

Uses of symbols and colors in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Abstract

In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, symbols are an important and integral part of what makes it a great novel. Though there are numerous and different aspects that could be explored, this article emphasizes several colors used for symbolism in the novel, for example, green, white, silver, yellow and golden. 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. Symbolism reflects what life in the 1920's was like, through Fitzgerald's eyes.

Key words: Colors As Symbols, Green, White, Silver, Yellow, Golden.

1. Introduction

They say that good writing is using the right words in the right place. This is certainly so in *The Great Gatsby* by Francis Scott Fitzgerald. He 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, a reader must recognize the situations in which these colors are mentioned. Fitzgerald's color symbolism was studied before to some degree (The use, n.d.; Schneider, 1964), but I decided to carry out a thorough analysis.

2. Method

The analysis I held is both qualitative and quantitative, as, on the one hand, I tried to find out the symbolic meanings of color words and, on the other hand, find regularities in how often each color word is used.

3. Analysis & discussion

Green (18 times mentioned in the novel, even 19, if we count the geographic name Greenwich) is traditionally associated with spring, hope, and youth. However, one possible meaning of green is envy. Gatsby can be seen as an envious, jealous character. He 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 possible that Fitzgerald uses green to symbolize money and its power in society. Money rules the lives of the people in the story. Gatsby needs money to live the life that he does. Gatsby also feels he needs the money to win Daisy's love back. The green color may both symbolize envy and money. Because the green color was seen as a symbol of stability, it was selected for **new** American dollars in 1862 (do not forget that Gatsby was a *nouveau riche* – **new** rich!). These bills were known as "greenbacks" for their color and started a tradition of the United States' printing the back of its money in green. In contrast to the currency notes of many other countries, Federal Reserve notes of varying denominations are the same colors: predominantly black ink with green highlights on the front, and predominantly green ink on the back (Wikipedia, n.d.). However, the most reasonable symbol for green in the book would have to be the one of future hope, especially in Gatsby's case.

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 to 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:

"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" (chapter 1).

In chapter 4 we read about Gatsby's car: "Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town".

The use of a green light at the end of a landing stage to signal a romantic reunion, is intriguingly similar to the green light at the end of Daisy's Buchanan's dock, which becomes a key image in *The Great Gatsby*:

"You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock." (chapter 5, Gatsby speaking about Daisy's house).

However, once green is certainly associated with jealousy – with Wilson, whose sunlit faces is paradoxically green: "With an effort Wilson left the shade and support of the doorway and, breathing hard, unscrewed the cap of the tank. In the sunlight his face was green" (chapter 7).

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. Michaelis wasn't even sure of its color — he told the first policeman that it was light green" (chapter 7). Probably this is because hope based on money can only bring death?

Whatever happened, Gatsby remained a hopeless dreamer: "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 out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning—" - (ending remarks of chapter 9).

Some color words deal with precious metals (gold/brass/silver), they more often stand for riches, but also for everything beautiful, sometimes dealing with nature (the sun and its light) as well. Gold/golden/brass (used 15 times) and yellow (+ crème - used 28 times) are colors that symbolize old wealth. The colors green and gold contrast in a significant way. In old times people used gold as a means for exchange, but as a national currency was established green money replaced the gold and gold no longer even backed the dollar. So, gold represents the old money and green represents the new. In the same way, gold symbolizes Daisy and Tom's old money and green symbolizes Gatsby's new money (only a couple of times it is mentioned in connection with him, e.g. his gold-color tie may symbolize how little of the old money he possesses – just a touch). One might say that Gatsby is green. To contrast this Tom is gold. In the same way that green and gold contrast, so do Gatsby and Tom. Jordan and Daisy are also represented

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by gold. "...Jordan's slender golden arm resting in mine..." (chapter 3); "turkeys bewitched to a dark gold" (chapter 3) (at Gatsby's parties even the turkeys turn to gold – an allusion to King Midas)...high in the white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl" (chapter 7).

Jordan Baker - the golden girl of golf - is associated with that color. "With Jordan's slender golden arm resting in mine" (chapter 3); "I put my arm around Jordan's golden shoulder" (chapter 4). With a few sentences Fitzgerald throws a light at the turbulent months while Daisy is waiting for Gatsby during the war. "All night the saxophones wailed the hopeless comment of the 'Beale Street Blues' while a hundred pairs of golden and silver slippers shuffled the shining dust. At the grey tea hour ..." (chapter 7). Here even the dust in the rooms, usually grey, is shining, while the usually golden tea is served at the grey tea hour. We find that contrast between golden and grey once more in "we went about opening the rest of the windows downstairs, filling the house with grey-turning, gold-turning light" (chapter 7).

The golden girl is, of course, Daisy. Daisy is the white flower with the golden center. Daisy's character is enhanced by Fitzgerald's use of white (mentioned 35 times, to say nothing about a Mr. Whitebait) to indicate Daisy's alleged freshness and innocence (as Gatsby sees her). He notes the gleaming white house, the airy, white rooms, and Daisy lounging in a white dress. Daisy also talks of her white girlhood. Fitzgerald evokes two meanings of white: one is the traditional meaning of purity; the second is the empowerment of whiteness. Daisy, as she is initially presented, represents both privilege and purity - a kind of a princess figure. The use of white helps to characterize her as the enchanted princess who becomes incarnate as Gatsby's dream. However, the different shades of white indicate that Daisy may not be an embodiment of purity and that privilege may have a corrupting effect, at least when it is used to veil or whitewash misdeeds. An egg is white (pure and innocent) on the outside, but yellow (corrupt) on the inside. This example corresponds precisely to the presentation of Daisy's character through color symbolism. Because of the number of times it is mentioned throughout the text, white proves to be a color that is vital to the novel. From Fitzgerald's use of the white color in these various scenarios, the color could be interpreted as: beauty, cleanliness, wealth, innocence, virginity, and also laziness.

The first time Nick Carraway meets his cousin Daisy Buchanan at Tom's and Daisy's home, she was dressed totally in white. So as the house and its furnishings are also tuned in light shades. This fact might be interpreted as: beauty, cleanliness, wealth, innocence, virginity and also laziness. Daisy's color is white, she wears white dresses and recalls her "white girlhood" (chapter 1), and this use of color helps her to characterize her as the unattainable "enchanted princess" who becomes incarnate as Gatsby's dream.

The white (champion of the colors, used 49 times) Daisy embodies the vision which Gatsby seeks to embrace - but which Nick, who discovers the corrupt admixture of dream and reality, rejects in rejecting Jordan. For, except in Gatsby's extravagant imagination, the white does not exist pure: it is invariably stained by the money, the yellow. Daisy is the white flower - with the golden center. If in her virginal beauty she was "dressed in white, and had a little white roadster" (chapter 4), she is, Nick realizes, "high in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl (chapter 7)". Her voice is "full of money" (chapter 7); she carries a "little gold pencil" (chapter 6); when she visits Gatsby there are "two rows of brass buttons on her dress" (chapter 5). As for the "incurably dishonest" Jordan (chapter 3), the lamplight shines "bright on ... the autumn-leaf yellow of her hair" (chapter 1), she displays a "slender golden arm" and "a golden shoulder"; however, her fingers are "powdered white over their tan" (chapter 7), which signifies feigned innocence. When she enters the hotel with Daisy, both are wearing "small tight hats of metallic cloth" (chapter 7); and when Nick sees them both lying on the couch a second time, they are "like silver idols weighing down their own white dresses against the singing breeze of the fans" (chapter

7) — the silver, of course, symbolizing both the dream and the reality, since as the color of the romantic stars and the moon (the first time we observe Gatsby he is gazing up at the "silver pepper of the stars") it is clearly associated with the romantic hope and promise that govern Gatsby's life, and as the color of money it is obviously a symbol of corrupt materialism.

Red usually interpreted as luxury and rage for me in this novel symbolizes danger: the description of Tom's and Daisy's house is full of red and its shades (this luxury involves blood). And this is where the danger comes from in the book.

Yellow is the color of the gold that Gatsby thought he needed to purchase his dream. Moreover, "cream"—the adjective that discriminating Nick uses to describe the car (chapter 4), and a color that the dictionary defines as "pale yellow to yellowish white" - is a blend of the two colors most frequently associated with the lovers, Daisy's white and Gatsby's gold or yellow.

Sometimes the gold at Gatsby's house turns to yellow. Thus the richness is only a cover, a short sensation, like the *yellow press* for the more offensively sensational press. "Now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music" (chapter 3). In contrast to the golden girl Jordan, her admirers are only yellow: "two girls in twin yellow dresses". "You don't know who we are", said one of the girls in yellow, "but we met you here about a month ago". "... we sat down at a table with the two girls in yellow" (all chapter 3). Remarkably Daisy's daughter has old and yellow hair: "Did mother get powder on your old yellowy hair?" (chapter 7).

Silver represents jewelry and richness. In *The Great Gatsby* the moon or moonlight or the stars are often silver: "the silver pepper of the stars" (chapter 1); "The moon had risen higher, and floating in the Sound was a triangle of silver scales" (chapter 3); "A silver curve of the moon hovered already in the western sky" (chapter 7).

When Gatsby talks about Daisy dancing at a ball, he offsets her cheerful idealism with saxophones wailing "the hopeless comment of the 'Beale Street Blues' while a hundred pairs of golden and silver slippers shuffled the shining dust" (chapter 8).

The second chapter which introduces to us the Wilsons is full of grey color (7 cases!) which symbolizes facelessness, melancholy and low class. However, changing the gloomy dark blue dress for a crème one, Myrtle Wilson changes as well, as the color of the dress symbolizes the social class: "With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur. Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her, until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air."

3. Results

Table 1. Color application in "The Great Gatsby"

Table 2. Statistics of color words application in *The Great Gatsby*

You can see that each chapter has a dominating color: 1-2, 4, 6 and 7 – white, 3 and 8 – yellow, 5 and 9 –green, It is also noticeable how, in chapters 5 and 6 the shining colors decline, foretelling the tragedy that is going to happen. Chapter 7 contains the climax – the car driven by Daisy kills Myrtle, it is very emotional, and the color words immediately increase in number. The eighth chapter takes us back to Gatsby's youth (flashback) – naturally it is full of colors. And the last chapter is the least colorful – Gatsby is dead! On the other hand, green is the dominating color. It means that no longer Gatsby, but other people should/will hope, "beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past", but still hope.

Table 1. Color application in "The Great Gatsby"

color	number of times	collocations	meaning	character it is associated with
green	5	green light	romantic reunion, hope + once - death	Gatsby
	2	green leather conservatory	nature, hope	Gatsby
	1	green house	hope, money	Gatsby
	1	apple-green shirts	hope	Gatsby
	1	green jersey	hope	Gatsby
	2	green card	hope	Gatsby
	1	green Sound	nature	Gatsby
	1	green face	envy	Wilson
	1	green golf-links	nature	Jordan Baker
	1	green tickets	money	Gatsby
	1	green breast of the new world	nature	Gatsby
gold(en)	1	red and gold - book-cover / money	old money	Nick
	1	gold window panes	old money	Tom
	1	turkeys turn into gold	money/riches	Gatsby
	1	golden arm	beauty, old money	Jordan Baker
	1	golden shoulder	beauty, old money	Jordan Baker
	1	gold-colored tie	money/riches	Gatsby
	1	gold odor	beauty, old money	Daisy
	1	toilet of pure dull gold	money	Gatsby
	1	golden billow of foamy clouds	sun, beauty	
	1	gold pencil	beauty, old money	Daisy
	1	golden girl	beauty, old money	Daisy
	1	golden slippers	beauty, old money	
	1	gold--turning light	sun, beauty	
	brass	1	brass rail	riches
1		brass buttons	riches	Daisy

yellow	1	the autumn-leaf yellow of her hair	beauty, old money	Jordan Baker
	1	yellow spectacles on the advertisement	old money	
	1	yellow brick on the advertisement	old money	
	1	yellow windows	old money	Tom
	1	tanned skin	money	Gatsby
	1	yellow bug (=car)	money	Gatsby
	5	yellow cocktail music	beauty	
	1	yellow dresses	old money, beauty	girls of high society
	6	yellowy hair	old money, beauty	girls of high society
	4	yellow car	old money, beauty + death	
	1	yellow light	old money	Tom
	1	yellow trolley	old money	
		yellowing trees	beauty, death	
	1		effort to look rich	
	1	<i>dress of cream-colored chiffon</i>	riches	Myrtle
	1	<i>cream color car</i>	riches	Gatsby
	1	<i>faint orange shirt</i>	riches	Gatsby
white	1	white palaces of fashionable East Egg	beauty, riches	high society
	1	red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion	beauty, riches	Tom
	4	gleaming white windows	success, riches	Tom
	2	in white (dresses)	success, riches	Daisy, Jordan Baker
	1	white race	privilege	
	1	White Star Line (street name)		
	2	white girlhood	happy, innocent	Daisy, Jordan Baker
	2	whitewashed railroad fence/alleys	cleanliness	
	1	white ashen dust veiled his dark suit	his soul torn between light and darkness	Wilson
	1	white dog feet	innocence	
	1	white sheep	innocence	
	1	white cake of apartment-houses	beauty, riches	high society
	1	one of gypsies (dressed) in trembling opal	??	
	1	powdered milky white	claimed innocence	Myrtle's sister
	1	a white spot of lather on his cheekbone	claimed nobility	high society
1	white flannels	innocence	Nick	

	1	the white chasms of lower New York	??? (paradoxical, as chasms are normally black)	
	1	cotton-white hair	? (it turned white for no reason)	
	1	white shirt	cleanliness, riches	Tom
	1	white knickerbockers	cleanliness	
	1	white card	innocence	
	1	the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps	riches	Daisy
	1	a white chauffeur	cleanliness	Gatsby
	2	the red, white, and blue banners	riches	Gatsby
	1	white roadster	cleanliness, claimed innocence	
	1	whitewashed alleys	cleanliness	
	2	white flannel suit	cleanliness, riches	Daisy
	2	white duck trousers	cleanliness, riches	
	1	white plum tree	cleanliness, riches	Tom/Daisy
	1	sidewalk was white with moonlight	beauty	Gatsby
	1	white face	beauty	high society
	2	white shirtwaist	beauty	
	2	white car	cleanliness	
	2	white steps (=stairs)	riches	
	2	white evening dress	riches	
	1	white wings of the boat	riches	
	1	intermarriage between black and white	beauty, freedom	
		white evening dress	riches	
silver	2	silver polisher; silver service	luxury	
	1	silver pepper of the stars	beauty	
	1	moon = silver scales	beauty	
	1	silver shirt	luxury	Gatsby
	1	silver fields	beauty	
	1	silver idols	beauty	Daisy, Jordan Baker

	1	silver curve of the moon	beauty, melancholy	Daisy	
	1	gleaming like silver	beauty, luxury	Daisy	
	1	silver slippers	beauty, luxury		
	1	dog-leash, made of leather and braided silver	luxury		
shades of red	1	red and gold books	richness	Nick	
	1	new red gas-pumps	??		
	2	through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space; rosy-colored porch	elegance, richness, danger	Tom & Daisy	
	1	red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion	elegance, richness, danger	Tom & Daisy	
	1	wine-colored rug		Tom & Daisy	
	2	crimson room	elegance, richness, danger	Tom & Daisy	
	1	red hair	elegance, richness, danger	Myrtle's sister, one of guests	
	1	red-belted ocean-going ships	??		
	1	red cross	??		
	2	coral, (shirt)	??	Gatsby	
	1	pink clouds	dream	Daisy	
	1	pink suit	tastelessness	Gatsby	
	1	red circle on the water	blood/death	Gatsby	
	black	1	black wheel	mourning	Daisy
		1	black rivulets	sadness	
1		Blackbuck	dirty money		
1		Blackwell's Island	gloomy setting		
1		black-and-blue knuckle	??	Tom	
1		black silk bow	injury		
1		black knotted tree	nervousness	Gatsby	
1		black wreath (in Gatsby's house)	nervousness	Gatsby	
	1	black morning	gloominess		
	1	black beach	gloominess		
	1	intermarriage between black and white	impossibility	Tom	
	1	black hostile eyes	hostility		
	1	a motor hearse, horribly black	death	Gatsby	

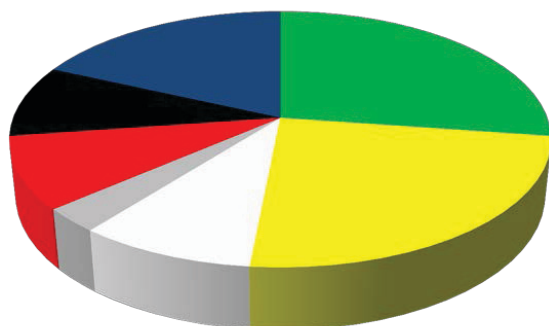
grey	2	gray sun-strained eyes	facelessness	Jordan Baker
	1	gray cars	facelessness, low class	
	2	ash-gray men	facelessness, low class	
	1	gray land	melancholy, fruitlessness	
	1	gray, scrawny Italian child	facelessness, low class	Myrtle
	1	gray upholstery	facelessness	
	1	Gilda Gray	facelessness, low class	
	1	cement color of the walls	facelessness, low class	
		a gray old man	facelessness, low class	
	1		???	
	1	gray little villages in France		
	1	gray names	unimportance	
	1	gray haze of Daisy's fur collar	melancholy	Daisy
		small gray clouds	forecasting something sad	
	1			
1	gray beard	sadness	Gatsby's father	
brown	1	brown dog	??	
	1	a brown riding-habit	??	
	1	brown body	??	
	1	brown beetles	earth/death??	
blue	1	black and blue knuckle	??	Tom
	1	The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are	omniscience	God
	1	blue		
	1	light blue eyes	??	Wilson
	1	dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine	Obscurity	Myrtle
	1	blue honey of the Mediterranean	beauty	
	2	blue gardens		Gatsby
	1	blue uniform	obscurity	
	1	red, white and blue banners	???	
	1			
	1	blue paint across her cheek	melancholy, mystery	Daisy
	1	monograms of Indian blue	sadness	Gatsby

1	blue nose	??	Wilson
1	blue coupe (=car)	obscurity	Gatsby
1	blue coat	obscurity	
1	Beale Street Blues (song)	melancholy	
1	blue cool limit of the sky	low class	
1	blue leaves		Gatsby
1	blue room	coolness, indifference	Gatsby
1	blue outside		Gatsby
1	blue smoke in the air	melancholy/death	Gatsby
1	blue lawn	melancholy/death	

Table 2. Statistics of color words application in *The Great Gatsby*

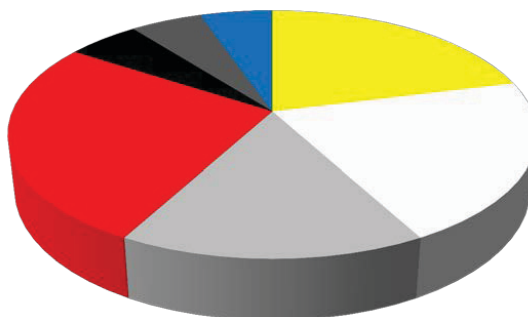
Chapters/colors	gold(en)	brass	yellow	silver	white	green	red	gray	blue	black	total
1	2	0	1	3	9	1	5	0	1	2	25
2	0	0	3	0	8	0	1	6	4	1	23
3	2	1	7	1	2	0	1	3	3	1	21
4	1	0	0	0	10	1	6	1	1	2	20
5	4	1	1	1	2	4	2	1	2	2	20
6	1	0	0	1	5	3	0	2	2	2	16
7	1	0	7	2	9	4	0	0	3	1	27
8	2	0	5	3	2	1	1	2	3	0	19
9	0	0	1	0	2	5	0	1	2	2	13
total	13	2	25 (+3 crème)	11	49	19	16	16	21	13	185(+3 crème)

Diagrams: color distribution per major characters



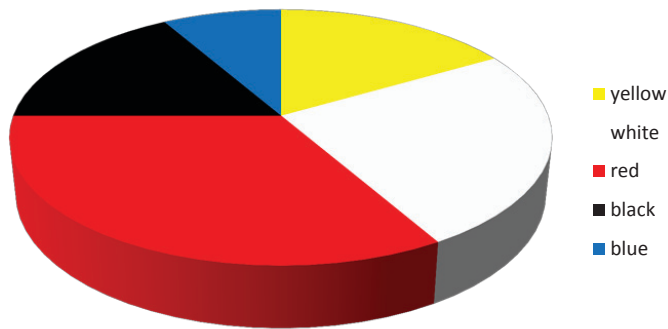
1. Gatsby

- green
- yellow
- white
- silver
- red
- black
- blue



2. Daisy

- yellow
- white
- silver
- red
- black
- gray
- blue



3. Tom

4. Conclusion

By my quantitative analysis I never mean that Fitzgerald was sitting and counting the words he used while writing *The Great Gatsby*. But he has that 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.

“*The Great Gatsby*” is one of the most “colorful” and “visual” works in literature – so high is the density of color words per page. Almost each time the color symbolizes some human value or feature, a character of the novel.

In the novel “*The Great Gatsby*” F. Scott Fitzgerald uses the literary technique of symbolism to reflect what life in the 1920’s was like, through Fitzgerald’s eyes. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s uses of colors throughout the novel prove to be of importance to the development of the theme and to the development and characteristics of the characters in *The Great Gatsby*. These colors give us a great understanding of the characters and their lives. Daisy is mostly associated with gold/yellow/brass/white/silver, as for Gatsby she is still his innocent beautiful bride, however, gold and yellow are often mentioned with her, to underline that her innocence has been corrupted by gold. What is interesting, is that red is an important color for her (her house), as her false, only outward beauty is dangerous. Gatsby is mostly linked with green – the color of hope, however, he is various (round character). What is interesting, colors symbolizing old money and riches (gold, yellow, white) are used only a few times about Gatsby, as if to say that he may try much, but he will never become a member of the high society, about which these colors are abundantly used (even anonymous “girls in yellow” are mentioned 5 times).

Tom is the gloomiest figure – fewer colors are “wasted” on him, and mostly they deal with danger.

The majority of color collocations in the book are unique, some are used twice, but the ones that are used repeatedly are certainly the key words in the text (such as green lights). Colors also constitute part of setting – a shiny summer (gold, yellow, white), the poor quarters of New York (gray), the luxury of the East Egg (gold, yellow, white).

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