

Original Research Article

Colors and Symbolism in “The Great Gatsby” by Francis Scott Fitzgerald

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study about the American writer Francis Scott Fitzgerald and his splendid and extraordinary novel “The Great Gatsby”. In this novel I will be stressing some crucial points regarding colors and symbolism inside the novel. I will analyze these topics and elaborate on them thoroughly its colors and symbolism. F.S. Fitzgerald has a prominent style, an important part of which is color symbolism, especially notable in The Great Gatsby, in every chapter of this novel. The writer is simultaneously a painter who makes his writing very visual and bright, as he mostly uses pure colors, not shades, to make the picture clear.

Introduction

F.S. Fitzgerald has a prominent style, an important part of which is color symbolism, especially notable in The Great Gatsby, in every chapter of this novel. The writer is simultaneously a painter who makes his writing very visual and bright, as he mostly uses pure colors, not shades, to make the picture clear. “These colors give us a great insight into the characters and their lives. Each case when a color word is applied does not have to be symbolic, but the majority of them are. To fully understand the meaning of his color use, we as readers must recognize the situations in which these colors are mentioned” (Schneider, 1964).

Literature Review

The novel combines symbolism with psychological realism. The description of the house, the parties, the music and the guests give them a symbolic glow. They seem to be part of an unreal world: “Men and girls came and went like moths (moth-winged insect which flies towards lights at night) among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars”. The novel is famous for its unusual and interesting use of colors: “The lights grow brighter and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music. Gatsby symbolizes the American belief that money can buy love and happiness”. (High, 1986, p.144).

Methodology

Symbolic Meanings of Colors

The major colors in The Great Gatsby include green, white, red, yellow, blue and grey. I will try to analyze their symbolic meanings one by one.

Results and Discussion

Green

No matter in the Oriental culture or in the Western culture, green is traditionally associated as a color of spring, which symbolizes confidence, vitality and hope. However, one possible meaning of green is envy. Gatsby can be seen as an envious, jealous character. The green novel runs throughout the whole novel, and it is closely related to Gatsby's short life. So it symbolizes Gatsby's original dream and hope, his ceaseless pursuit of his dream and even the corruption of his dream and life. Gatsby once had the love of his life, Daisy, but now she is married to another man. He spends all of his time and effort in an attempt to win Daisy back. It is also that Fitzgerald uses green to symbolize money and its power in society. Money rules the lives of the people in the story. Gatsby needs the money to win Daisy's love back. The green color may symbolize the money, because the green color was seen as a symbol of stability. American dollar bills were known as "greenbacks" for their color, but the most reasonable symbol for green in the book would have to be the one of future hope, especially in Gatsby's case. The green color is closely associated with the green light. The initial appearance of the green light occurs when Nick sees Gatsby for the first time, standing in front of his mansion and stretching out his arms toward the green light. The light becomes, for Gatsby, the symbol of a reunion with Daisy. This reunion seems justifiable, yet it is so far away from coming true. The first time when the green light occurs is at the end of the first chapter:

"Involuntarily I glanced seaward-and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock". (Fitzgerald, 1999, p.16).

In Gatsby's eyes, the green light just represents Daisy, who is his lifelong pursuit and dream. He thinks that the reason why Daisy breaks up their engagement and is married to rich Tom is that he is too poor. So he believes that he can win Daisy back only if he earns enough money.

The second time when the green light occurs is in the fifth chapter. At this time, Gatsby has successfully shown his enormous fortune to Daisy and Daisy begins to cry when she faces Gatsby's incredible wealth. Gatsby said to Daisy that "You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock". (Ibid., p. 60).

It seems that he is nearly realizing his dream, but he becomes lost because of the big difference between the real Daisy and his imaginary Daisy. So now the green light seems to have lost its original significance and the American Dream is beautiful in the imagination but is fragile in the reality. Once more the green color of Gatsby's car is used paradoxically –so stay for "death car": "The "death car", as the newspapers called it, didn't stop; it came out of the gathering darkness, wavered tragically for a moment, and then disappeared around the next bend. Mavromichaelis wasn't even sure of its color –he told the first policeman that it was light green" (Ibid., p. 88). Probably this is because hope based on money can only bring death.

Next time when the green light occurs is at the end of the novel. With the death of Gatsby, the people who holds the faith in the light does not exist anymore, which indicates the disillusionment of the American Dream. In the end of chapter nine we have: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther...And one fine morning- ". (Ibid., p.115).

Gatsby simply integrates his dream with love and wealth, and gambles on Daisy, who is hollow, selfish, greedy and indifferent. Gatsby's pursuit of his dream on the spiritual level is incompatible with the social environment.

White

White occurs many times in the novel, and is closely associated with Daisy. White represents the immaculate and pure beauty. It symbolizes nobleness and purity. It is Daisy's color in the novel. She wears a white dress when she meets Gatsby for the first time as well as when Nick visits her in the East Egg. At the age of eighteen, she dressed in white and had a white car, which made her charming in the eyes of young officers. Her house is full of the color of white, for example, "The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside" and "A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags". (Ibid., p.7). Even her name Daisy is also a kind of white flower. Thus, it may easily make people feel that she is pure, flawless, innocent and noble when people meet her the first time. That is why Gatsby is infatuated with her throughout his life and regards her as a pure beauty and as his American Dream. However, white actually symbolizes emptiness, superficiality, ruthlessness and selfishness to a great extent in the novel. Describing Daisy with the color of white, it indicates that under the pure and beautiful appearance, Daisy owns a superficial, hollow, cold and selfish heart from the inside. Her life is full of nothing except luxury and she wastes everyday in boringness and loneliness, for example, Daisy once cried, "what'll we do with ourselves this afternoon, and the day after that, and the next

thirty years?" (Ibid., p.75).

Even though Gatsby has run out of all his youth and passion for her, even sacrificed his life, Daisy shows no grief for his death but just goes out for traveling with her husband, which reveals her selfish and indifferent personality. White implies that although the upper class is rich in their morality, and is irresponsible and insensitive to the society, to their life and to other people. White symbolizes Daisy's emptiness, superficial, hypocrisy and ignorance. Gatsby on the other side regards Daisy as his dream, and it indicates that his dream is illusive and worthless, and it also implies that his American Dream is doomed to be corrupted.

Red

Red is associated with blood, so it is the symbol of violence, danger and rage. Nick has bought a dozen books on finance, which is red and gold standing on his shelf. The gold color of these books represents money, while the gold is associated with red, it means that the worship and the obtaining of money is closely associated with blood and violence in that age. On the other hand, when Nick left Daisy's house, he saw "in front of wayside garages, where new red gas-pumps sat out in pools of light." (Ibid., p.15)

In this sentence, the author not only uses the color "red", but also uses the word "pool", which indicates the ending of the story. Here red represents the blood of Myrtle who died in front of a gas station in the Valley of Ashes and the blood of Gatsby who was shot in his swimming pool.

It is Tom's enormous wealthy and superior family background that makes him selfish, arrogant, defiant and supercilious. He is disloyal to his marriage. Though he has married with Daisy, he often cheated her with his mistress, Mrs. Wilson. However, after discovering his wife and Gatsby's love affairs, he is so selfish and arrogant that he unexpectedly takes his wife to Gatsby only to prove that Gatsby cannot cause any harm to him, from which we can see his arrogance and defiance. After knowing all this, Daisy kills his mistress unintentionally by Gatsby's car, out of envy, he instigates his mistress's husband to kill Gatsby, from which we can see his selfishness and cruelty.

Yellow

Throughout the novel it can be seen that the most common color accompanying with Gatsby is yellow. With this color, the author skillfully implies what kind of outer self that Gatsby intends to show before others. Yellow is the color of gold, which symbolizes money, materialism and high social position. In chapter three we have: "Now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music" (Ibid., p.27). In order to win Daisy back, Gatsby chooses the yellow color to decorate himself and his house to show that he has been one member of the rich family. After owning enough money, he keeps himself in a golden world to show his wealth to Daisy, his golden tie, yellow car, golden toilet set and even his golden food and music in his fancy parties. Even Doctor T.J. Eckleburg's enormous spectacles are yellow too. All these yellow and golden things indicate that the 1920's is an age where everyone shows great worship of money and where materialism is so fashionable that even God cannot avoid its influence. All of these show that she enjoys herself greedily in the wealthy and luxurious life style, and Gatsby is doomed to be disillusioned. On the other hand, the yellow color is the color of autumn leaves, which symbolizes decay, death and destructive power. Before Gatsby was shot by Wilson, it was depicted that he refused the chauffeur's help and disappeared among the yellowing trees in a moment, which indicated his death. His yellow car not only ends Mrs. Wilson's life, but also eventually leads to his death. It is Daisy who actually leads to Gatsby's tragedy. Yellow color also indicates the failure of the American Dream. Yellow, the color that Gatsby is struggling all his life, not only gives him confidence, but also destroys his dream and life.

Blue

Blue represents tranquility, melancholy, loneliness and fantasy. If the yellow color is the color to show Gatsby's outer self, the blue color, which is full of sadness and fantasy, indicates Gatsby's real inner self. In the novel, Gatsby's garden is described as blue, such as the blue garden and blue livery occurred in the third chapter. In chapter eight we have "the blue leaves" (Ibid., p. 96). In chapter nine we have "blue lawn" (Ibid., p.115).

He throws fancy parties in his blue garden to allure Daisy, but fails, which makes him become sadder and lonelier. Even though he throws the luxurious parties, he never takes part in them. That is why the people who take part in the parties hold speculation and debate on the real identity of Gatsby. As to the reason why Gatsby does not take part in his parties, it may be that the real Gatsby cannot merge himself with those wealthy people and the tranquility in his inner heart is

contrary to the noise scenes. Blue also symbolizes the fantasy and illusion of dream. When the blue color is used to describe Gatsby, it indicates that Gatsby is full of beautiful fantasy and illusion towards his dream, Daisy. In the end of the novel, when Nick sees the blue smoke of leaves in the air, he realizes that the disillusionment of the American Dream is inevitable in such times.

Grey

Grey is the basic tone that rules the whole novel. It symbolizes decadence, bleakness, corruption and disillusionment and represents moral decay, spiritual emptiness and death. The valley of ashes is a grey place where everything is colored grey. In the beginning of chapter two we have: "This is a valley of ashes-a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (Ibid., p. 16). There are also grey cars crawling along an invisible track and ash-grey men swarming up with leaden spades.

Critics often point out associations between the symbols and those used by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. The most obvious is the valley of ashes between West Egg and New York, reminiscent of the *Waste Land* itself, and there are other echoes of Eliot's poetry. Some features of Eliot's poem, *The Hollow Men* are echoed in *The Great Gatsby*. In the poem, the hollow men (with heads 'filled with straw') inhabit a valley. The adjective 'hollow' recurs in connection with Wilson, another inhabitant of a valley, while Tom is a 'straw-haired man' "(Matterson, 1990, p.17).

Every grey thing in the Valley of Ashes makes people feel depressed, hopeless and afflicted. Besides the poor Valley of Ashes is grey, there are many scenes with grey color in the novel, for example, the living room of Tom's mistress is filled with grey smoke; the guests in Gatsby's parties have grey names; the accident which kills Mrs. Wilson happens in the dusk. All these grey scenes symbolize spiritual emptiness, moral decadence, gloomy life and sad tragedy. After Mrs. Wilson's death, in chapter eight we have: "Wilson's glazed eyes turned out to the ashheaps, where small grey clouds took on fantastic shape" (Fitzgerald, 1999, p.101). This indicates Mr. Wilson's painful state of mind and his determination to kill the owner of the yellow car. In the end of the story, the author describes that Gatsby is killed by an ashen and fantastic figure. The appearance of this grey figure just indicates Gatsby's disillusionment and death. It also means that all the things including Gatsby's dream and life are ended in the bleak and gloomy tragic grey atmosphere.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I would like to say that *The Great Gatsby* is not only a great story, but it is the story of real life and had a permanent place in American literature. Personally, I really liked it, when I started reading it, you just want to stay in his magical world, and never get out of there.

What I was amazed while reading this novel was that Fitzgerald had that internal wonderful instinct of an artist who felt very well which color and how much color to use to create the canvas he had in his mind. Almost each time the color symbolizes some human value or feature, a character of the novel. Fitzgerald's voice is always his own, a unique one. It is haunting and magical and fascinating. Personally, while using colors and its meaning I understood how was the life in 1920's such as greed for money, power, illegal activities, and the fall of the American Dream.

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