

Literature color symbolism



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The Color of Literature Color symbolism can be used to set the tone of a story and aspects within that story. Colors can invoke an emotional response as well as paint a picture of a character or scene within the story. In exploring the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Damrosch, Pike 1200-59) along with Christopher Columbus' letter The Green and Beautiful Land (Columbus 1-7) there are three main colors that stand out. The first color, as shown in both titles, is green.

Green plays a significant role in both tales as it is the main color of the antagonist in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the supple landscape that is described by Columbus. Green also represents negative aspects in the stories such as misfortune and lack of experience. The second color that is emphasized is yellow, or gold. Gold is woven throughout each tale with varying meanings, ranging from vitality to deceit. The final color that is significant is red. Red not only sets the tone for strength and aggression but is used to describe the scenery.

Both authors let these colors stand out on their own as well as lacing them together to paint vivid pictures in the reader's imagination. Color symbolism plays a leading role in the nature and meaning of both stories. The color green symbolizes nature, good luck, and renewal as well as inexperience, jealousy and misfortune (Rohrer; Smith). In both writings, green has the significant meaning. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the most noticeable reference to green is toward the beginning of the story when the Green Knight appears on a green horse wielding a green axe in one hand and a green holly bough in the other.

The Green Knight is a giant of a man, entirely green from his bushy hair to his bare feet with broad shoulders and a narrowing waist so his image portrays that of a tree (Kelly), showing the symbolism of nature. The saddle blanket on the horse is bright green and embroidered with birds and flies (Damrosch, Pike 1207), reinstating the reference to nature. Other references to the color green in reference to nature include the description of the entrance to the Green Chapel which is pictured as “ grass in green patches was grown all over” (1251).

Sir Gawain makes the observation that because of the overgrown area, it “ fits well that fellow transformed into green” (1251). Green may show natural and positive symbolism, but it also is used to describe less desirable attributes. A significant reference to green in a negative light is the belt that Sir Gawain is given before facing the Green Knight. The belt is the only thing that Sir Gawain hides and lies about. The Green Knight, who later reveals himself to be Bertilak, the lord of the castle who hosted Sir Gawain the previous three nights, knows that Sir Gawain lied about the green belt.

It is here that the color green shows misfortune, as Sir Gawain is humiliated that he was not as virtuous as he wished to be. The final reference to green pertains to the change in how the belt is worn. During the altercation with the Green Knight, Sir Gawain wears the belt properly on his waist under his clothing. On his way home, Sir Gawain wears the sash as a baldric instead of a belt. The change in how Sir Gawain wears the green belt represents renewal, as the Green Knight did not slay Sir Gawain.

Even though Sir Gawain is ashamed of his weakness pertaining to the belt, King Arthur sees Sir Gawain's quest as successful and wishes all of his court to wear a bright green baldric and to wear it in the same fashion as Sir Gawain, " a band of bright green obliquely about him"(1259). The green baldric renews its meaning and transforms from a source of misfortune to a sign of good luck in Arthur's court. Good luck plays a part in the account by Christopher Columbus in *The Green and Beautiful Land*. When Columbus found the Caribbean Islands it was by chance and luck as he was looking for a passage to India.

Columbus' description of the islands paints a vivid picture of a green oasis that is " filled with trees of a thousand kinds...that they never lose their foliage", comparing them to the trees in Spain in the spring (1). Columbus also describes the islands to have " marvelous pine groves, and extensive meadow country"(2) which again symbolizes the nature and fertility of the islands. At the end of Columbus' letter, he tells the king and queen that he can send gum mastic, aloe wood, and rhubarb, all of which are green and represent the fertility of the new lands (5).

Columbus describes the native islanders as " wondrous[ly] timid" and delighted to receive items of little or no value from the crewmen (2). It is in this description that the reader imagines the inexperience of the islanders, a negative often associated with the color green. The next representation of color is of gold, or yellow. Yellow represents idealism, vitality, and gold, or wealth as well as cowardice, greed, and deceit ((Rohrer; Smith). The Green Knight's attire was adorned with color, " bright gold on silk broideries banded most richly" (1207).

The saddle blanket of both the Green Knight's horse and Sir Gawain's horse was embellished with gold trim. These detailings of gold represent vitality and wealth. The wealth of Bertilak's castle is also seen in the description of the lavish surroundings, from the curtains with "clear-golden hems" to the tapestries hung "on ropes with red-gold rings" (1223). The account of lavish surroundings may also give the impression of greed as well as wealth. The color yellow symbolizes idealism and vitality in Sir Gawain's clothing and armor at the start of his quest.

The piece of armor that stands out the most is Sir Gawain's shield which has a "pentangle depicted in pure hue of gold" (1217). The pentangle itself holds great meaning, representing the five senses, the five wounds of Christ and the fifth five which is free-giving, friendliness, chastity, chivalry and piety (1218), which show the idealism of the time. The fact that the shield is painted gold enhances the indication of vitality and idealism. On the opposite side of vitality and idealism is cowardice, in which the color yellow is often used as a descriptor.

In the beginning of the story, Sir Gawain refuses to be a coward and steps forward to take the Green Knight's challenge. He again refuses to be a coward when being seduced by Bertilak's wife. At the end of the story, Sir Gawain confesses he was a coward for taking the green belt and continues to wear the belt to remind him of this flaw. While idealism is not represented as significantly in *The Green and Beautiful Land*, the vitality of the land is stated quite often. Columbus describes the islands to be abundant with gold, from streams and rivers "most of which bear gold" to "many mines of metals" (2).

The representation of gold can be seen as a wealth of the land and greed of the man. Deceit is another trait associated with the color yellow. There is deceitfulness depicted in Columbus' crew as they take advantage of the good nature and inexperience of the native people. The crewmembers trade broken and useless items to the natives for a good amount of gold, "to the weight of two and an half castellanos, and others much more for other things which were worth much less" (2).

In describing the natives, Columbus depicts the natives from most of the islands as frightened and timid, often fleeing when Columbus and his men approached. Columbus uses the phrase "wondrous timid" (2) and "most timid people in the world" (4) to disguise the sense of cowardice. The descriptive words of yellow seem opposite of the words used to describe the color red. Red brings to mind power, sexuality, and excitement as well as aggression, violence, and danger ((Rohrer; Smith). As Sir Gawain readies himself for his journey, his armor was laid out on a "carpet of red silk" (1216).

His horse wore a saddle blanket of red with gold studs and Sir Gawain's shield was red with a golden pentangle. The description of his adornments suggests strength and power, as well as someone who is ready for the violence of battle. Red is commonly associated with sexuality. The wife of Bertilak tries to seduce Sir Gawain for three days, and although Sir Gawain experiences lust, he does not act upon her advances except with kisses. On the third day, red is used to describe the sexual tension as well as the hunting trip of the day.

Bertilak goes out hunting for a fox, often red, and describes the red hues of the morning sun shining on the mist (1241). The sexual tension runs high between Bertilak's wife and Sir Gawain, as Bertilak's wife enters Sir Gawain's chambers half-naked then joins him in his bed. Sir Gawain kisses her but declines her sexual advances. She then offers Sir Gawain a present, a ring of red and gold. The color of red is represented in Columbus' account of his journey in subtle ways. Columbus' excitement, which is an attribute of the color red, is apparent in his letter to the king and queen.

He gives great detail of the islands and states they are rich in bird species, flowers, fruits, and spices. While red is not specifically mentioned, it is a common color in the items listed above. Columbus mentions La Spanola has a great many spices (2) and the natives endure the cold of winter with food flavored with excessively hot spices (4). Spices, especially the more intense varieties, bring to mind excitement and a rich color of red. Columbus was also aggressive and violent with the natives of the islands in the fact that he took some of them against their will.

He de-emphasizes this fact in his letter with softer phrases such as " I took by force some of them in order that they might learn [Castilian] and give me information of what they had in those parts" (3). He justifies his aggressive acts by telling the king and queen that the new interpreters run to announce his arrival when they reach new villages, which indicates acceptance of their new roles. Another reference to violence is the portrayal of ferocious and cannibalistic natives on an island with a second entrance to the Indies.

Columbus also states these people raid different islands and “ pillage and take as much as the can” (4-5). There are many times in both stories where the colors of green, yellow, and red are intertwined. The fact that the feast in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight takes place at Christmas time is one good example as these colors are often associated with the holiday. Another is in both the Green Knight’s and Sir Gawain’s apparel. The Green Knight was adorned in green with gold trimmings, along with gold and red embroidery.

Sir Gawain was dressed in red and gold, as well as carrying gold armor and a red and gold shield. Both outfits were ornamented with jewels. The castles that Sir Gawain visited were decorated extravagantly in red and gold. When Christopher Columbus describes the islands, he states the islands are lush and plentiful with birds, fruits and flowers, which brings to mind the three predominant colors as well as a myriad of other colors. The symbolism of colors is strong in both the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Christopher Columbus’ account of The Green and Beautiful Land.

The mention of green in both titles, the significance of green in the characteristics of the main subjects and the misfortune of the other subjects in the stories runs true to the descriptive words associated with green.

Yellow depicts vitality, wealth and greed in the extravagant descriptions of the castles, the characters apparel and the portrait of the islands. The idealism of Sir Gawain is apparent in his gold accoutrement and apparel, and cowardice and deceit play a part in both narratives. Red illustrates the aggressive nature of Columbus and the battle clothes of Sir Gawain.

The red shade in the battle clothes as well as the battle shield also indicates strength and power. Color is a powerful tool that can set the mood and tone of people, places and objects. Both authors utilize color symbolism to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the characters as well as paint a vibrant picture of an astonishing new land. Works Cited Columbus, Christopher. The Green and Beautiful Land. Handout. Georgia Gwinnett College. 19 Aug 2011. Damrosch, David, David L. Pike, and general editors. The Longman Anthology of World Literature. Compact ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2008. 200-59. Print. Kelly, Keith. Class lecture on the Age of Enlightenment. Georgia Gwinnett College. 9 Sep 2011. Rohrer, Ken. "Color Symbolism and Culture." Incredible @rt Department. Princeton Online, 2011. Web. 28 Sep 2011. <http://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/middle/color2.htm> Smith, Kate. "A Glimpse into the Meaning, Symbolism & Psychology of Color." Sensational Color. N. p. , 2011. Web. 28 Sep 2011. <http://www.sensationalcolor.com/color-messages-meanings/color-meaning-symbolism-psychology/psychology-of-color-a-glimps-into-the-meaning-symbolism-psychology-of-color.html>