

## **GOLD RUSH AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES: ROSE TREMAIN'S THE COLOUR**

**Cristina Mihaela Nistor**

**Assoc. Prof. PhD, National University of Science and Technology „Politehnica”  
Bucharest**

*Abstract: Rose Tremain's 2003 book *The Colour* is a fictional account of the mid-19th century gold rush in New Zealand. Similar to most of Tremain's narratives, this novel explores themes that are dear to her heart, such as intertextuality, personal transformation, and the complexities of human relationships. In order to achieve her goal, Tremain uses the historical backdrop to delve into the lives of her characters, particularly focusing on the disintegration of the marriage between Joseph and Harriet Blackstone. Tremain's vivid descriptions and intricate character development highlight the harsh realities of colonial life in New Zealand and the impact of greed and ambition on human nature. The paper here gives an analysis of the way the novelist manages to educate her readers in both the history of New Zealand and the personal stories of (some of) the colonists.*

*Keywords: Tremain, history, personal narratives, New Zealand, gold rush*

### **Introduction**

Dame Rose Tremain is one of those authors who have constantly grown and eventually developed as writers that have embraced the form of the historical novels as the best means to deliver their narrative message. The list of her notable historical books is opened by *Restoration* (1989), a novel set in the 17th century England, which follows the life of Robert Merivel, a physician who becomes a courtier to King Charles II (the novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize). In strict logical order, we include as second on the list its sequel, *Merivel* (2012), which continues the story of the fictional physician Robert Merivel as he navigates the complexities of life in Restoration England. Another historical novel, *Music and Silence* (1999), which won the Whitbread Award, was set in the 17th century, and explored the lives of the royals as well as of the servants and musicians at the court of King Christian IV of Denmark. Tremain's *The Colour* (2003), which we are discussing in this paper, was shortlisted for the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction in 2004. Although it is not technically considered a historical novel, another book by Tremain, *The Road Home* (2007) got her the 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction, while also being nominated for the Costa Book Awards in 2007. Last, but not least, Tremain's *Islands of Mercy* (2020) is a historical novel set in the 19th century (same as *The Colour*), which explores themes of love and colonialism in Bath and Borneo.

In many ways, most of Tremain's narratives may fall under the category of postcolonial writings, with their characters depicted as representatives of either a national or a cultural voice that struggles to make itself heard. From *Letter to Sister Benedicta* to *The Swimming Pool Season* or *The Road Home* (and others), it is Tremain's compelling storytelling and her characters' personality and individual history that combine to give the respective novels' strength and value. One might remark that, on Rose Tremain's website<sup>1</sup>, readers interested in her biography are instantly introduced to the author by means of a quote that encompasses the core belief that sets the writer's creative wheels in motion:

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rosetremain.co.uk/about/biography/>

I suspect that many writers deceive themselves about why they write. My self-deception is that I create in order to understand, and that the final end of it all may be wisdom. This means that I deliberately seek out the strange, the unfamiliar, even the unknowable as subjects for my fiction and trust my imagination to illuminate them to the point where both I and the reader can see them with new clarity.

This literary approach, which relies on imagination to bridge the gaps within the literary text, shifts focus and concurrently induces a change in the reader's perception of the written material, mirroring chameleonic behaviours and attitudes. *The Colour* demonstrates in a way that is unequivocally expressed that history is best discovered when unfolded on the pages of a fictional piece of writing; that is why the scope of this paper is to show how the little lives and dramas of the few colonists that make up the personae of the novel under scrutiny teach readers a valuable lesson about courage, love and the making of a nation.

### **History, fiction, postcolonialism**

Many discourses on cultural postcolonialism address cultural identity in colonised societies, and/or discuss similarities and differences between the colonist and the colonised societies. Thus, the study of postcolonialism covers a range of topics, including the struggle to develop individual and national identities, the ways in which writers from former colonies express and celebrate their recovered identities, the depiction of colonised people and their customs by writers from former empires (often tailored to suit the coloniser's interests), and how the coloniser's literature has justified colonialism by portraying the colonised as inferior in terms of the quality of the people, society, or culture. Postcolonial critics such as Edward Said or Homi Bhabha reconsider the relation between the margin and the centre, tipping the scales in favour of the former. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha attacks certain binary oppositions that he perceives as Western concepts by means of which colonizers support their violent relationships with other cultures. From among those, the most important binaries identified by the critic are: centre / margin, civilized / savage, First world / Third world, West / East, North / South, capital / labour, and enlightened / ignorant.

Somewhat in the same vein, but referring to the close connection between history and fiction<sup>2</sup> as well as to the marginal position of things (in both real and fictional narratives), theorist Linda Hutcheon remarks in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*:

One of the effects of the discursive pluralizing is that the (perhaps illusory but once perceived as firm and single) centre of both historical and fictive narrative is dispersed. Margins and edges gain new value. The “ex-centric” – as both off-centre and de-centered – gets attention. That which is “different” is valorised in opposition both to élitist, alienated “otherness” and also to the uniformizing impulse of mass culture. (Hutcheon 130)

This “ex-centric” position described by Hutcheon proves to be a favourite with contemporary writers such as Rose Tremain, as they both learn about history and rediscover their own literary mission. If we compare *The Colour* to either *Restoration*, *Merivel* or *Music and Silence*, it is easy to remark upon the difference in setting, or in the characters' types and interests. While the last three books enjoy lavish settings that describe either the English or the Danish courts, the setting of the 2003 novel strikes readers as bleak, harsh and uninviting. This harsh scene aptly describes the difficult lives of colonial settlers and gold miners in New Zealand in the mid-1860s, and Tremain does her best to render things as accurately as possible. Readers may find equally appropriate the writer's employment of history, as a tool by means of which personal

---

<sup>2</sup> Once perceived as branches of the same tree of knowledge

dramas can unfold undisturbed. As a spoiler, we may notice that, in *The Colour*, only a few characters will eventually find solutions to their problems, and readers are deftly led to agree with the narrator's choices by the end of the book.

## Setting

The idea that sparked Rose Tremain's interest in New Zealand's history and prompted her to undergo the endeavour of researching for and writing her 2003 novel came quite naturally, as the novelist herself confesses in an interview that was found on the Internet in 2010<sup>3</sup>. While attending a book festival in New Zealand, Tremain visited a gold mining museum; there, she was deeply impressed by the simplicity of the colonists' working tools, which inspired her to utilize a historical context once again in writing a novel about the courage to change one's life.

I was moved by the fragility of the tools (picks, pans, makeshift cradles etc) with which men were attempting to bring about a transformation to their lives. The thought came to me there and then that, at some stage, most people make a choice between a quiet monotonous life and a daring and difficult one and these prospectors were choosing the daring and the unknown. This immediately presented itself to me as an admirable subject for a novel.

From a narrative perspective, the story presented in *The Colour* is linear and has a multitude of threads that originate from and reflect upon the couple that forms the main interest of the novel: Joseph and Harriet Blackstone. They are accompanied in their journey from Norfolk to New Zealand by Joseph's mother Lilian, a widow who is with them out of bleak necessity, but who has her own strong opinions and desires, which often come contrary to the others' interests. Still, they all seek new beginnings and prosperity, despite the harsh natural conditions they battle. Out of the trio, only the two young newlyweds choose to emigrate to New Zealand in the hope of a new life in a new world, whilst the old widow is almost dragged against her will to that part of the world. With her husband dead and her possessions sold so that the deceased's debts could be paid off, Lilian is simply a widow ruined twice: first by her spouse's gambling, and then by his bizarre death as a victim of an ostrich attack.

Cob House, the residence of the three Blackstones, is the most unlikely place one might find gold in. The opening line of the novel, "The coldest winds came from the south and the Cob House had been built in the pathway of the winds" (Tremain 2003: 3), is a warning that the poor site Joseph has chosen for his dwelling will cast a long and icy shadow over the narrative. Turning a deaf ear to his workers' warning against his chosen location for a new house, Joseph builds Cob house on a wind-blown slope, far from the nearest habitation, but close to a creek he calls after his wife, Harriet's Creek. The three Blackstones will try to make a new life there, in a place where the elements challenge them and try to devoid them of the little optimism they have left after their encounter with the snow that buries them in their own house and kills their only cow, Beauty.

## Characters and dramas

In the economy of the novel, Tremain deftly guides her readers to understand that her characters development is emblematic of the colonisation process in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century New Zealand, and, thus, of the nation's history. From the very first pages of the narrative, Tremain's readers are warned that there is no love lost between the Blackstones, as each has his or her own agenda, carefully hidden from the others. The main male character, Joseph, is fleeing from a dark past, which readers slowly come to learn about, and, in his master plan, his new wife Harriet plays the role of the instrument by which he struggles free:

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.book-club.co.nz/features/rosetreman.htm>

Joseph wanted to cross the room and put his arms round Harriet and gather her hair into a knot in his hand. He wanted to lay his head on her shoulder and tell her the one thing that he would never be able to admit to her – that she had saved his life. (Tremain 2003: 4)

From the very beginning, the male character's egotism is apparent and covers all aspects of life; thus, although he feels guilty for having dragged his mother to the end of the world and, out of a desire to compensate for that, he longs to please Lilian, he does that by neglecting his wife. Indeed, in his attempt to make amends both to his mother and to his shameful past, he leaves his wife Harriet's needs unattended and actually tries to turn her into a servant to Lilian. Joseph's selfishness and guilt are never so transparent as when he has sex with his wife, at the beginning of their married life: "he did what he did with his hand over her face (so that she might not see it?) and withdrew just before he came to his pleasure." (Tremain 2003: 15). Throughout the progress of the novel, Joseph's secretive and selfish nature renders him as an unpleasant character, with whom readers find it hard to sympathize. On top of all his peculiarities, it is Joseph's stubbornness in one aspect that baffles his wife and, eventually, makes her desire her independence: he will not father the child that Harriet longs to hold in her arms. Unbeknownst to Harriet, Joseph had a past experience that has in fact decided his fate – he had to choose between going to prison and leaving for New Zealand as a colonist. Unable to express his feelings – or, indeed, to relate to others' – Joseph raped Rebecca, a young woman whom he then refused to marry and for whose untimely death he was responsible. Joseph is simply terrified by the idea of having a child, and his refusal to procreate could be rendered as an attempt to remain forever his mother's child – while Harriet is denied her own chance at procreation and human affection:

The only thing he dreaded was that Harriet would pester him to father a child. He'd never said anything to her on this subject, but he hoped she sensed it: he hoped she understood that a child was not part of the bargain they'd made. She was a clever woman. He prayed she understood that it would have to be the two of them and Lilian and whatever they could make of that. (Tremain 2003: 13)

In *The Colour*, Tremain's narrative effectively captures the evasions and misunderstandings that sustain the Blackstones' marriage, all recounted without false sentiment or delicacy. Turning the readers' attention to Joseph's wife Harriet, Tremain depicts her as a 34-year-old former governess, who marries Joseph not for love, but because she yearns for novelty, and he happens to be the one who promises her a rebirth in a strange land at the end of the world, New Zealand. She lets herself be lured by Joseph's words that speak of new beginnings: "We will not cling to familiar ways. We will imagine ourselves reborn over there. On the acres I am buying, everything will begin afresh." (idem 15). Even if she knows in the heart of hearts that her new husband is "an ordinary man" (idem 14), she deludes herself with dreams of a happy life, on the world's other side. Once it becomes clear to her that Joseph is a selfish man who is unlikely to change his ways, she decides to waste no more affection or hope in his direction.

Conversely, Harriet discovers another English family close by, only a day's ride away, their compatriots the Orchards. To Harriet, those are depicted as a wonderful family portrait, and she finds in their midst everything she dreams of: they are as wealthy as her own family are poor, as sensible as Joseph and Lilian are selfish, and as generous as Joseph is mean. What is more, the Orchards have a delightful child, Edwin, which, to Harriet, represents the epitome of what a real family should be. This main female character is the moral centre of the novel under scrutiny here, and Tremain cleverly engineers the threads of her narrative plot so that small miracles could happen for the heroine who deserves them. Returning from the Orchards' house with her cart laden with goods, Harriet finds herself miserable at the Cob House and, having become aware of the

lovelessness of her marriage, she courageously tries to lock this knowledge away in a tea tin box brought from England. The twist in the narrative has Joseph take that very box to hide his great discovery – a handkerchief with a few grains of gold he found on his land while Harriet was visiting the Orchards. He discovers gold in the creek below the house and vows to tell no one.

Gold is made to appear in the lives of the Blackstone unhappy trio by chance; nevertheless, its effect is to speed them to the destinies towards which they were already inclined. As one might expect, the characters' quest for gold and personal fulfillment leads to a series of dramatic events that test their resilience and moral values. Readers witness how the colourful grains precipitate all that is worst in Joseph, while revealing the best in Harriet. Joseph keeps his discovery of gold a secret, but he cannot help himself becoming infected with the lust for "the colour" – the blue streak in clay that means it is auriferous. While the two Blackstone women Lilian and Harriet are left to struggle on alone in the makeshift farm at the mercy of the elements, Joseph travels on a ship to Kokatahi, where gold is occasionally discovered, and forms a troubled bond with a boy called Will Sefton. In Joseph's absence, everything he built collapses and turns to dust: his mother dies, and his Cob house with partitioning walls made out of calico tent decomposes in a storm; under the circumstances, his wife Harriet decides to cross the mountains to find him.

### **Focalizing the narrative**

At this point, the narrative diverges into several parts, with each part revealing the consequences of gold exploration for various characters. Tremain's narrative seeks to explore a multitude of characters, shifting its perspective in unpredictable and occasionally whimsical manners. Readers are sometimes transported into the mind of Pao Yi, the solitary and seemingly serene Chinaman who supplies vegetables to the diggers who work assiduously to secure their own future with "the colour" they find. Other times, the focus shifts elsewhere and the narrative presents the viewpoints of Harriet's fellow farmers, Toby and Dorothy, who have successfully prospered from sheep farming, as well as the dreams of their ailing son Edwin.

At times, events are depicted through the eyes of Edwin's 40-year-old Maori nurse Pare, whose thoughts are imbued with the myths of her tribe. Pare is banished from the Orchard house when she flees to find refuge from a fantastical animal she supposedly sees and lets baby Edwin at the mercy of a storm that almost kills him. Tremain imagines a mystical link between the boy and his (former) nurse but reserves a tragic end to that story. Pare believes she is in disgrace with the spirits, and that is a state of affairs that can only be expiated by the discovery of greenstone. As a Maori, she knows exactly where the gold for which hundreds of white people search lies, but in the effort to get there, she eventually dies. Although Edwin and Pare are separated, they converse telepathically, they are taken ill at the same time and die together in different parts of the country. Harriet is eventually drawn to the same place where Joseph has found nothing but degradation, while Pare found her death – Kokatahi River. There, readers find the one person in all this mess of mud and misery who has found his vocation – Chen Pao Yi, a Chinese who has cultivated an exquisite vegetable garden beyond the reach of greed. The Chinese man becomes the instrument of Harriet's salvation in more ways than one: he nurses her when she is sick, fathers her child and, ironically, it is he who discovers the legendary cave of gold that would bring Harriet's independence.

Carefully planning the reveals of her narrative show, Tremain describes the gold fields of New Zealand as wastelands in the wilderness:

The scrub uprooted and burned, the trees felled and stripped down into saplings and planks for the windlasses and for the flumes on stilts that carried water from the river to the hillside claims.

The ground had a pocked and tousled look. Tents stood on this ground at tilted angles, in untidy rows. The scene [...] resembled a field hospital for the remnants of some small, forgotten army. Slab huts, roofed with ti-ti leaves and barely larger than dog kennels, had also struggled into being: shelter for those who'd had no money to buy rope or canvas. (Tremain 2003: 153)

At every step of the narrative way, the world Tremain describes in *The Colour* looks both fragile and unpredictable. Readers can imagine houses collapse unexplainably under their very eyes, characters taken sick and on the verge of death, without there being a good reason for their demise. In fact, Tremain imagines many deaths as mandatory parts of the lessons one is supposed to learn while reading *The Colour*: Pare and little Edwin, Joseph's parents, and Rebecca Millward. It is only after readers have completed 230-odd pages that their suspicions are confirmed about the reason why Joseph has had such a peculiar behaviour: he had a hand in his English lover Rebecca's death. When Tremain finally reveals the story of his guilt, readers learn that, influenced by his mother Lilian's strong opinion, who considers his lover, Rebecca, "a minx" (idem 237), Joseph arranges for her to have an abortion. With the girl completely unaware of Joseph's plan, she is "operated on" by a veterinary surgeon while under powerful drugs and, consequently, she dies of blood poisoning four days later.

With all the horrid pages deftly inserted in the story, Tremain designs the novel to conclude on the hopeful anticipation of Harriet's baby, in a new house, bought with the money for her share of the gold discovered by Chen Pao Yi. Joseph returns to England, defeated and hopeless, while Harriet invites her father to come and join her and the future baby. This conclusion seems to suggest that all characters get what they deserve, and, in a postcolonial reading, we might notice that the margin or the subaltern becomes the centre of the universe, free from their previous bonds. The ending may, indeed, be read in a feminist, postcolonial / post imperialist note: Harriet remains single, an independent woman, free from her oppressive husband, while expecting a child conceived with a Chinese, and she plans to build her own house made of wood, where her father is invited to come and live with them.

## Conclusion

The present paper has attempted to analyse *The Colour* as a historical novel whose value is to be found in the construction of the characters that populate it, and not in its probable foundation in real life. As in the case of most of Rose Tremain's novels, the accuracy of historical detail makes this dramatic novel about the mid-19th-century gold rush in New Zealand a masterpiece. Nevertheless, history is, here, a mere instrument by means of which Tremain draws a nuanced portrait of the disintegration of a marriage, and of personal rebirth allowed to the most deserving characters. With its combination of vivid historical adventure and sensual, late-blooming romance, the novel teaches moral values that characters learn under duress. In that respect, in *The Colour*, as in so many other narratives, Tremain works wonders. In her interpretation, the gold, or the "colour" is itself symbolic of more than wealth; it is a reward for those like Pao Yi, the Orchards and Harriet, who have not forgotten the colours of their own past, or their humanity. The novel offers a historical view of the mid-19th-century gold rush in New Zealand as well as a lesson in love and trust – the moral poles of Tremain's artistic creed.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Bhabha, Homi., ed. *Nation and Narration*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
2. Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
3. Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988
4. Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
5. McLeod, Marion. 'The outsider'. *The Listener Archive: Arts and Books*. November 24-30, 2007, Vol 211 No 3524
6. [http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3524/artsbooks/10028/the\\_outsider.html;jsessionid=F6EA7E7BFD5FF4A94566AA7B62310E43](http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3524/artsbooks/10028/the_outsider.html;jsessionid=F6EA7E7BFD5FF4A94566AA7B62310E43)
7. Nistor, Cristina Mihaela. *Narrators And Narratees. A Narratological Approach to The Novels of A. S. Byatt and Rose Tremain*. București, EUB, 2010
8. Prince, Gerald. *Narratology*. Berlin, New York and Amsterdam: Mouton, 1982.
9. Renan, Ernest. 'What is a Nation?'. *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. 8-22.
10. Rustin, Susanna. 'Interview with Rose Tremain.' *The Guardian*. May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2003. <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,952639,00.html>, retrieved June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006
11. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/may/10/featuresreviews.guardianreview5>, retrieved May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007
12. Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Vintage, 1979
13. Tremain, Rose. *The Colour* (2003). London: Vintage, 2004
14. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/may/03/featuresreviews.guardianreview31>, retrieved September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009
15. <https://www.walterscottprize.co.uk/shortlist-interview-rose-tremain/>, retrieved June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025
16. <https://www.rosetremain.co.uk/about/biography/>, retrieved June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025