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Gender and Sexuality Through the Visual Imagery of Colors

In the stories of Colette and in *Les Guérillères* by Monique Wittig, we see different colors appear in different stories, bringing with them different symbolic connotations that may highlight themes within these stories that are not evident at first. Trying to interpret the visual imagery that colors bring might help us answer questions concerning why Colette and Wittig use them in the first place. Are they just stylistic elements? If not, what do these colors mean? Does the thematization that occurs by reading into colors help us understand, further reinforce, or bring out new perspectives on social issues being raised in these texts? Do they express themes that words alone cannot? And how can we apply what a color means in one context to other contexts that use that same color?

The two colors red and blue are extensively used by both Colette and Wittig to distinguish between the two categories of sex—man and woman—that have been constructed by society. In *Les Guérillères*, when the armies of men and women confront each other before the battle, “[t]he embattled women stand motionless, awaiting the order to move forward. In their hands they hold kites the colour of their army. One lot is red, the others are blue” (84). Wittig uses the red color to signify women and the blue color to signify men. Her choice of these two colors as a way of distinguishing between the two sexes is derived from the contemporary usage of them by society in the same manner. By using the same colors that her audience would be familiar with, she invites the readers to identify with one of these colors, with the connotations

that they bring with them, and with the contexts in which they are depicted. The purpose behind using two separate colors to denote men and women is presented in “One Is Not Born a Woman”, where Wittig argues that “by admitting that there is a “natural” division between women and men, we naturalize history, but also consequently we naturalize the social phenomena which express [women’s] oppression, making change impossible” (11). Wittig’s use of two separate colors is then a way to present the differences in the lived experiences of men and women and the systemic oppression that women face but men do not. Creating this barrier between the two sexes in a heterosexual relationship through the use of colors then helps the audience to relate this to their current social, economic, and political situation and for Wittig to, later in *Les Guérillères*, attempt to break it down through the concept of Lesbianism. Colors are a stylistic choice that carry with them visual imagery and symbolic connotations that help us think differently about the stories.

The color pink in Colette’s “A Dead End” provides a plausible explanation for the “accidental” death of the wife: a conscious escape of women from the oppression of patriarchy. Colette begins the story by describing the marital relationship between the husband and the wife. She says, “He had taken her from another man, this slim magnificent blonde who looked like a greyhound on a leash” (249). By comparing the wife to a greyhound on a leash, Colette places the husband in a dominant authoritative position and the woman in a subjugated position. The power imbalance in this heterosexual marriage culminates in the death of the wife: “... there had been an accident ... a fall on the steps ... a fractured skull ... died instantly ... death” (251). The death of the wife is called an “accident”. However, there is some evidence that might suggest calling it otherwise. Right before the “accidental” death, for the husband who begins to worry about his wife’s past, “The suffering began one morning while he was looking out from behind a

hedge, ablaze with **crimson geraniums**, at the lake and its mist the color of **pink pewter**, and Elsie was singing in a low voice, up on the second floor, as she dressed” (250). The hedge, here, denotes the boundary of the house, the patriarchal system instituted by the husband. Beyond the hedge, everything appears pink. Pink, a slight variant of the color red, is used to signify femininity, womanhood. The death of the wife, then, represents a conscious escape, as opposed to an accident, from the male-dominated patriarchal institution toward a place, outside of this institution, where femininity and womanhood are celebrated, where there is no color blue, which represents masculinity, manhood, and an oppression toward women. The death can be read as symbolic of a divorce, which, in a heteropatriarchal society, wives can employ to escape their husbands, transcend the domestic sphere, and become free if they so choose.

For Colette, the presence of the color pink not only enables women to distance themselves from men, from patriarchy, and their oppression while still being within their class, but it also serves as a way for men to escape the myth of “man” imposed upon them by society. In Colette’s “The Hand”, the wife is disgusted by her husband’s hand: “And I’ve kissed that hand! ... How horrible! Haven’t I ever looked at it?” (247). At the end, she kisses the hand (248), implying a form of respect and submission that she pays to her husband in their heterosexual marriage. The institution of patriarchy makes her submit to her husband; moreover, it has made the wife subscribe to the myths of “man” and “woman” from such a young age that she is unable to challenge them. When the husband is sleeping, the wife notices “the flat nails, ... gleamed, coated with **pink** varnish” (247). Pink here represents a feminine color that the wife does not like to see on her husband’s nails: “Varnish and pink polish don’t go with a hand so ...” (247). Colette’s use of the color pink is suggestive of the husband transcending the myth of “man”, his virility. The husband is also not authoritative; in the morning, he asks his wife, “Do

you want this slice, darling? I'll butter it for you" (248). It can be argued, then, that the wife only imagines the hand of her husband to be "horrible", appearing as a "beast" (247); she believes that that is how men should be. Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, says, "He is told that '... A man doesn't look at himself in mirrors. ... A man doesn't cry.' He is urged to be "a little man" ... Many boys, frightened by the hard independence they are condemned to, wish they were girls" (270-1). The wife reinforces the myth of "man" in her husband by not having him polish his nails, by imagining him to be a beast, strong, virile. It is patriarchy, the society, that has instilled into her these notions, these myths since childhood that the wife now is unable to question.

Wittig, in an attempt to destroy the categories of sex, and thus the oppression that women face, uses the concept of Lesbianism, which she signifies using the color green. One of the stories that Wittig narrates in *Les Guérillères* is: "Somewhere there is a siren. Her **green** body is covered with scales ... The undersides of her arms are a **rosy** colour. Sometimes she begins to sing. The women say that of her song nothing is to be heard but a continuous O" (14). "O" represents the circle, the community of lesbians who use it as a symbol for unity against heterosexuality (114). The siren singing a continuous "O" implies that she is a metaphor for a lesbian. Her body is green in color, except for the undersides of her arms, which are red. The underside of the arm is not typically visible, which suggests that the color red, which represents womanhood, has been masked by the color green, a signifier of lesbianism. The masking of the color red, instead of completely being rid of, can be understood from Wittig's "One Is Not Born a Woman", where she writes, "Thus a lesbian has to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is no nature in society" (13). One is not born a lesbian, one becomes them; similarly, the siren appears green, but there is still the color red present underneath. By not fighting from within the class of women, and thus, the color red,

like Colette proposes, Wittig goes a step further and adopts a completely different color under which to fight against heterosexuality, a color that does not fall within the heterosexual duals of red and blue, a color that represents lesbianism. Wittig wants to completely destroy the categories of sex through homosexuality, through lesbianism, and by disassociating with the class of women, which has been traditionally oppressed in a patriarchal society, she strives not to create a matriarchy, for “Matriarchy is no less heterosexual than patriarchy: it is only the sex of the oppressor that changes” (“One is Not Born a Woman” 10), but to escape heterosexuality.

Not only do women reinforce the myth of “man” in their husbands, as shown in Colette’s “The Hand”, but they also reinforce the myth of “woman” in their own selves as a result of the way in which they have been raised by society since childhood. Wittig, in *Les Guérillères*, narrates the story of the green canaries that are trapped by young girls: “[The little girls] find some green canaries which they cover with kisses, which they hug to their breasts. They run singing ... In their haste they clasped them too tightly to themselves. They ran. They bent down to pick up pebbles which they cast far away over the hedges. They took no heed of their chirping.” (18). Here, canaries, which are usually yellow in color, are represented using the color green to use them as metaphors for lesbianism. Little girls catch these canaries in an attempt to become lesbians, to fight and escape oppression from a patriarchal society. However, they unconsciously kill these canaries when they pick up pebbles which they had cast over the hedge before finding these canaries. Casting pebbles over the hedge acts as a metaphor for what the girls did before they found out about the canaries, about lesbianism. Once they learned about lesbianism as a way to become free from their oppression, they still went back to picking up those pebbles, the way in which they behaved before. This suggests that “[i]f, well before puberty and sometimes even from early infancy, [a girl] seems to us to be already sexually

determined, this is not because mysterious instincts directly doom her to passivity, coquetry, maternity; it is because the influence of others upon the child is a factor almost from the start, and thus she is indoctrinated with her vocation from her earliest years” (Beauvoir 268). Society has made the girls subscribe to the myth of “woman” from such a young age that they are unable to challenge this notion even after finding out about lesbianism as a way to overthrow this system.

Outside of the colors representing gender and sexuality, Wittig uses the color yellow in the form of the sun to denote freedom and liberty. In *Les Guérillères*, Wittig mentions the names of two sun goddesses—Amaterasu and Cihuacoatl—who represent fertility and war (27). Later in the book, when the women prepare for their battle against men, against heterosexual oppression, they say that “[t]hey have modelled their most formidable weapon on the metallic mirror that the goddesses of the sun hold up to the light when they advance on the forefront of the temples. They have copied its shape and its power of reflecting light” (120). The women have a mirror as their weapon. This weapon, modelled after those of the two sun goddesses representing fertility and war, is capable of reflecting light. The reflection of light is, then, a metaphor for fertility, for creation that will be born after the war ends. This creation will be born in freedom, in independence from the heterosexual oppression and the categories of sex. Wittig allows lesbians to wield this weapon because “Lesbian is the only concept [she] know[s] of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man) ... For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation ..., a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or stay heterosexual” (“One is Not Born a Woman”, 20). Sun, light, or the color yellow represents freedom from heterosexuality, which is

accomplished through lesbianism. This is why Wittig, in the poem on the first page of *Les Guérillères*, mentions “green suns” as a way to portray lesbians, signified by the color green, as suns, which signifies the promotion of freedom and independence from heterosexuality and oppression.

Regarding the birth of this new creation, this new definition for mankind, that Wittig talks about in *Les Guérillères* that will be born free from heterosexuality and oppression, she uses the color violet to signify a form of unification between the classes of men and women. Once the battle is over, “[the lesbians] say, take your time, consider this new species that seeks a new language ... The sun is about to rise ... The lilac and violet colours brighten in the sky ... They say, it would be a grave mistake to imagine that I would go, me, a woman, to speak violently against men when they have ceased to be my enemies” (131). Using the symbol of the sun, the color yellow, Wittig signals the birth of a new species from the end of heterosexuality. The color violet, which is a combination of colors red and blue, is all that is visible. Men have stopped becoming women’s enemies; some of the men had, moreover, joined the lesbians’ cause and fought alongside them (124). Wittig, here, dissolves the myths of “man” and “woman” and instead brings the two classes together, unifies them into a single species, without any separation or class distinction. The lesbians “wish the survivors, both male and female, love strength youth, so that they may form a lasting alliance that no further dispute can compromise” (127-8). The color violet is this lasting alliance; the color violet is “a new personal and subjective definition for all mankind ... found beyond the categories of sex (woman and man)” (“One is Not Born a Woman”, 19-20). Lesbianism is a social form that women employ to fight the categories of sex, to fight heterosexuality, and once the fight is over, they and the men adopt a new single color, the color violet, destroying the heterosexual colors of red and blue, indicating no separation, no

categories, but an alliance, a unification, and freedom from oppression as the sun shines over them all.

While Wittig argues that lesbians use a mirror as their weapon to reflect light and destroy the institution of heterosexuality, Colette proposes that women exercise freedom from within the institution of heterosexuality by disassociating with men. In Colette's "The Other Wife", when the husband and wife sit at a table in a restaurant, the husband "gazed at the colorless midday sea, at the pearly white sky, then at his wife, whom he found lovely in her little Mercury hat with its large, hanging veil. 'You're looking well, darling. And all this blue water makes your eyes look green, imagine that!'" (264). The sunlight outside is so blinding that everything appears white, colorless. The light that is reflected from the blue sea is absorbed by the wife's eyes, making them transform from blue to green. The wife also wears a red hat that has a veil attached to it. The husband's ex-wife, on the other hand, is a "lady with brown hair, no hat ... The woman in white, whose smooth, lustrous hair reflected the light from the sea in azure patches" (264). The ex-wife does not have a hat, and she reflects light in blue patches instead of absorbing it and transforming herself. The red hat with a veil signifies womanhood and the subjugation to the husband that comes with it. The ex-wife has escaped this subjugation by getting a divorce from her husband, from patriarchy, and reflecting light, freedom, like men in blue patches, showing that she possesses all that men possess. The wife embodies the myth of "woman" by refusing to reflect light and exhibit freedom. Even when the husband asks her what she wants to eat, she replies by saying that he can choose whatever he likes (263). The ex-wife has escaped the myth of "woman" by wanting to be a man and experiencing freedom, but the wife fails to escape it even briefly when she is given an opportunity by her husband to do so, which is a result of the deeply infused notions of heteropatriarchy in her since childhood.

As discussed in this essay, both Wittig and Colette make use of colors to bring out themes and talk about social issues in a succinct and elegant manner that using words alone would have made challenging. Different colors represent different, and complex, ideas. Both Colette and Wittig, through their works, highlight problems in the institution of heterosexuality and marriage and offer solutions to escape them. For Colette, a disassociation from men allows women to gain freedom that men enjoy; this disassociation can emerge from either a divorce or death. For Wittig, destroying the institution of heterosexuality, and the categories of sex with it, is the only way in which mankind as a species can truly become free. Irrespective of the way in which women or men decide to challenge heteropatriarchal notions, the struggle to undo the myths of “woman” and “man” that they are made to subscribe since childhood is significantly difficult. Nevertheless, these women authors have definitely started important conversations around the issues of gender and sexuality that their audiences can identify and grapple with if they so choose.

Works Cited

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