

## COLOR NAMES. CONFUSING AND ARBITRARY.

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**I**T is largely the household novelist of the gentler persuasion who revels in the sunset's colors of crysolite, nacre and carmine. Four men in every hundred are color-blind, in two hundred women only a single one. This must explain why men give so little heed to hues. With half-a-dozen syllabic tags they dispose of all the two thousand shades educed by the chrysanthemum society.

Refinement on the theme doubtless began with the other sex; the question is: What force do color-titles carry? Milady of the pen dipped in glory may be sanguine enough as to her power to convey to the reader's inner eye ideas reflecting not only the glamor but the true glint of her nomenclatural jewelry; yet any comparison of the various senses and absence of sense attaching to some of the commonest poetic colorifics gives rise to doubt. If this essay gets anywhere it should shortly disclose that the poetess's raptures about yon heliotrope west, yonder rhododactylous east, with flowers of carmine, scarlet, purple and so forth, bring home as little to the averagely attentive imagination as a draft on the mathematical calculus.

Sixes-and-Sevens—Let us begin with the familiar *livid*, properly meaning ember-colored, from Latin *lix*, ashes. "Livid with passion" seems almost the only phrase in which the word remains popularly current, and then as a synonym of purple. Borrow, who appears to have possessed some abnormality of vision, sets down the hue of the Jew as "livid."

How many who use the word know that *lurid* is defined in the dictionary as "pale yellow?" An ancient classification of human races describes the Mongolian as *luridus*—a "lurid" Chinaman! Or

who among those using the word recall that *sallow* (now implying pale greenish yellow) may with some lexical authority be used as equivalent to swarthy? The recruiting officer's over-employment of it for all shades of complexion save florid, freckled and dark, and especially for yellowish white, seems to have been born of a confusion with the noun *sallow* signifying a species of willow—hence *sallow*, willow-color.

Ovid called the Britons *virides* (green), where others have depicted them in a free and easy undress of blue woad. Homer makes the hair of Hector, as the beard of Ulysses, *kuaneos*, dark blue. Lucian in his Dialogs dubs Athena, *glaukōpis*, literally green-eyed, without any connotation of either envy or rusticity; she is always elsewhere portrayed as keen-eyed, martial. Purple was a term which the classic authors deemed applicable to any bright color.

*Vermilion*, at first glance, might strike one as the most locatable of all color epithets, for it comes from *vermis*, and is therefore designed to convey simply worm-color. Unfortunately there are many kinds of worms, but the ruddy earthworm is so widespread that little risk can exist of any other being invoked to explain the meaning of this epithet. The mnemonic "worm-color," then, is very fair as mnemonics go.

To Prove Black Is White—Etymologically, if not by logical mood and figure. For (to follow Euclid) if black be a shade or color and be not white it must be some other shade or color. Now, there is an English adjective "bleak;" this formerly meant colorless, or loosely, white; the *bleakfish*, from whose scales artificial pearls are produced, is also called whitebait, or on the Continent *Weiss-fisch*, French *able*, from Latin *albula*, that is little white fish. "Bleak" was pronounced in Anglo-Saxon *blaak*, so that "black" signifying at first ink, then the color associated with ink as anciently made, and "blaak" meaning pale, wan or colorless differed at most in the length of that vowel, a gap easily bridged by dialectal variations.

A century-old novel describes a damsel's lips as being of a beautiful purple, where many a modern might fall back on our colloquial allusion to the "pink of condition." But color-discrimination must have been very weak in the Middle Ages if, as some French grammarians hold, the word *bleu* (blue) is to be affiliated to the Latin *flavus* (yellow).

Prevalence of color-blindness is explained by the fact that only the center of the retina is sensitive to color, while light and

shade affect its whole surface. It may be in consequence of this that races such as the Tatars, who, some have credited, can see the major moons of Jupiter with the unarmed eye, possess only half-a-dozen terms for color in their language.

Air is colorless apart from its content of dust, to which is due the blue of the sky; artificial skies can be made by the chemist to test this point, the sky matter and with it the tint of cerulean being added and subtracted at will. The self color of water is true blue. In view of the apparent blueness or greenness of ocean depths, the wave's whitening into foam at the immixture of a little air may afford a legitimate subject for wonder.

It might be a great saving of thought to re-name or number all colors according to their position in a scale such as that of the solar spectrum; the systematic reformer could call black *nil* or *o* and attach to white the highest number, to signify that it is the all-inclusive color. Some color terms not self-explanatory to the run of folks but in frequent use are: *beige*, the natural color of wool; *paille*, straw color (to be distinguished from *faille*, meaning throw-out, that is, reject silk, which has no gloss); *azure* is named for the mines of Lajwurd mentioned by Marco Polo: lapis lazuli was the light-blue stone quarried there—Old French *l'azur* in mistake for *le lazur* being the connecting line; scarlet meant primarily Eastern broadcloth, which was usually of the loudest of hues; *crimson* meant the color of the insect called *kermes* used in dyeing; turquois conveyed to the French the notion of Turkish (or light) blue; *invisible green*: a very dark shade of green, approaching black and liable to be mistaken for it; *matt* is German for dull; *cardinal*, the color of a cardinal's robe, a species of red; *buff*, "a saddened yellowish orange,"—Webster (the color of buffalo skin, with a velvety or fuzzy finish); *visual purple* and *visual yellow* denote parts of the contents of the retina of the eye; *purple* was so named from the shellfish purpur, from whose blood the people of the Levant prepared a bright dye, a blend of red and blue. In Spanish *coloredo*, literally *colored*, is used only for red. The English adjective *blank* formerly had the sense of white (*blanc*), while in German the word means polished. *Calomel* is now the title of a white powder, yet its two roots make it express simply "beautiful black."

*Dappled* may mean dabbed with or dipped in color; *piebald* is equivalent to "bald in spots" (Latin *pica* a spot); *skewbald* means marked in a skew (that is, irregular) manner; *emerald* is the greenish color of the stone dubbed by the Greeks *smaragdos*, of which

name *emerald* is a corruption. *Lake* means the color of the gum lac, a variety of crimson; "crimson lake", then, seems an idle emphasis. *Taupe* means mole-color (Latin *talpa*, mole). *Moire*, *moiré*, applied to the undulating or watered appearance in silk, is the same word as *mohair*. To remain true to its ancient intention *puce* should denote nothing more nor less than flea-color. *Pink* has its provenance from the flower called a pink, while in the case of *carnation* the flower affording the color term is itself named from a resemblance to human flesh, the carneous tissue, unless as some suspect it has been corrupted from "coronation." *Sorrel* once indicated the reddish-brown complexion of a sere leaf. *Mauve* still means, to all who understand French, of the color of mallow-flowers. *Roan* stands for a mixed color having a shade of red; it probably is unconnected with the rowan or mountain ashtree. *Maroon* means chestnut color, a brownish crimson; some recent writer speaks of a lady blushing maroon. *Hoary* alludes naturally to hoarfrost. *Grizzled* comes from French, *gris*, gray. *Café* (coffee) is the regular word in Spanish for brown. *Rose* in French means pink. It is said that no blue rose has ever been cultivated—a fatality like that of the invariable she-ness of tortoiseshell cats.

*Red* at present is applied to tints as diverse as the "ginger" (probably a metaphor for hot, fire-color) variety of hair that one could almost "redd" the dinner on and that quite different grog-blossom embellishing a toper's nose. "*Carrot*" hair may mean like that of Judas which was also called *Iscariot*.

A common expression is *violet* color, yet the violet is found of as many colors as the coat of Joseph. *Ochre* originally denoted yellow, but it is quite as usual nowatimes to speak of red ochre. *Jaundice* derives from French *jaunisse*, yellowness, yet there is a custom of speaking about yellow jaundice, which seems to suggest that several other colors may not be barred from competition. Froude writes of "the black colors in which Philip the Beautiful painted the Templars." Black is not properly a color, and how many black colors could there be, apart from degrees of admixture with white? Many of these color notions and emblazoned figures of speech appear as wide of the mark as the schoolboy's opinion that *scarlatina* might be the feminine of *scarlet fever*.

Although yellow and blue mixed by the artist produce green, yet because of interference with each other's rays a blue glass slide held over a yellow one results in the obscuration known as black. The red in "Red Indian" may have referred to warpaint, but this

is unlikely in view of the early loose use of color names. Green, said of fruit, is often used hastily for unripe, without any allusion to color, and one may compare metaphorical idioms such as "green geese," "a green wound." The root means still-growing. Blue blood probably alludes to the color of the veins in a Caucasian race as distinguished from the Moors and others. Verdigris (oxide of copper) may be translated offhand green of gray (*vert de gris*). Olive is the name of another green, the yellowish-green of the olive tree; "oil" itself is derived from the same word in its Latin form of *oliva*, and *oliva* descends possibly from the root of "elastic," referring to the quality of the expressed sap.

The blue guntree seems to be christened from the color of its bark, while the title red-gum may refer to the tint either of the resin or of the hewn timber.