

Color That Palate Dorian Gray!

By Regina Barreca

There is no criterion by which to recognize what is a color, except that it is one of our colors.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

While electrochemical events may unproblematically be regarded as the causal precondition for seeing color, the reception of sensations in “the color space” as semantically labeled natural categories, kinds, or information, is a “just so” story: it is Wittgenstein’s beetle in a box.

—Saunders and Brakel from “The Trajectory of Color,”
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When I wax philosophical about color, I don’t think of Wittgenstein’s beetle in a box; I think of Crayola’s 64 crayons in a box, the nifty package with a sharpener on the back. From my earliest days, Crayola provided me with a tutorial on seeing the world, a transformative ability to name features in my universe surpassed only by the scene where Anne Bancroft teaches Patty Duke the word *water* in *The Miracle Worker*. Without Crayola in my childhood, I would have grown up able to see only those colors that guys see: red, blue, and yellow. And maybe brown.

Without Crayola, how else would I have learned about apricot, a fruit we never ate but a color that saturated many a remodeled kitchen in the 1960s—a color that continues to exist only in boxes of crayons, the vegetative world, and shops catering to bridesmaids? How about maize? That wasn’t a word thrown around my ethnic household on any kind of regular basis. Without Crayola, I would have understood even fewer of the “what-you-call-maize-we-call-corn” references littering various

business, political, and postcolonial-theory treatises. Without the 64 box, I never would have known how to see magenta in a sunset or in the weave of a cheap silk pillow; I would have never recognized aquamarine; I would have forever lost the pleasure that the very word *periwinkle* has afforded me because of its vaguely effete, not to say degenerate, sound.

Although I have very little use for periwinkle itself, at least through my exposure to Crayola I can identify it. That is what education is for, after all. Non-Crayola types, in contrast, think Periwinkle is either a character created by Tobias Smollett or the name of the hedgehog in one of those terribly British fairy tales.

Let’s not forget that Crayola is not only the lamp but the mirror: It has changed colors over the years to reflect various cultural shifts. They’ve provided not only the colors of the rainbow but the colors of the Zeitgeist. Indian Red, created in 1958 and referring not to Native Americans but to a color of dye found in Southeast Asia, was nevertheless renamed Chestnut in 1999 . . . just in case. When the crayon Flesh was created

in 1949, nobody seemed to blink their (presumably all-white) eyelids. Then along came the civil rights movement, and, by 1962, Flesh was renamed Peach.

If they had given literary types a chance to re-name the color, we could have at least called it To Eat a Peach.

Indeed, because Wittgenstein did argue that “our ordinary language has no means for describing a particular shade of color,” and is therefore “incapable of producing a picture of this color,” it occurred to me that it might be time to rethink the whole Crayola concept through the lens of literature.

What would it be like if literary types named the colors in a box of crayons?

What if we produced color names suitable for the creation of a picture of our own experience, filtered as it is through the pages of books, images on screens, and the voice of the poet crying in the wilderness?

I mean, Crayola gives us Sea Green which is perfectly fine, but wouldn’t a student of Irish literature

in general and James Joyce in particular want to see the shade's moniker transformed into the more intensely evocative Scrotumtightening Sea Green? I mean, even if, like so many of us, you've pretty much stopped reading *Ulysses* after the famous first page in order to get more quickly to Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the end, you would recognize that image.

In the same manner, you don't need to be a huge fan of Hawthorne to imagine the bitter, thwarted color called Young Goodman Brown. Wouldn't it have been better for Crayola to have turned to the literary community rather than going all mushy with Fuzzy Wuzzy Brown, as they did in 1998?

And even if you weren't positive what year the book was written, you can no doubt see in your mind's eye the sickly yet brilliant high modernist hue of a Crayola named, à la Aldous Huxley, Chrome Yellow. (For those keeping track, the publication date was 1921.) Clearly the executives at crayon-central were forced to listen to albums recorded by Donovan during their earliest youth; they went with Unmellow Yellow in 1990. There can be no other excuse. (I won't even go into the problem inherent in naming a crayon Inch Worm, a crayon color as of 2003. How is Inch Worm a color? That would be like asking how big something is, only to be told the answer is "violet.")

Perhaps the Crayola people might be worried by the fact that not everyone would understand the context for literary colors. "We want our colors to be drawn from the average Crayola user," they might say. Fair enough. But if this concern were indeed paramount, why did they decide to offer Manatee as a crayon in 1998? Do kids from Kansas to Kentucky have ready access to their own local fully aquatic marine mam-

mals of the Trichechidae family, for example, in order to help them understand where Manatee falls on the color spectrum? Right next to the ever-popular Dugong and the less-desirable Sea Cow, I presume.

In contrast, I would argue that even our 18-year-old freshman literature students could identify a crayon called Clockwork Orange, distinguishing it easily from, for example, Amy Tan. Wouldn't it have been preferable for the manufacturers to



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have adopted Burgess's title rather than allowing such names as Atomic Tangerine to enter the lives of the young? Let alone Laser Lemon or Neon Carrot, both of which sound like produce harvested from gardens in Chernobyl.

Can't you just imagine Badge of Courage Red? It would sit in the box beside Pimpernel Scarlet and Letter Scarlet. And what would the difference between those two crayons be? With one you would draw a swashbuckler and with the other you'd draw an unbuckler. You'd have O'Hara Scarlet as well, but the color would disappear quickly, being gone with the wind and all.

Placed alongside Chrome Yellow you'd have a crayon with the garish sensibility of Wallpaper Yellow, next to which you'd discover a space left by the chronic unavailability of Anne Gregory's Hair Yellow.

And consider the cool, crisp lu-

minosity of a Crayola called Girl in Hyacinth Blue. Wouldn't that make a wonderful contrast to the unnecessarily complicated and heavy eyesore presented by Prose Purple? Can't you imagine its magnificent contrast or the self-reflective and spiritual density of Graham Green(e)? Or to Anne's Gables Green for that matter?

You'd have to split Iris Murdoch between The Red and The Green, of course, just as you'd have to give a nod to the semiotics and deconstructionists by awarding Saussure both Black and White in order that they might define each other. Naturally, since postmodernism treads on the heels of deconstruction, Noise White could add a nuanced edge to the very idea of definitive contrast.

When even the prismatic perspectives (or senseless enthusiasms, depending on your perspective) of postmodernism offer no playful, insouciant outlook on life, when sentiments of vague defeat and interminable boredom dampen even the slightest possibility for joy and renewal, then only the crayon called Dorian Gray will do. You'd find folks in literature departments all over the country trying to purchase whole boxes of crayons exclusively of that one color.

Look, if the all-powerful Crayola people can name a crayon The Color Purple and present it to Oprah Winfrey on camera, we should be able to get them to make up a box especially designed for those with a taste for literature. Perhaps they could get a special session accepted at the next convention of the Modern Language Association. And if they didn't feel they could manage a whole new box, we might let them know we'd settle for one crayon.

That crayon would be named Well Read. •