

Poetics of Colours (Red/Green) as Related to Fire Imagery in Depicting Loki, Prometheus and Satan

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Abstract: In a literary text, the poetics of elements combined with colour imagery applied to their description plays a crucial role in revealing the omniscient nature of characters. Among four elements (e.g., fire, air, earth and water) fire in particular is the one which possesses a unique capacity to create and destroy in an instant. Such equivocality is lying within its very nature. The article investigates how the semantics of the colours red and green, which are used to depict the rebellious spirit of Prometheus, Satan and Loki, accentuates their ambiguous nature within Greek, Christian and Norse mythological discourse. In order to fulfill its objectives this work resorts its analysis to original sources, such as the Bible, the Eddas and Greek tragedies. In the first part of this article theoretical premises are considered. The second one gives examples from literary text to illustrate each step of the analysis.

Key words: Prometheus, Satan, Loki, poetics of colour, fire, myth

1. Introduction

This article consists of two parts. The first one is devoted to theoretical overlook on the semantics of colours and the way red and green are positioned within chromatic schemes by different authors. It also accentuates the fact that the perception of the place these two colours take is culturally determined. As a part of collective unconsciousness, it is also reflected in language. The opposition of red and green having its deep roots in human psyche makes it impossible to coin such expressions as “reddish green” or “greenish red” (Lee, 1980). Grammatical forms are conventionally paired with meaning, which in its turn is culturally and socially constituted (Kanerva, 2018). Furthermore, the theoretical part of the article gives evidence for fire to be regarded as binary by its nature. Out of four basic elements of creation, fire is the one, which expresses this ambiguity most vividly. Natural qualities of this element have given rise to fundamental metaphors it stands for in culturally bound discourse, such as literature and especially myths. This section gives reasons why out of other elements only mainly fire follows the description of Prometheus in Greek mythology, Satan in Biblical texts and Loki in The Eddas.

The second part of the article resorts to original sources. In its turn it consists of three sections. Examples from the literary texts illustrate and support the line of reasoning for each character separately. Each subsection analyses how the imagery of colours and poetics of fire are inbuilt into mythological discourse. The first one is

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dedicated to the role of fire and colour in depicting Prometheus. The second one draws similarities between Greek and Christian myths. It also demonstrates in what way red is decisive in characterizing Satan. The third subsection shows that Loki possesses striking similarities with Prometheus and the Devil. It also demonstrates that fire is crucial in the description of Loki. What is more, green is the dominant colour in connection with this character.

2. Points of Contact between Colour Imagery and Poetics of Elements

2.1 Green and Red: Unity of Opposites

According to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's theory of colours, there are pure (red, yellow and blue) and mixed ones (green, orange, purple). Based on this distinction, each group of colours forms a triangle. Accordingly, green is postulated as a mixture of the two pure colours: yellow and blue. These two triangles are subsequently presented as a regular hexagon (Goethe, 1840, p. 317). Colour harmony with all possible shades of colour for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is presented as an arrangement in a chromatic circle, within which red and green are placed opposite to one another in such a way that "red demands green and vice versa" (Goethe, 1840, p. 319).

In "Culture and Value", Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980) underlines that Goethe's theory of colour does not have physical but rather psychological directionality, it is a culturally bound discourse on the value, which colours carry in the collective unconscious. Further, he transformed Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's hexagon into a colour octahedron, which is meant to describe a scheme of colours as a psychological dimension (Heinrich, 2014, pp. 33-44). Green was not presented as a mere mixture of yellow and blue, subordinate to the pure colours by its origin, but as an independent colour, claiming its own angle within the octahedron.

Ludwig Wittgenstein characterised colour imagery as a grammatical entity. In this connection, grammar refers to the structural organization of language. His line of thought perfectly explains the impossibility of coining such expressions as yellowish blue or reddish green and vice versa, as long as "grammar is not entirely a matter of arbitrary choice. It must enable us to express the multiplicity of facts" (Lee, 1980, p. 8).

The geometry of colour casts light on the absence of these notions. The location of them on the opposite sides of the octahedron perfectly reflects the fact that they are perceived as negations of one another (Hrachovec, 2014, pp. 79-92).

It is important to stress that within the Wittgensteinian scheme, green becomes a rigorous colour. Similar view was expressed by Arthur Schopenhauer. In his opinion, red is not just opposed to green: they also complement each other, symmetrically mirroring one another within the structure of the octahedron. They are different, yet they are simultaneously each other's counterparts (Schopenhauer, 1994).

Further developing this thought, it is possible to draw a conclusion that these two colours serve as a double to one another, i.e., the latter being the other to the former and vice versa. In other words, red and green are two extremes of one and the same entity. They complete each other by that negation which is inherently inbuilt in their nature.

2.2 Poetics of Fire in Relation to Colours

Poetics of fire in literary discourse also gravitates towards ambiguity. This element by its nature has a binary character: on one hand, it can be considered as something constructing, bringing light and heat; on the other hand it is certainly destructive.

Ūrij Mihajlovič Lotman (1995, p. 817) determines time-spatial characteristics of the elements: they lie beyond the domain of culture, memory and artifacts. To put in other words, these elements, penetrating into the

plot, start to carry narrative load, as far as their immanent characteristics from the physical world at that moment are being projected to form images in the Reader's mind. According to Ūrij Mihajlovič Lotman, fire, from the point of view of its destructive capacity, has the most brightly displayed characteristics of immense eschatologism. This is what associates the image of fire with Apocalypse (Lotman, 1995, p. 819).

Gaston Bachelard's argument on the poetics of fire: "Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse" (Bachelard, 1968, p. 6). He associates fire with Prometheus, calling the complex of Prometheus the Oedipus complex of intellectual life. Thus, this element contains a potential force which drives an individual towards a rebellion, in case of discrepancy between the externally dictated state of affairs and the desired ones.

3. Mythological Dimensions of Fire Burning with Red and Green Flames

3.1 Role of Fire and Colour in Depicting Prometheus

Curiously enough, but in connection with the image of fire, two colours appear in Greek, Norse and Christian myths in association with Prometheus, Loki and Satan. These colours are red and green. They persistently follow the description of these three characters, which are typically viewed as rebels with unbreakable fortitude.

Friedrich Nietzsche accentuates that a single man, capable of rising into something Titanic by the power of his will, "is victorious over his own culture and compels the authority in his hand" (Nietzsche, 1871, p. 35).

The ambiguous nature of the Aeschylean Prometheus can be illustrated with the lines from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Faust" (1924): "Everything present is just and unjust and equally justified in both. That is your world! That's what one calls a world" (Nietzsche, 1871, p. 37).

Being driven by the need to introduce changes, Prometheus started a rebellion against Zeus, the ruling god, who before that had overthrown his own father, Chronus. Having won, Zeus started a new generation of gods. This is the fate of all rulers: there are always revolutionaries, ready to overthrow them. Unfortunately, in case of success, they also risk to become like their predecessors. Real constructive force lies only in the potential to introduce changes. Once the task is fulfilled, there is a need for the next rebellion.

In the epoch of Romanticism the myth of Prometheus received a new interpretation in literature. Goethe's "Prometheus" stipulated a new type of Titan, a human being capable of becoming equal to God. Through the prism of Christian myths, such an interpretation received a new reading. Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon Byron directed aesthetic and ethical focus against dogmatic perception of Christian conventions. The struggle of Titans against the Olympic gods became a manifestation of moral freedom.

The step beyond good and evil is the last stage of evolution. Spiritual strength aiming at moving forward in its development is the defining characteristic feature of the Nietzschean super-human, a Titan capable of being equal to God (Nietzsche, 2009).

At this point, the image of Prometheus came close to the image of the Devil. It symbolized unlimited freedom, pursuit of lost harmony and integrity, protest against the world and the established order. Friedrich Nietzsche (1871, p. 36) also stated that the myth of Prometheus and of the Fall were "related, like brother and sister". There are striking similarities between them. Both Prometheus and Satan aimed at overthrowing the masters of all things. Their uprising was crushed. As a result, they both were condemned to eternal sufferings.

3.2 Domination of Red in Characterization of Satan

The image of Satan appears in multiple variations. Being the main antagonist of God in religious myths, he is presented in the Old Testament as an angel who came to present himself before the Lord (Job 1: 6-12). Later on, Lucifer is referred to as day's beginning, son of dawn, fallen from Heaven (Isaiah 14:12). In the New Testament, Satan, too, is said to have fallen from heaven (Luke 10:18). Paul insists that Satan is capable of disguising himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). The semantics of colour plays a vital role when referring to Satan. Red is the colour of the dragon that broke out a war against God's angels, was defeated and fell from Grace (Revelations 12:7-9). The Red Dragon, who stands for the Devil or Satan, is also named here as the deceiver of the whole world (Revelations 12:9), and was described with the word "purros", which means (trans. from Old Greek; Hebrew) "having the colour of fire, red" (BibleTools).

Fire is not the only element that accompanies the description of Devil. It often depicts the image of God's punishment: having been defeated, Satan was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur to be tormented day and night forever and ever (Revelations 20: 10). Another association with God's might and reproach comes in Isaiah 66:15. Red carries negative connotations, being referred to as the colour of sin (Isaiah 1:18).

In the poetics of Romanticism, demonic becomes an aesthetic category, a certain spiritual ideal. It has a binary character. On one hand, the spiritual strength as a key moving force of development and evolution, a chance to overthrow the existing order with all its imperfections by overthrowing God himself, subsequently taking his place, and becoming a new God. On the other hand, it is a hostile force bringing destruction and not bound by moral tenets. This is a mysterious force, which can be malicious and benevolent at the same time. According to Vernant (1990, pp. 183-201), the image of Prometheus carries ambivalence of good and ill will. He is a father of people and the one who has caused misfortunes to them. In this context Pandora is meant by the one, who brought pain and suffering to the mankind. Due to her curiosity all misfortunes were released. At the same, people were given hope owing to her. A woman, who changed the fate of humanity, is one more similarity between Greek and Christian myths. Eve was also the first woman, who was so curious as to impose suffering on the rest of mankind, but only because of her the light of knowledge was brought to people.

Russell further characterizes the change in views on Satan starting from the Romanticism. Through John Milton's portrayal of the Devil and through the concept of the sublime he becomes a Romantic hero. Satan connecting and merging with image of Prometheus becomes a "symbol of rebellion against the unjust order and tyranny of the ancient regime" (Russell, 1990, p. 169). The Romantic Hero is perceived as an "individual, alone against the world, self-assertive, ambitious, powerful and liberator in rebellion against the society that blocks the way of progress towards liberty, beauty and love" (Russell, 1990, p. 175). Jeffrey Burton Russell also stresses the view that the image of Satan splits into an ambiguous image: on one hand with ultimate revolutionary, striving for free nature, on the other hand the one bringing suffering and disaster. It is remarkable that later on in gothic novels Satan also gained some comic features. Since Faust, "the favourite theme among American writers has been the bargain with the Devil" (Russell, 1990, p. 212).

In Mikhail A. Bulgakov's "Master and Margarita" (1986) Voland or the Devil also claims to be a part of that power, which always wishes evil and always commits good deeds.

3.3 Chromatic Dimensions of Fire in Defining Loki

Prometheus, Loki and Satan share a range of similarities. There is a connotation of greatness in the origin of Prometheus and Loki. The first one is a Titan, another one is a half-giant, they are both gifted with talents, at one

point revolted against gods and established order. Both of them failed to succeed in their struggle, subsequently fell from grace, were tightened to the rocks and are tortured till the end of time (West, 1966; West, 1978; Young, 1971; Bellows, 1923).

Barber, Elizabeth Wayland, and Paul T. *Barber* insist that “geological findings (Olrik, 1922; Mallory, 1989) strengthen the hypothesis that the story of Loki is a changed later version of the same myth as Prometheus” (Barber & Barber, 2005, pp. 218-230).

In the Prose Edda he is referred to as Logi or “wildfire” (Young, 1971, p. 68). Loki is a son of Farbauti, the giant, who refers to lightning (Kock, 1899, pp. 90-111) and Laufey or Nal, who is referred to as “full of leaves” (Simek, 2000, pp. 186-87). Thus, the imagery of fire and the colour of green are closely associated with the characterization of Loki. The ambiguity of Green is manifested in the description of Loki, he is not always depicted as a representation of pure evil, but is also as a crafty character, gifted by virtues. In the Bible, this colour is mostly referred to as the one giving new life. Concerning its counterpart, red, used in Christian myths in relation to Satan, the double nature is presented as well, especially in connection with fire. The usage of Red and Green as predominant colours is not arbitrary; their role in texts is dictated by metaphorical implications of their meaning, deeply rooted into the “collective unconscious” as formulated by Carl Gustav Jung.

A range of similarities between Satan and Loki can be found in the description of the latter. It is stated in “Baldr’s Draumar” that the destroyers of the world will come to the final battle when Loki is released from his bounds [stanza 14], in “Voluspó” [stanza 51] Loki leads the ship with the dead to war against gods; is called “A lover of ill” [stanza 35]. In “Lokkasena” — gods tighten him, “The flames: the fire that consumes the world on the last day” [stanza 65: 4-5], in “Voluspó” the world is devoured by fire [stanza 57] (Bellows, 1923).

After the murder of Baldr, the gods took Loki and bound him to a rock with the intestines of his son Narfi, who had just been torn to pieces by Loki’s other son, Vali. A serpent was fastened above Loki’s head, and the venom fell onto his face. Loki’s wife, Sigyn, sat by him with a basin to catch the venom, but whenever the basin was full, and she went away to empty it, then the venom fell onto Loki again, till the earth shook with his struggles. “And there he lies bound till the end”.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the poetics of the colour green and red within the image of fire becomes a manifestation of the ambiguous nature of Prometheus, Loki and Satan in the discourse of power, where every ruling God is a former rebel who managed to succeed in his attempts to change the existing order. Fire, as an element of creation and divine endowments, embraces destructive and apocalyptic characteristics. Red, commonly associated with fire in literature, accompanies the images of Prometheus and Satan, while green, being an index of life-giving power in mythological worldview (Greek, Christian and Norse), and relentlessly follows the image of Loki, revealing surprisingly new angles of interpretation. In particular, the ones that point at the transition from half-divinity and giftedness to sinfulness (like envy in Biblical discourse) and flagrant wickedness.

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