THE SYMBOLISM OF “YELLOW” IN “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER” AND “THE YELLOW SIGN”

CAMPINA GRANDE
2016
THE SYMBOLISM OF “YELLOW” IN “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER” AND “THE YELLOW SIGN”

Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado à Universidade Estadual da Paraíba, como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de Graduada em Letras – Inglês.

Área de concentração: Estudo Comparativo.

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The symbolism of “yellow” in “the yellow wallpaper” and
“the yellow sign” [manuscrito] / Isabelle Coutinho Ramos Benicio.
- 2016.
31 p.

Digitado.
Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (Graduação em Letras
Inglês) - Universidade Estadual da Paraíba, Centro de Educação,
2016.
“Orientação: Profa. Dra. Sudha Swarnakar, Departamento de
Letras e Artes”.

21. ed. CDD 753
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Aprovada em: 31/10/2016

NOTA 10,0

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deep gratitude to Dr. Sudha Swarnakar for her assistance and stimulating conversations throughout the elaboration of this work.

Those who constitute the examination board, I would say I feel really thankful for accepting the task.

A special thanks to my parents Roberto Benicio and Ana Maria Coutinho, who provided me the necessary support to leave my hometown and realize my wish of studying in Campina Grande.

Thanks also to my lover Nícolas Barreto, who was always present with affection, and to my friends (especially Evaristo Medeiros, Otávio Coutinho and Paula Batista) and colleagues with their generous help in the unfolding of these thoughts. And to everybody that had a direct or indirect participation in the preparation of this work, my sincere thanks.
ABSTRACT

The symbolism of color is used to qualify the colors around us and is commonly utilized in literature as a means to convey a range of significances. As symbolic devices, colors may assume different meanings depending on time, context and perceptions. Taking this into account, the present work aims to make a comparative analysis of the symbolism of “yellow” color in two stories that belong to same language (English), period (the late nineteenth century) and culture (American): “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “The Yellow Sign”. Through this comparison, we want to know if the symbolic use of “yellow” in the chosen stories differ or not. The initial expectation is constructed around the idea that, if the stories are from same period and culture, there are chances of cultural resemblance between them. The discussion is based on the theoretical basis provided by mainly Davison (2004), Doran (2013), Joshi (2004), Lanser (1989), Heller (2013) and O’Connor (2015).

Keywords: Symbolism of Color. Yellow. Comparison.
RESUMO


Palavras-Chave: Simbolismo da Cor. Amarelo. Comparação.
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1 INTRODUCTION

In his book “Folk-Lore of Women”, Thiselton-Dyer (2008, n. p.) cites the old proverbial rhyme: “Blue is true, Yellow’s jealous, Green’s forsaken, Red’s brazen, White is love, and Black is death”. Association of colors to beliefs or notions is an old practice. From primitive times until today, colors are used as symbols, as the carries of different or multiple meanings. For example, it is of common knowledge that “green”, “yellow” and “blue” are usually related to nationalism in Brazil; “blue” is the color of the “royalty” in England; “red” is the color of Communism and Socialism in politics and auspicious in some religions (Hindu); and “white”, the color of all important ceremonies (such as marriage and baptism) in Western World, is the color of mourning for Hindus in India. Whether with an individual, cultural or universal character, the symbolism of color is present in every sphere of society in different times and different contexts.

The initial motivation of this research has been my particular interest to find out the symbolical use of color in literature. The symbolism of color is very common in a variety of literary works, and this attracted me to search for the various symbolic meanings attached to the “yellow” color.

During my study of literary texts, I developed a taste for fictions of Gothic tradition, especially short stories, in which “black” and “red” commonly appear to compose an atmosphere of mystery and fear. Edgar Allan Poe, for example, uses “black” and “red” in a number of his stories to create the mystery (as in “The Black Cat” and in “The Mask of the Red Death”). During my reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1892, and “The Yellow Sign” by Robert William Chambers, 1895, I perceived that “yellow”, as well as “black” and “red”, can integrate the atmosphere of mystery and fear in Gothic stories too. It created a curiosity and desire to know if there are differences in the symbolism of “yellow” color between the stories and, if there is/are, what is/are this/these difference(s) and also the similarities between them. That was what impelled me to select these stories.

The first critical comment about these stories (albeit separately) seems to come from Howard Phillips Lovecraft, who expresses his opinion, about Gilman’s one, saying that the author, “[...] in ‘The Yellow Wall Paper’, [Gilman] rises to a classic level in subtly delineating the madness which crawls over a woman dwelling in the hideously papered room where a madwoman was once confined” (2006, n. p.). In relation to “The Yellow Sign”, Lovecraft says it is, perhaps, Chambers’ mighty story of “The King in Yellow” and defines
the latter as “a series of vaguely connected short stories having as a background a monstrous and suppressed book whose perusal brings fright, madness, and spectral tragedy” (LOVECRAFT, 2006, n. p.).

During our collection of data to make a comparative study, we had not much difficulty in finding critical material about each story. Material about “The Yellow Wallpaper” seemed to be more available due to the increase in feminist reading. However, this is not the focus of the present work. When it comes to “The Yellow Sign”, in spite of its prestige as part of the Gothic American literature the research for critical material is laborious. In his essay, “Supernatural horror in literature”, the writer H. P. Lovecraft highlighted Robert William Chambers’ qualities as a writer, but lamented his later abandonment regarding the supernatural genre: “One cannot help regretting that he did not further develop a vein in which he could so easily have become a recognised master” (LOVECRAFT, 2006, n. p.). Yet it came as a surprise that very little attention is paid to the comparison of these two stories and we felt a scarcity of critical material to carry out the research.

To make a comparative analysis of these stories, we rely on the theoretical base offered by, mainly, Davison (2004), Doran (2013), T. S. Joshi (2004), Susan Lanser (1989), the German sociologist and psychologist Eva Heller (2013) and the color theorist Dr Zena O’Connor (2015).

In particular, we started our work from the idea that, if the stories are from the same period and culture, there are chances of cultural resemblance. Nevertheless, we want to know if the use of “yellow” differ in the selected stories or not. Besides, by comparing the two stories, we also expect to understand which significances of “yellow” are used by the two writers.

Though we intend to make a comparison of how color “yellow” is used by two writers, one female and the other male, our foam is not the gender questions. The gender/sexual identity of the writers are not our objective of study. We plan, with this work, to make a comparison of the symbolism of “yellow” color in two stories: “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “The Yellow Sign”, which belong to same language, English; same period, late nineteenth century; and same culture, American.

We are aware that such a comparison does not enter in the field of Comparative Literature, since this field demands that the works to be compared should normally be from different languages and cultures.
A comparison of two works may involve different theoretical support. Here, we call attention to three terminologies which are often ignorantly interchanged when one refers to Comparative Literature, Comparative Study and Comparative Cultural Study.

Comparative Literature places certain restrictions on the selection of the text. For comparison, theorists clearly show that these texts should be from different cultural background then the comparison can highlight the cultural aspects. As Swarnaker (2007, p. 30) observes: “Those of us who work within the field of comparative literature know that in comparative criticism it is a common practice to study literary works set in same time period but to compare works from same linguistic and socio-cultural context is normally not accepted”.

Another term used by comparative critics is “Comparative Cultural Studies”, presented by Tötösy and others, it shows a clear emphasis on cultural differences between two texts. In his article “Comparative Cultural Studies and the Study of Central European Culture”, Tötösy compares the idea of Central European culture in texts from Eastern German and Hungarian literature:

“The Fürsts [a German family], similar to the Salamons [a Jewish-Hungarian family], and the family of Susan Rubin (Suleiman) had relations all over Central and East Europe, including Poland, Hungary, and Austria. Lilian’s parents specialized in dental surgery already in Vienna, they were educated with active interest in literature, theatre, and the arts. Their families and relatives suffered the Holocaust everywhere. Yet, Lilian and Desider Fürst’s memoirs are imbued with nostalgia for the lost world that was theirs before the Shoah, a world that their memories recover and dress in sunshine” (TÖTÖSY, 1998, p. 10).

Comparative Cultural Studies, conceptualized by Tötösy (1998), combines principles from Comparative Literature (except for its traditional principles as the Eurocentrism and national tendency) and Cultural Studies. In the same article, Tötösy (1998, p. 1) defines:

Comparative cultural studies are a field of study in the humanities and social sciences where tenets of the discipline of comparative literature are merged with the field of cultural studies; the objects of study are all sorts of culture and culture products including literature. [...] In comparative cultural studies the processes of communicative action(s) in culture – and the way, these processes work – constitute the objectives of research and study. However, comparative cultural studies do not exclude traditional textual analysis or other established fields of study [...].

Nevertheless, in Comparative Cultural Studies, the literary works have to be from different cultures (as in Comparative Literature).
The third term used is “Comparative Study”. Being one of the oldest terms, it leaves one with more freedom in selection of the texts. Comparative Studies is opened to comparisons of works from same linguistic or socio-cultural background, as says Swarnakar: “Comparative Study goes back to its origin in Greek tradition and expands frontiers which are well locked up by comparative literature” (SWARNAKAR, 2007, p. 30). Thus, we feel that the analysis proposed in this work fits well into Comparative Study.

The methodological support for comparison is based on an evidence-based research and analysis. Besides, regarding the type of research, it will be an exploratory one because it permits the researcher to have more familiarity with the object of study and to “[...] develop, clarify and modify concepts and ideas [...]”\(^1\) (GIL, 2008, p. 27, our translation).

Taking into consideration the procedure for data collection, this research is essentially bibliographic, since it “[...] is developed from material already available [...]”\(^2\) (GIL, 2008, p. 50, our translation) or, in other words, the literary and critical texts used for such research. In relation to the tools, as it is a bibliographic survey, we will use reliable sources from textual material, like books, e-books\(^3\), critical articles, essays, etc.

The data analysis will be of qualitative nature, as our goals and research materials do not involve the use of numbers. Instead, we follow three steps in data analysis, as Miles and Huberman (1994) propose: reduction (selection and simplification of data), exhibition (organization of data in a systematic way) and conclusion/verificiation (review of collected data).

The following pages will deal primarily with the theories that will be used to support our comparison on the section of comparison. Firstly, we intend to refer to the concepts of symbols and color; and then we try to show the types of symbolism of color and the symbolical use of “yellow” in literature and cultures. Thus, before entering the analytical part we would like to give a brief comment on both authors and also on both stories.

2 THE SYMBOL AND THE SYMBOLISM: A QUICK GLANCE AT CRITICAL MATERIAL

2.1 SYMBOL

\(^1\) “ [...] desenvolver, esclarecer e modificar conceitos e idéias [...]” (GIL, 2008, p. 27).
\(^2\) “[...] é desenvolvida a partir de material já elaborado [...]” (GIL, 2008, p. 50).
\(^3\) Some of the quotations with “n.p.” (no page) will appear with the abbreviation “loc.” (localization) in their footnotes. When this happens, it indicates the quote was extracted from an e-book that was read on an electronic device.
The conceptualization and interpretation of symbols have been a practice of many areas like psychology, philosophy, semiotics and literature. Symbols commonly express social, ideological, political or artistic significances.

In the first part of the book “Man and his Symbols”, Carl Jung explains that “[w]hat we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us” (JUNG, 1968, p. 20). According to this definition, symbols have the potential to denote and connote something, that is, they may represent literal/more known or obscure meanings.

From a general point of view, Glukhova (n. d., p. 110) also defines, “Symbol is an object/phenomenon of extra-linguistic reality denoted by a lexeme […] Symbol is regarded, considering its denomination, the number of its meanings, and the probability of its usage that testifies to its importance […]”. Namely, symbols are used to represent something else. For example, “[…] a judge uses the toga when enters the court. All people get up. They are not standing up to the person of the judge, but for what it represents: justice, the power to decide. The toga is a symbol” (MONTEIRO, n. d., p. 56, our translation).

In literature, the use of symbols is very common. They can be used in many ways like philosophically, mythologically, artistically and technically. That is the reason literature stocks a range of symbols. They are results of poetic labor and creativity. As Souza (2014) argues:

Literature is a store of the sign of the expression of human experience and, as such, is equally a repository of individual or collectively created symbols. In this sense, products of poetic activity are conceived as significant spaces of the representation of symbols. (SOUZA, 2014, p. 92, our translation)

Besides, the symbolic uses in literature can reflect personal perceptions and shared notions.

2.2 SYMBOLISM OF COLOR

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4 “[…] um juiz usa a toga quando entra no tribunal. Todas as pessoas se levantam. Não estão se levantando para a pessoa do juiz, mas para o que ele representa: a justiça, o poder de decidir. A toga é um símbolo.” (MONTEIRO, n. d., p. 56).
5 A literatura é portadora da expressão do signo das experiências humanas e, como tal, é, de igual forma, um repositório dos símbolos criados, individual ou coletivamente, pelo próprio homem. Nessa direção, concebem-se os produtos da atividade poética como espaços significantes de representação do símbolo (SOUZA, 2014, p. 92)
“Symbolism”, as a literary movement, has its roots in France. Among its principles was the idea of favoring the use of imagination against an increase of the scientific way defended by the Naturalistic movement.

[...] it must be remembered first of all that it [Symbolism] is a reaction against the naturalistic literature of yesterday. And what is Naturalism? To define it in two words: it is the introduction of science into literature, and especially the introduction of scientific proceedings into literature. (SCHINZ, 1903, p. 274)

However, “Symbolism” should not be confused with the “symbolism of color”, that has a much longer history and is still used by humans as means to qualify the colors that surround us:

[...] the primitive men were aware of the differences between colors and their symbolic level – they saw that certain colors give security while others repelled. They ‘read’ the reactions of animals and birds to natural colors, and how their own feelings responded to the colors, and so the symbolism of colors began to emerge [...] (MALLON, 2008, p. 278 apud NASCIMENTO, 2009, p. 3, our translation)

The term “colour symbolism”, as explains Zena O’Connor (2015, n. p.), “[...] can be defined as color that stands for, represents or denotes something else. It may be an abstract idea, quality or condition, and it may occur by suggestion or conventional understanding”. In other words, the term represents the use of colors as symbols.

As symbols, colors may convey obscurity through the meanings they represent. And the cultural variation of color is, perhaps, the most responsible to colors’ ambiguous and obscure characteristics, according to O’Connor (2015, n. p.).

Besides, color symbolism may vary according to time (O’CONNOR, 2015) and context (HELLER, 2013; O’CONNOR, 2015). In pre-history, people used to cover human remains with red ochre because they believed that the tone was similar to blood, which represented “potential life” (PAVEY & OSBORNE, 2011, p. 11); in the Middle Ages, “red” represented witchcraft, since red-haired women, especially in Germany and Spain, feared the

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7 Although most of our references use the term “colour symbolism”, we will also use the term “symbolism of color” throughout this work.
8 Loc. 37.
9 Loc. 37.
witch-hunt (HELLER, 2013, p. 69); in political and social ideologies of the twentieth-century Europe, “red” was the representation of Communism (DORAN, 2013, n. p.\textsuperscript{10}); and, in the Taoist symbolism, “red” is used in the architecture of the temples representing “royalty” in the Bagua doctrine (O’CONNOR, 2015, n. p.\textsuperscript{11}).

In the examples above, we can see how time (pre-history, Middle Ages and twentieth-century Europe) and context (Europe and Asia) influence on color symbolism. We perceive that color symbolism is the representation of concepts through colors, and these concepts are time-and-context-dependent, as critics such as Heller (2013), O’Connor (2015) and others show.

Moreover, as O’Connor (2015, n. p.\textsuperscript{12}) says, color symbolism “[…] tends to occur at three levels: individual, cultural and universal […]”. The next subtopics will be opened to properly explain each one of them.

2.2.1 Individual Symbolism of Color

Taking into account the individual level, color seems to influence people in a very subjective way, since they differ emotionally and cognitively (O’CONNOR, 2015, loc. 376). Gender, preferences and occupation are some examples of aspects that may impact on the variation of one’s perception of a color. For example, with regard to nomenclature, women may understand and process color symbolism differently from men; and artists and designers more likely combine colors differently from other professionals (O’CONNOR, 2015, n. p.\textsuperscript{13}).

Heller (2013) observes that the individual impression caused by color can be also influenced by the context: “[t]he color of a costume will be performed differently than a color in a setting, in food, or in art” (HELLER, 2013, p. 18, our translation\textsuperscript{14}). Based on this, we may say that different contexts can provide a range of significances to different colors.

Another example of the individual character involved with color symbolism was also observed by the anthropologist Riley (1963), who considered the variation of color symbolism the motive that caused the lack of uniformity concerning directions (north, south, east and west) in the Pre-Columbian cultures of Central and South America. And this aspect

\textsuperscript{10} Loc. 184.\textsuperscript{11} Loc. 156.\textsuperscript{12} Loc. 361.\textsuperscript{13} Loc. 390.\textsuperscript{14} A cor num traje será avaliada de modo diferente do que a cor num ambiente, num alimento, ou na arte. (HELLER, 2013, p. 18)
was not only intercultural. For example, two individuals from the same culture could give different color associations to one direction.

### 2.2.2 Cultural Symbolism of Color

The cultural level, on the other hand, characterizes the “shared beliefs, social or cultural norms, behaviours, and values of a particular cultural or sub-cultural group” (O’CONNOR, 2015, n. p.15). Namely, it is the cultural information that is part of the memory of a group or society.

For example, the symbol of swastika (ॐ), the Hindu auspicious symbol, is always made in “red” in Hindu culture. But, in Germany, since it became a Nazi symbol, not only it is used in a contrary way (卐) but also became to be used/written in black and gained the meaning of German nationalism (ROSENBERG, 2010).

In this sense, we may assume that each group can have their own cultural “storage” of the symbolism of color. At the same time, each color can have a different symbolism depending on the culture it is inserted.

[…] each color has its history, marked by habits and meanings, and this is what makes it liable to a classification. You can take the color as active instruments of a particular culture and, in the case of Western culture, there are the colors linked to the meanings, describing their respective histories. (SILVEIRA, 2007, p. 253, our translation16)

The author still highlights the relevance of the cultural aspects as both previous knowledge, when he says “[…] culture plays a fundamental function in what is selected to be retained in visual memory and the choices and issues of the visual chromatic world […]” (SILVEIRA, 2007, p. 122, our translation17). In other words, culture can be the reference to the choices people make, functioning as a basis to what is seen.

Thus, based on their interpretations about the world, groups of people may assign different meanings to colors and use these significances to register their own experiences. Hence, we are able to say that culture is responsible to convey symbolic meanings to colors.

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15 Loc. 400.
16 “[…] sabemos intuitivamente que cada cor tem sua história, marcada por hábitos e significados, e é isto o que a torna passível de classificação. Pode-se tomar as cores como instrumentos ativos de uma determinada cultura e, no caso da cultura ocidental, tem-se as cores atreladas aos significados, descrevendo suas respectivas histórias” (SILVEIRA, 2007, p. 253).
17 “[…] a cultura tem um papel fundamental naquilo que se seleciona para ser retido na memória visual e nas escolhas e edições do mundo visual cromático […]” (SILVEIRA, 2007, p. 122).
and that one people can interpret the world differently from another people, and attribute different meanings to the contact they have with it.

2.2.3 Universal Symbolism of Color

O’Connor (2015, n. p.18), looking from the universal point of view, says that color symbolism portrays a general or world-common meaning, independently of culture or country. As an illustration, the author gives the case of the traffic light colors (red, amber and green), that follow a species of pattern around the whole world. But O’Connor also comments that universal meaning happens with a few number of color symbolisms, since the variations occur with more frequency at the other two levels – individual and cultural.

Knowing that color symbolism may happen through these levels, we intend to present different significances of “yellow” at these levels, throughout the time and in different contexts, in the ensuing topic about the symbolism of the color “yellow”.

2.3 “YELLOW” AND ITS SIGNIFICANCES

In primitive times, the elements of nature, the phases of the moon, the cycle of the zodiac and the planetary colors used to be sources of color symbolism. “The most powerfully effective colour symbols in art have always been those taken directly from nature, and especially from natural phenomena already standing for universal ideas” (PAVEY & OSBORNE, 2009, p. 7). Besides, the “yellow” color is also considered to be the lighter color and also one of the primary colors, and it is, perhaps, the most contradictory color (HELLER, 2013), because its meanings vary from optimistic to negative ones.

In the field of proto-psychology we may find much ample use of color symbolism. The choleric personality took its color from the yellow bile (PAVEY & OSBORNE, 2009). In ancient times, it is known that Hippocrates formulated the classical Greek doctrine of the four humors. In this doctrine, black bile, blood, yellow bile19 and phlegm were associated to four temperaments: melancholy, sanguine, choleric and phlegmatic (O’CONNOR, 2015). Among these four humors, the symbolism of “yellow” was related to the choleric one, which meant “anger” and “irritation” (DAVISON, 2004; O’CONNOR, 2015).

18 Loc. 410.
19 It is interesting to note that the term “yellow bile” was used by ancient wizards to designate the “yellow diseases” (HELLER, 2013, p. 89).
As well as disease and temperament, “malodorous” also seems to be a mark of “yellow”. Heller (2013, p. 100) exemplifies saying that in propagandas, smoke is usually represented by a dirty “yellow”.

Like the symbolism of the sun, “yellow” belongs to the symbolisms of summer (HELLER, 2013, p. 88), light and gold (HELLER, 2013, p. 85). When related to the sun or to the summer, the color denotes “energy” and “optimism”, “blossom”; when related to the light, “lightness”. However, “yellowness”\textsuperscript{20} signifies decay (HELLER, 2013, p. 100).

Color as a symbol is used frequently even in the musical notes. The Russian composer Alexander Skrjabin once said that every musical tone has a color correspondent and that “re” would be the “radiant”, and “the “yellow” tone that is associated to the sun (HELLER, 2013, p. 85).

When the color is “transformed” in the metal gold (or golden “yellow”— a variation of “yellow”), people tend to associate it to the noble “yellow” and consider it a noble metal. "Gold is money, is luck, is wealth – that determines the symbolology of gold", declared Heller (2013, p. 227, our translation\textsuperscript{21}). But besides materialism, “gold” may also represent different aspects as “beauty” and “pretentiousness” in a broader sense, as well as “wisdom” in Islam, according to the research of Heller (2013).

Among its range of meanings, golden “yellow” also can be used to show “maturity” or prosperity. As the “golden age”, it is used to reflect on the better living conditions with lots of food, “fruits and leaves” in the autumn (HELLER, 2013, p. 88).

In Chinese culture, “yellow” used to symbolize status in architecture: “Golden yellow is the royal color of emperors and households. Associated with the element of Earth, it symbolizes growth, power and authority. [...] [T]he order of status was shown in the colors of walls and the roof. The Yellow roof was an Imperial Palace [...]”(PAVEY & OSBORNE, 2009, p. 35).

The relationship between religion and color symbolism is ancient and varied. In the ancients Egypt and Rome, “gold” had, respectively, the meaning of “rare and precious” and “reserved for depictions of royalty or divinity”, and “for the robes of the Emperor and Imperial family” (O’CONNOR, 2015, n. p.\textsuperscript{22}).

In the Hebrew culture, the figure of the High Priest used to wear a golden breastpiece to interpret God’s sentences (PAVEY & OSBORNE, 2009, p. 46). Here, we recap the idea of

\textsuperscript{20} “[A]marelecimento” (HELLER, 2013, p. 100).
\textsuperscript{21} “Ouro é dinheiro, é sorte, é luxo – isso determina a simbologia do ouro” (HELLER, 2013, p. 227).
\textsuperscript{22} Loc. 437.
“gold” related to “authority”. The idea of divinity associated to the color is also present in the representation of the Hindu goddess, Bagalamukhi, with “yellow” clothes, ornaments, garland and complexion (OLSON, 2007, p. 293). On the other hand, in Hinduism, the color may still convey a relation with demonic figures: “yellow is symbolically associated with the demonic residents of Yama’s23 realm” (OLSON, 2007, p. 96).

In the Middle Ages, the color of the dynasty flag that defended the Muslims in the Crusades was “yellow”. It was the color of the outcasts (HELLER, 2013, p. 94). But for Hindus, the saffron (a variation of “yellow”) flag on temples and also in war is the symbol of Hindu nationalism (DWYER, 2006, p. 274) and faith (BASU, 1993, p. 38).

“Yellow” when is used as “yellow sign” was used to designate a type of stigmatization for the Jewish people. They were forced to wear a “yellow star” so that they could be easily identified and separated from the rest of the society. The meaning of “yellow”, in this case, is used as a means or instrument of marginalizing Jews, and more than that, of spreading an anti-Semitic feeling till the times of Hitler in the Nazi Germany (DORAN, 2013, n. p.24). It was commonly used in some parts of Europe.

To be more specific, it was in the Europe of “progress and decadence” (SWART, 1964, p. 10) of the 19th century, that was developed what characterizes the idea of polarity or ambivalence on the symbolism of “yellow”. If, on the one hand, “yellow” carries, naturally, “a serene, gay, softly exciting character”, on the other hand, when materialized, it is “extremely liable to contamination” according to Goethe (1810, p. 308). This thought, perhaps, was being disseminated or, at least, helped to disseminate the ambivalence on the symbolism of “yellow” not only in Germany, but, mainly, in Western Europe.

2.3.1 “Yellow” in the literature of the late nineteenth century

The publication of the hybrid “The Yellow Book” in 1895, in London, confirmed the status of “yellow” as the color of “the scandal”25, “the time-spirit”, “the theatrical”, “the bizarre” and “the queer”. This book, that was half-book and half-magazine, gained a modern status because of its style. It was a mixture of the contemporary avant-garde and mass

23 According to Olson (2007, p. 96), Yama is the Lord of death.
24 Loc. 260-265.
25 One of the facts that gave the color this significance was the media report that Oscar Wilde, when arrested (accused of sodomy), was carrying “The Yellow Book” (DORAN, 2013, n. p., loc. 1573).
culture\textsuperscript{26}, and its propaganda focused on its visual design. Besides, its first edition presented a cover with a figure of an elegant woman reading a book, representing the potential for seduction and the aspiration for independence of the new women of the \textit{fin de siècle} (DORAN, 2013).

The publication of the book also influenced the designation of the late nineteenth century as “The Yellow Nineties” (DORAN, 2013; LANSER, 1989; LOVECRAFT, 2006) which comprised, also, early literary works, such as “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “The King in Yellow”. In the first one, the own author explains the reason that impelled her to write such story. She comments that she intended “to save people from being driven crazy” (GILMAN, 1913, p. 1) by criticizing, through the story, her doctor’s treatment for her “nervous breakdown” (GILMAN, 1913, p. 1). In contrast, with regard to Chambers’ tale, T. S. Joshi (2004, n. p.\textsuperscript{27}), talking about Robert William Chambers, declares that besides being done in a “spirit of fun”, “[t]he best of Chambers is a product of the 'Yellow Nineties', and gains its power in large part by capturing the languor and pathos of that distinctive period” and “much of this seems to have been done in a spirit of fun”. His saying is based on the fact that Chambers experienced the French decadence with property, perhaps because, as said by Tomlinson (2014), who was in Paris studying Arts at the time he wrote “The King in Yellow”.

Whilst Chambers was in Paris, “[i]n California, where Gilman lived while writing ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, mass anxiety about the ‘Yellow Peril’ had already yielded such legislation as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882” (LANSER, 1989, p. 425). By the use of “yellow”, “peril” and “Chinese Exclusion” in the same phrase, we can notice that, in the late nineteenth century, in the United States, the “yellow” color\textsuperscript{28} was associated to a kind of xenophobia.

According to Lanser, through the lens of an Anglo-American cultural study, the “yellow nineties” is a period in which “yellow” “[…] readily connoted inferiority, strangeness, cowardice, ugliness, and backwardness” (LANSER, 1989, p. 427). The author also attributes the implication of “yellow” as “disease, cowardice, worthlessness, uncleanliness, and decay” (LANSER, 1989, p. 427) to the cultural moment of that epoch.

\textsuperscript{26} The “yellow-back pamphleteering”, as called by Edgar A. Poe, was a type of cheap literature normally sold at railway stations in Britain. (DORAN, 2013)

\textsuperscript{27} Loc. 480.

\textsuperscript{28} In contrast, the symbolism of “yellow”, in China, seems always good. It is the Yang, it means loyalty, wealth and is the color of religion. (HELLER, 2013)
Furthermore, these words previously mentioned used to be, implicitly, related to race in the Anglo-American psychic.

The common nineteenth-century belief in three races — black, white, yellow — each linked to a specific continent, was reconstituted so that ‘white’ came to mean only ‘Nordic’ or Northern European, while ‘yellow’ applied not only to the Chinese, Japanese, and light-skinned African-Americans but also to Jews, Poles, Hungarians, Italians, and even the Irish. (LANSER, 1989, p. 427)

It looks like the Anglo-Americans’ criterion to “classify” people as black, white or yellow overpassed the question of “color complexion”. “White” was related to the idea of racial supremacy (SMITH, 2015, p. 266), whereas “black” and “yellow” were associated to the idea of “race inferiority”, which negatively affected the American descendants of Africans and the immigrants of Europe in America.

Finally, as we can see, “yellow” represents a variety of meanings that have acquired a new meaning or have lost it totally over time and context. Color symbolism, time and context seem to be very well-connected. We may say that whether negatively or not, each symbolism may be related to some notion or belief present or used in a specific epoch, context or culture, and each one conveyed the distinct perceptions of different individuals or groups of individuals around the world.

Before we move further and compare the “yellow” symbolism between the two stories as it is used by the two writers, we want to present our plan of discussion. Following the chronological order, first, we will present both authors and then a brief introduction to the stories, plot, characters and theme. Then, following O’Connor (2015), Heller (2013), Davison (2004), among other theoretical references, we will discuss the symbolism of “yellow” color in both stories.

3 THE TWO STORIES

3.1 “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER”

Published officially in 1892, in the New England Magazine, the semi-autobiographical “The Yellow Wallpaper” is the most notorious story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It was written right after she gave birth to her only child (with her first husband, Charles Walter Stetson) when she had a post-partum depression. Besides, it was set on a period in which
women were seen as “hysterical” and “depressive,” that is, mentally ill. She was born in 1860 in Hartford – Connecticut, in the United States; she lived her youth in Providence – Rhode Island; in 1884, after her divorce from her first husband (something not common to the period), she went to Pasadena – California, to live as an activist in feminist organizations; she also lived in New York with Houghton Gilman; and, then, in Norwich – Connecticut, returning to Pasadena after Houghton’s death in 1934 (DAVIS & KNIGHT, 2004).

Bringing out themes as relationship between patient-doctor, mental illness, gender questions and domestic conflicts, “The Yellow Wallpaper” presents a common and middle-class female narrator as the main character who is spending summer with her husband John in a colonial mansion. The story tells that she is confined by him (who is a physician and a doctor) in a papered room. John insists the couple must stay in the room at the top of the colonial mansion they have rented to spend some days, because she needs to recover from a “temporary nervous depression — a slight hysterical tendency” (GILMAN, 1899, n. p.). Her husband forbids her to engage in work of any type — including writing, so that she gets full rest and recovers soon.

While the story develops, the narrator reveals that she escapes her husband’s recommendation. She confesses that she cannot stop observing the room’s wallpaper, which is “yellow”, and starts writing about it when there is no one around. It seems like she has an inexplicable and uncontrolled desire to stand by it. Day by day, the wallpaper is scrutinized and analyzed by her and some of its features as the color, the pattern and the smell enter in her description, which shows her perception of “yellow”. She says that “[t]he color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight” (GILMAN, 1899, n. p.); "[i]t is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw - not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things. (GILMAN, 1899, n. p.)”; and “[t]here are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I cannot keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously” (GILMAN, 1899, n. p.). However, at some point, she becomes familiarized with the yellow wallpaper, as she says: “[i]t used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house to reach the smell. But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of the paper! A yellow smell” (GILMAN, 1899, n. p.); and “I ‘don’t want to go outside. […] For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow” (GILMAN, 1899, n. p.). She is even informed by Jennie, John’s sister, about the “yellow” smudges on her and John’s clothes.
At the end, the main character removes the “yellow” wallpaper. She says that the woman (or the projection of herself on the wallpaper) that once was “trapped in the wallpaper”, would be put there no more: “I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (GILMAN, 1899, n. p.).

3.2 “THE YELLOW SIGN”

Published in 1895 by F. Tennyson Neely, “The King in Yellow”, written by Robert William Chambers, is a set of stories mixing fantasy and romance, which involves two themes: the history of a mysterious spectral king in yellow and an evil book, which “destroys” everybody who reads it.

Chambers was born in 1865 in Brooklyn (New York) and lived a part of his youth in Paris studying Arts. Besides a writer, he was also a painter, a collector of historical documents, paintings, books and insects (TOMLINSON, 2014, n. p.29). As a writer, Chambers seemed to be influenced by Ambrose Bierce’s “An Inhabitant of Carcosa”, and is known as one of the influences to the construction of the Cthulhu Mythos, mainly created by Lovecraft (TOMLINSON, 2014, n. p.30).

The story is divided in three parts. The first part begins with the character questioning himself about aspects in life he cannot explain: “Why should certain chords in music make me think of the brown and golden tints of autumn foliage?” (CHAMBERS, 1895, p. 73). Then the narrator starts to describe a sequence of events he goes through.

Placed in, New York, a typical city of the United States, the story structures around mysterious events involving Mr. Scott, a painter and the narrator, and Tessie, his model, that starts to happen when, one day, he gets distracted by the presence of a strange man in the churchyard out of his window. He looks at the man for some time, and then, when he returns to paint, he realizes that the mixture of colors on canvas, to draw the arm of the model, looks like dirty. He tries hard to change this dirty effect without success. Interested in knowing who distracted Mr. Scott, Tessie leans on the window and is surprised of what she sees. The man reminded her of a dream she had before about a ritual of burial in which the painter and the same strange man were present.

29 Loc. 418.
30 Loc. 290.
In the second part of the story, the situation is worse. Mr. Scott also has the same
dream, but with some alterations as it is dominated by his own point of view or what he might
“preferred” to see. Soon he starts to live a romance with the model. One night, passing by the
churchyard, Mr. Scott is addressed by the same stranger, who mutters these words:

‘Have you found the Yellow Sign?’
‘Have you found the Yellow Sign?’
‘Have you found the Yellow Sign?’ (CHAMBERS, 1895, pp. 85-86)

And it looked like it annoyed the painter, because he could not understand the
meaning of these words.

Next day, Tessie brings a box and offers it as a gift to Mr. Scott, as she is living in a
romantic relationship with the artist. She tells the artist that she found the gift at the same day
she had the first dream about the burial. Mr. Scott, then, describes how the gift was: “I opened
the box. On the pink cotton inside lay a clasp of black onyx, on which was inlaid a curious
symbol or letter in gold. It was neither Arabic nor Chinese, nor, as I found afterwards, did it
belong to any human script” (CHAMBERS, 1895, p. 87).

The third part focuses on the finding of a book called “The King in Yellow” in Mr.
Scott’s library. This book, as the main character explains, contains some content that is
somehow connected to the tragedy of who ventures to read it. Because of that, he does not
want Tessie to touch it or read it. But, disobeying him, she picks up the book and finally reads
it. Both characters, indeed, could not resist and read it. They both read and discuss about “The
King in Yellow”. And come to the conclusion that the clasp was the “yellow sign” mentioned
by the strange man. Then, they hear a sound of wheels coming from distant that stop at the
gate of the building. It was the king. But they could not see anything, just feel: “I knew that
the King in Yellow had opened his tattered mantle and there was only God to cry to now”
(CHAMBERS, 1895, p. 91). Then the story ends with the death of the painter and Tessie,
such is the power of the king.

4 THE SYMBOLISM OF “YELLOW” IN BOTH STORIES: “THE YELLOW
WALLPAPER” AND “THE YELLOW SIGN”
There are many parallels and contrasts between the stories. However, our objective is to compare only the symbolism of “yellow”. First, we would like to call attention to the similarities and then to the differences.

Both stories have a title that shows a deep link with “yellow” and in both stories the word/color “yellow” comes as a modifier or adjective. However, the title words of “The Yellow Wallpaper” suggest a domestic “yellow” environment that fits the maddening atmosphere of confinement in which the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is located. Contrary to this, “The Yellow Sign” does not suggest an exact notion of what it could be: if a reference to the “yellow star” or any other type of sign. But taking into account the literary context in which they were produced, the fact of the stories have “yellow” in the titles already suggests the idea of “scandal” (DORAN, 2013), as the example of the “Yellow Book”.

In general, in most parts of each story, “yellow” seems to carry the idea of “exclusion” (LANSER, 2013) when it comes to what happens to the protagonists. In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the main character is confined in a room decorated with a “yellow” wallpaper. Thus, she is, to certain extent, “isolated” from other people and from the activities she is accustomed to carry on. In “The Yellow Sign”, a similar idea is developed. The protagonist, who is in the possession of the “yellow sign”, is captured and “banned” from the real world. His life is taken by the spectral king in yellow. Both characters behave as “outcasts”, in the sense that Heller (2013) observes. These two characters, either the woman or Mr. Scott find themselves “exiled” from their (normal) lives.

We can also say that the color, associated to the two narratives, is related to the idea of “making one insane or mad” or the sense of “madness” (LOVECRAFT, 2006). In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the growing madness of the protagonist is potentialized by her perception of the color of the wallpaper (which initially annoys her). Similarly, in “The Yellow Sign”, there are events and attitudes that Mr. Scott cannot understand and these seem out of his control: the appearance of a strange watchman, the clasp with a yellow script, the cursed book that suddenly appears at his library and his interest in reading it (from the beginning to the end), and his inexplicable refusal to throw away the yellow sign from his breast. However, “The Yellow Sign” does not make use of “yellow” from the beginning” of the story. In a very mild way, it can be associated with the word “yellow” as it appears for the first time.

The way the symbolism of “yellow” is used in the conflicts of both stories is very similar too. In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, it is associated with a female protagonist who passes through three kinds of conflict: first with herself, because she makes an effort to maintain her sanity; second with her husband (who confines her) — this one could also represent the moral
oppression of society against mentally sick people/women; and the third one which comes at the end of the story, with a type of “supernatural being” that dwells along the wallpaper. The character seems to project these conflicts with the yellow wallpaper, giving it the role of an “opponent”. Adjectives like “repellant”, “revolting”, “smouldering”, “unclean”, “old foul” and “bad”, are enough to describe the effect and the tone of “yellow”, as Davison (2004) observes, which fit the classical Greek symbolism of “yellow” as the color of the choleric humour (anger and irritation), and also fit the ideas of “inferiority”, “strangeness”, “ugliness”, “uncleanliness” (LANSER, 1989) and “the bizarre” (DORAN, 2013), the symbolic use of the color in the “Yellow Nineties”. Besides this, the synesthetic use of “yellow” as an adjective in the term “yellow smell” suggests “uncleanliness”.

In “The Yellow Sign”, apparently a similar line can be placed. Similarly to the protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Mr. Scott faces four conflicts: the first one is an inner conflict with the strange man who asks him about the “yellow sign”, the second one with the “yellow sign”, the third one with the book “The King in Yellow” (which he swore to himself never read it) and the forth one is against the spectral king in yellow.

In one moment, “yellow” is materialized as a golden script on a clasp. And the script could designate nobility (HELLER, 2013; O’CONNOR, 2015). But, as the character suggests, it is neither Arabic nor Chinese and not humane. If it represents none of them, the symbolism in this part is the one of “the time-spirit” (DORAN, 2013) or something diabolical (OLSON, 2007) or “hellish”, as the term “not humane” indicates.

In other moment, “yellow” appears in the name or the title of the “mythical play” (JOSHI, 2004, n. p.31) “The King in Yellow” — in which the perusal brings a tragic end to the reader — representing “exclusion” and “decay” (LANSER, 1989). Both characters are unable to resist the temptation of reading it.

At last, “yellow” in the spectral king’s “tattered” vestment, symbolizes “the time-spirit”, “the bizarre” and “the queer” (DORAN, 2013), and the “decay” (DORAN, 2013) of the main character.

Another point that is similar about the symbolism of “yellow” between the two stories in relation to the individual perception of the main characters. There is a strange change in the perception of Gilman’s protagonist about the yellow wallpaper. She seems to develop a fascination with this color. It is perceptible that the protagonist, after spending too much time in a room, gets accustomed to the wallpaper’s color that she disliked in the beginning of the

31 Loc. 376.
story. The same happens in “The Yellow Sign” too. There is also a strange and inexplicable moment of “empathy” felt by the protagonist concerning the “yellow sign” in the beginning of the story.

Besides the title, the point that differs is the meaning of “authority” that the king’s “yellow” vestment gives. In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman provides no such link.

Lastly, we have the opening paragraphs. The meanings of the color in the opening paragraphs appear quite revealing as they offer different meanings to “yellow”. In this case, the color meaning differ in both. In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the narrator starts describing the setting by saying that summer is the season in which the story befalls. In general, “summer”, as we know, relates to “the season with sun”, and “sun” indicates “energy” (HELLER, 2013). We may confirm this meaning because, further in the story, when the narrator presents comparison between the “yellow” color of the daylight and the “yellow” color of the wallpaper, the later is a “faded” one.

Differently to this, in the opening paragraph of “The Yellow Sign”, “yellow” color appears as its variation, gold. The narrator/character says his memory makes inexplicable associations between the colors and things, places or situations. One of them is the association between some chords and the golden autumn leaves. Gold is associated with autumn and, in that case, it gains the meaning of the beginning of “decay” (LANSER, 1989), since it represents a presage to a coming tragedy at the end of the story.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through our research, we can see that symbols are representative of meanings, that the history of the symbolism of color is a long one, and that colors may assume different meanings, depending on time, context and perceptions (individual, cultural and universal).

As we expected, it was possible to learn a range of significances that “yellow” color may convey all over the world in many areas such as psychology, architecture and literature, and also in religious systems and politics. The “yellow” color conveyed metaphorical associations with “beauty”, “wealth”, “authority” and “sacredness” as well as with “exclusion”, “strangeness”, “hellish” and “decay”.

Comparing the symbolism of “yellow” color in the titles, the central ideas of each story, the narratives, the conflicts, the characterization and the opening paragraphs, we detect both similarities and differences between the stories.
The differences were present in the titles, in the characterization and in the opening paragraphs. “The Yellow Wallpaper” presents an idea of “homely environment” associated with the “yellow” color in the title; there is no link to an idea of “authority” through characterization; and the “yellow” in the opening paragraph suggests the ideas of “energy”. On the other hand, in “The Yellow Sign”, the color of the title incites an idea of “scandal” and “exclusion”, the cloth of the king indicates “authority” and the opening paragraph conveys the beginning of “decay” in the narrative.

It is not a surprise that we could count more similarities than differences because the stories are products of the same culture, the same period and the same linguistic background. The coincidence of meanings is related to the time (the nineteenth century), and context (“Yellow Nineties”) mostly assumed the symbolic idea of a strange, dirty, ugly, bizarre, old, excluding and decadent “yellow” color.

Finally, a research of this nature helped in expanding our understanding of the stories. By comparing the two literary works, we could see and realize the beauty of both. Besides, we hope such study will motivate the readers to use “Comparative Study” as a tool for better comprehension.
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