

# Characteristic of henry lamartine in the red convertible

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In the short story, *The Red Convertible* by Louise Erdrich, Henry Lamartine is a free-spirited and loving older brother. Henry and his younger brother, Lyman, buy a convertible sports car together and go jet setting across their country. Later in the story, Henry is sent off to the war in Vietnam, only to return as a depressed veteran. The once attractive scarlet car became an object of disdain. Lyman remarks, " It was at least three years before Henry came home. By then I guess the whole war was solved in the government's mind, but for him it would keep on going" (3). Before the war, the red car had symbolized freedom that Henry and his brother had, but after the war, he felt as if he had been stripped of that freedom because of what he had experienced while in Vietnam. Whatever had happened to Henry while he was at war changed his perception of the red car from being something of pleasure to something of pain. Henry was experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This transition is explained using the psychology of color. Naz Kaya, an author and contributor to the journals, *College Student Journal*, *Environment and Behavior*, and *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, wrote an article about the relationship between color and emotions. This article focuses upon the unseen forces of color and how it affects the mental state. Kaya writes, " Color is an inseparable part of our everyday lives and its presence is evident in everything that we perceive. It is widely recognized that colors have also a strong impact on our emotions and feelings. For instance, the color red has been associated with excitement..." (1). Kaya goes on to explain that ' excitement' can mean contentious or fervent—negative or positive. The invisible effects of color are inescapable and depending upon our experiences and environment, they can

cause favorable or disagreeable outcomes. Therefore, war veterans should be warned of the effects of color, specifically red, because of the negative effects they can have on the psyche.

After Henry Lamartine returns from war, he appears to avoid the red convertible at all costs. His brother Lyman observes, “ Henry had not even looked at the car since he’d gotten home, though like I said, it was in tip-top condition and ready to drive. I thought that the car might bring the old Henry back somehow” (4). This behavior could be described as avoidance motivation. To Henry, the car had become a negative stimulus that brought out thoughts of his past. Andrew Elliot, who received his Ph. D. from the University of Madison, Wisconsin, teaches Social Psychology and Individual Differences and Achievement and Motivation courses, and has published more than 15 articles about psychology, color, and motivation, is an expert on this subject. One of his articles focuses on how the color red inhibits performance and creates the feeling of failure. He writes, “ Persons encounter both explicit and subtle pairings between colors and particular messages, concepts, and experiences in particular situations ... the mere perception of a color in a particular situation activates its paired associate and influences affect, cognition, and behavior accordingly” (155). To Henry, through positive repetitive contact with the convertible, red gained the feeling of freedom that he had with his brother when they traveled across the country. When he was sent to war, his perception of reality was altered. When he returned, the red car evoked negative feelings such as failure and the need for evasion. Eventually, Henry was able to overcome that and restore the old car—he had semi-returned to his former relationship with red.

Later in the story, it is revealed that his experiences at war had too great of an effect upon him and he reverted back to the negative connotation with red. With more therapy and research geared toward color psychology, those like Henry could possibly be cured from their mental issues developed from war.

Henry was able to fight against avoidance motivation because of the long-term previous experiences he had with red, that is, until he succumbs to his depression at the end of the story. Lyman explains his post-war behavior, “ He was so quiet and never comfortable sitting still anywhere but always up and moving around. I thought back to times we’d sat still for whole afternoons, never moving a muscle, just shifting our weight along the ground, talking to whoever sat with us, watching things” (4). Henry never completely erased his previous disposition and memories because his post-war self was constantly changing its perspective and attention. Henrik Olsson, a research scientist of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and a doctor of psychology, presents an avenue of color therapy for Henry. His article focuses on his argument and study about how mental categories should be expanded upon to more specificity because of the broad subjects each category encompasses. He explains, “ Accurate visual working memory requires the preservation of attention over the retention time and fails when attention is directed to other objects” (8789). In order to retain memories visually, one must be exposed over a period of time without being interrupted with another stimulus. Should Henry have had a therapist to help him, the clinician could have used visual memory

categories to aid Henry in healing. For example, using the category of colors, the doctor could present Henry with pleasure evoking, red items and allow him time to create new connections with reds and break the ties with the negative feelings. This strategy could even be used for any mental category besides color, such as shapes, sounds, and visual perceptions. Olsson writes, " To keep a purely visually represented object active in working memory requires that during retention, attention has not been directed at any other object. That is, when attention is directed to any new object belonging to the same category, the object representation in visual working memory is updated by an overwriting process" (8788). Studies show that long-term mental associations can be broken or altered by presenting a different stimulus. This can also explain how Henry's positive association with the red convertible was modified after his experiences during the war. The author, Erdrich, does not provide information about Henry's experiences in the war, but perhaps they were instances great enough to contrast Henry's consciousness. Also, when combined, all of the above discussed information and articles are powerful arguments to urge researchers to look further into color psychology and performance attainment related to therapy for veterans. Such research may result in the life or death fate of soldiers returned from battle.