



SOME NOTES ON COLOR SYMBOLISM



Color symbolism is all around us. It is such a mundane and common phenomenon, that we rarely stop to think about it. Consider the American flag. It is red, white, and blue (like the British flag, the French flag and the Dutch flag, among others). What does red represent? In the 1980's and earlier, red was the color of the Democratic Party. It was also the color of Communism (Soviets were called "reds" and left-wing partisans were called "pinkos"). The flag of the Soviet Union was red. China's flag is red. Blue was the color of the Republican Party as well as the earlier Federalist Party. Democrats who leaned to the right were called "blue dogs." Blue was connected to "blue bloods" and the English Tory Party. The colors were up for grabs during the 80's and 90's, and since the 00's are relatively fixed. Red now signifies the Republican Party, blue the Democrats.¹ Blue also signifies sadness (the blues), naughty language (blue language), probity (blue stockings), cold (blue lips), inexpensive goods (blue light special), inexpensive food (blue plate special), and so forth.



The flag of our neighbor Canada is red and white. Why doesn't the Canadian flag have any blue in it? Our southern neighbor Mexico flies red white and green. What does the green represent? Some say independence, some say hope. What does green represent in the United States? To go "green" relates to nature—perhaps as in Gawain and the *green* knight. Consider the phrase "green-eyed jealousy." In that phrase, green has nothing to do with nature. Also consider that the color of earth isn't green, it's black. We speak of "rich, black soil." Things get even more confusing when we consider the colors of traffic lights!



Colors in family and national crests as well as on early flags were regulated by a code of heraldry. Red represented blood and military strength, blue represented truth and loyalty, green represented hope and joy, white represented peace, and so on. The Hapsburg family ruled most of southern Europe for centuries; they were kings of Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Portugal, as well as Mexico and Brazil. Their colors were black and yellow. They ruled the Holy Roman Empire, whose flag in the Middle Ages was red with a white cross. (The Crusaders wore white with a red cross, now the colors of the worldwide health organization, Red Cross.) The Hohenzollern family also ruled in Europe for centuries. They were kings of Prussia and Germany. Their colors were black and white. The German flag today is red, yellow, and black. Some say it means honorable service (knighthood, black), blood (red), and the light of freedom (yellow).



¹ See [Washington Post](#) and [Smithsonian](#).

Medieval Colors

In medieval Europe, several systems of symbolism existed side-by-side. For authors who were raised reading Greek and Latin literature, the symbolism was less convoluted.

In early Greece, symbols coordinated the four elements with four bodily humors and four colors.

■ Red aligned with spring, air, south, childhood, blood, the sanguine temperament, and the geologic qualities warm & moist.

■ Yellow aligned with summer, east, fire, youth, bile, choleric temperament, and to the geologic qualities warm & dry.

■ Black aligned with autumn, earth, north, manhood, black bile, the melancholic temperament, and the geologic qualities cold & dry.

□ White aligned with winter, water, west, old age, phlegm, the phlegmatic temperament, cold, and the geologic qualities cold & moist.

Greek Christian symbolism added the quality of purity to white. Black becomes the symbol of the physical world, the *cosmos*. Colors represent qualities in the physical world, and whiteness becomes the lack of color—that is, the lack of physicality found in the spiritual world.

Later Greek and Latin writers modify that tradition. One of the more influential was Pseudo-Dionysius, translated from Greek into Latin by John the Irishman (John Scotus Eriugena) around 860 A.D. Another influential writer was Isidore of Seville, author of the first Encyclopedia. He noted that colors represent the four elements: red for fire (which earlier was yellow), white for air, green for earth (earlier it was black), and blue for the sea (earlier it was white). These change again with the extremely influential Church Father, Jerome—who was from the Balkans. He writes about the colors of the 12 stones that decorated the breastplate of the High Priest of Jerusalem:

“The four colors refer to the four elements, through which all things subsist: the white linen is assigned to earth, for the flax grows out of the earth; the purple to water, for it is dyed from little sea-snails; the hyacinth [blue] to air, because of the likeness of colour; the scarlet to fire and aether ...”²

By the late Middle Ages, several symbolic color schemes were available to writers.

There were literary tropes concerning the “colors of love.” As Peter Dronke explains, the “associations of certain colours—green with the awakening of love, blue with fidelity, white with the hope of reward, yellow with love’s consummation—were to remain relatively constant in diverse periods and diverse literary genres.”³ Dronke notes that Spain had a slightly different tradition: blue meant jealousy, white meant chastity, yellow meant sadness, and so forth. One of the clearer expressions of the symbolism of the 12 colors of the High

² Cited and translated by Peter Dronke, “Tradition and Innovation in Medieval Western Colour-Imagery,” *Eranos* 41 (1972): 51–107, at 68.

³ Dronke, *Tradition*, p. 71.

Priest is found in an early Latin poem, “Cives caelestis patriae.” Some of the colors are as follows:

- Green (jasper): “greenness of faith” or loyalty
- Blue (sapphire): innocence
- Black (sardonyx): humility
- White (sardonyx): chastity
- Red (sardonyx & ■ carnelian): martyrdom
- Aquamarine (beryl): serenity
- Purple (chrysoprase): perfect love

One major medieval poet, Hildegard of Bingen, uses green in one of her famous poems. Here it is in Dronke’s translation:

You noblest greenness
with your roots in the sun,
sparkling in white serenity
in a whell
that no earthly
eminence comprehends—
you are enfolded
in the embraces of divine
solicitudes.
You glow like dawn
and burn like the sun’s flame!⁴



AS Dronke explains, for Hildegard, “greenness suggests not only paradisaal bliss and holiness, but also physical fertility, beauty and fulfilment.”⁵ In short, he says, “greenness is the blithe overcoming of the dualism between earthly and heavenly.”

To put it another way, color is a means of making an idea real. A medieval writer of the twelfth century named Richard of St. Victor wrote, “A symbol is the gathering of visible forms for showing the invisible.”⁶

Later, Richard interpreted a scene from an Arthurian romance. The romance describes three drops of blood in the snow. The Arthurian knight Perceval/Parzifal sees the snow-bound blood and thinks of his absent love. The white snow represents pure love, intensely spiritual, abstract—the ideal. And the blood represents the physical body in which that love is manifest, as well as loyalty and kinship implied in blood (think “blood kin” and “blood oath”).

A medieval author rarely describes a color without implying some larger idea.

⁴ Dronke, *Tradition*, p. 83. “Greenness” is *viriditas*.

⁵ Dronke, *Tradition*, p. 84.

⁶ Dronke, *Tradition*, p. 85.