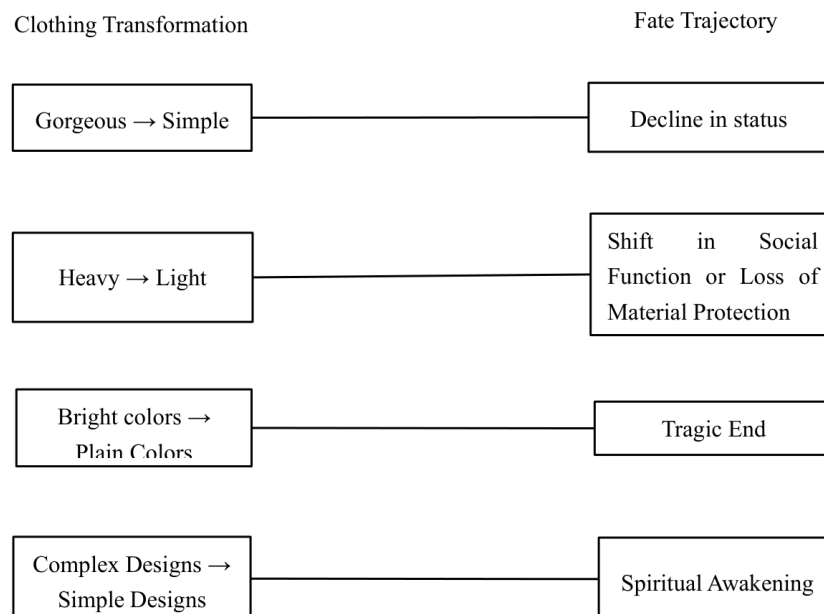


FIGURE 2. Correspondence between changes in clothing and fate trajectory

the close correspondence between clothing descriptions and fate, recognizing the ingenious artistic conception designed by the author [14].

F. THE NARRATIVE ROLE OF VELVET CLOTHING IN PLOT PROGRESSION

Taking Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai as examples, their contrasting clothing styles vividly demonstrate the narrative

function of the symbolic system of clothing. The following diagram (Figure 3) visually illustrates the differences in their clothing characteristics and the symbolic meanings behind them.

Velvet garments are not merely static background descriptions but also participate in the generation and advancement of the plot, becoming an important component of the narrative dynamic mechanism. Clothing, as a material

Lin Daiyu	Xue Baochai
Colors: Cool tones (blue and white)	Color: Warm and calming tones
Texture: Light and airy	Texture: Heavy and luxurious
Pattern: Simple and sparse	Pattern: Neat and ornate
Style: Elegant and understated	Style: Dignified and elegant
Personality Traits: Aloof and proud, otherworldly and refined	Personality Traits: Conforms to worldly customs and adheres to social norms
Fate Hints: Fragile life, tragically beautiful	Fate Hints: Marriage to Baoyu

FIGURE 3. Comparison of clothing styles between Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai

carrier, often serves as a trigger for conflict. Plots involving the gifting, fighting, and destruction of clothing cause changes in character relationships and advance the story. Unauthorized use of clothing disrupts the hierarchical order; special gifts of clothing reveal the closeness of emotional relationships; and accidental damage to clothing becomes a turning point in fate. This plot design transforms clothing from a mere decoration into a narrative element. The process of displaying and appreciating clothing in social settings becomes a stage for character conflicts and clashes of values, revealing a character’s inner qualities and spiritual pursuits through their attitudes toward different clothing. Changes in clothing mark shifts in time, space, and plot segments; using different styles of dress for different occasions is a method of controlling narrative rhythm. Cao Xueqin imbues clothing with a narrative function, merging material description with plot structure, making clothing both a narrative object and a narrative tool—both the subject of the narrative and its producer. This narrative style enriches the novel’s expressive layers, fully integrating the material and spiritual worlds, external form, and internal meaning, showcasing the superb narrative art of *A Dream in Red Mansions* [15].

IV. THE SYMBOLIC SYSTEM OF CLOTHING DEEPENS THE EXPRESSION OF THE NOVEL’S THEMES

The symbolic system of velvet clothing plays an irreplaceable and profound role in the thematic expression of *A Dream in Red Mansions*, endowing the novel’s philosophical reflections with concrete artistic expression. Clothing is a symbol of material civilization; its rise and fall reflect the fleeting nature of prosperity and the impermanence of wealth, deepening the novel’s themes of nihilism and disillusionment. The transformation from aristocratic velvet

and satin to the coarse cotton or linen of a monk’s habit is not merely a change in material condition but also a profound reflection on a materialistic way of life. The hierarchical depiction of clothing concretizes the rigidity and irrationality of the feudal system, using this detail of daily life to reveal the essence of feudal society—using social hierarchy to restrict human freedom—thus deepening the novel’s critique of the feudal system. The correspondence between clothing and the characters’ fates embodies fatalistic thought, expressing the individual’s powerlessness in the face of history and social structures, strengthening the tragic consciousness and sense of destiny. Meanwhile, characters’ rejection of ornate clothing—such as Baoyu’s renunciation and Daiyu’s indifference to fame and fortune—represent transcendence of material constraints and a pursuit of spiritual freedom, adding a transcendental dimension to the novel. Through the multi-layered construction of a symbolic system of clothing, Cao Xueqin transforms abstract philosophical propositions into perceptible artistic images, enhancing the thematic expression’s appeal and persuasiveness.

V. CONCLUSION

The descriptions of velvet clothing in *A Dream in Red Mansions* are not merely scene embellishments but a multi-dimensional symbolic system meticulously constructed by Cao Xueqin. Through detailed depictions of clothing’s rank, color, texture, and patterns, the novel establishes a subtle correspondence between the material and the spiritual, appearance and essence, making clothing a code for interpreting characters’ personalities, foreshadowing their destinies, and revealing the essence of society. The rise and fall of velvet clothing is structurally aligned with the

fluctuations in the characters' fates, turning an abstract sense of destiny into a perceptible material form. This symbolic system of clothing not only enriches the narrative's layers and depth but also deepens the novel's reflections on feudal society, the human predicament, and the philosophy of fate, reflecting the aesthetic tradition of classical Chinese novels in using objects to symbolize people and revealing profound truths through subtle details.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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