

Somewhere Over the Rainbow: The Significance of Color in *A Visit*

From the Goon Squad

by Kirstyn Kedaitis

Jennifer Egan's novels are not simply fluff-filled fictions. Another layer of meaning is often present in her texts, and she has admitted that, stating: "Theory-lust still guides me as a fiction writer. There's usually a theory or two hidden (possibly not well enough) in my books." (Cox) In her work *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Egan weaves together several standalone stories to form a unified work drenched in relevant themes. Two of the most notable themes, youth/naïveté and acceptance/moving on, are accented by the use of yellow and darker colors, respectively. Egan's use of colors in this way not only develops and brings dimension to these themes, but it also provides resolution to the book and encourages the audience to read between the lines by absorbing information that is present but not explicitly stated.

The theme of youth and naïveté is constant throughout nearly the entire novel, and it is augmented by heavy usage of the color yellow. Yellow is omnipresent in various ways throughout the entirety of *Goon Squad*, with a significant halt in its use near the end of the novel. In addition to helping readers gauge the maturity of characters or aspects of certain situations, it also alludes to a sense of nostalgia and links many characters and scenarios together.

Yellow is first seen in the novel within its opening lines—Sasha is applying yellow eye shadow while out on a date. Although this instance in particular does not immediately establish or unveil the color's significance, later in the chapter the

narrator explains that the yellow scarf Sasha has is one of her favorite stolen items, and Sasha finds a picture of a yellow-clad sports team in Alex's wallet. Multiple mentions of the color in simply the opening story makes readers aware that yellow will be a significant force in the book.

Although mentioned several times in the first story, Egan's reasons for using the color do not become apparent until the end of the second chapter. "The Gold Cure" is laden with even more yellow references than "Found Objects": this story features Sasha in a yellow sweater, Bennie's yellow Porsche and his gold flakes, the blond children of Crandale, and a blond girl Bennie had once pursued at a party. Most of these yellow things relate to Bennie's past and his desire to return to it. He's staring at Sasha and consuming the gold flakes in order to hopefully achieve erections once again, and once he is successful in doing so, he thinks about a blond girl from his past. He is reflecting on his time in Crandale when he imagines the town's blond children. Yellow is the common denominator in all three of these instances of nostalgia, and here is where this color begins to take on its personality and theme.

The idea of yellow as a representation of youth and nostalgia can be seen in all the yellow references in the first two stories of the book. Sasha's eye shadow is yellow because an inner part of her has yet to mature. The scarf she stole is yellow because it came from a young child and her stealing problem is something she needs to overcome by "growing up" mentally. (A second interpretation of the scarf could be that she is trying to "steal" youth and happiness from others.) The yellow uniforms in Alex's picture are a simple reflection of Alex's fondness for a particular

time in his past. Yellow is being used in these parts of the book to signify nostalgia, youth, and immaturity, and as a result, readers have the opportunity to learn more about these characters without any further explanation from Egan.

It is also important to note the large number of blond characters in this book. Lou, Mindy, Kathy, La Doll, and Kitty are all blonds, and this hair color says something about all of them. The symbolism the hair color holds is slightly different for each character, but each symbolism falls under the larger umbrella of naïveté and incomplete maturity. Lou, for example, is not young by any means. However, he lives life like he is a carefree teenager, with not much regard or respect for his future or the people around him. His wife Mindy, on the other hand, is young and under the impression that she is much smarter and more mature than she actually is. Both of these characters have some growing up to do, but in different ways. Lou needs to realize that life is not all fun and games like he thinks it is, and he has serious responsibilities to attend to—like his career and his children. His wife Mindy has yet to mature, but in a different way: she has yet to see that taking part in higher education does not automatically make one a genius or a mature adult in any way.

Like Lou, Kathy is not young. However, as a typical Crandale woman, she cares about petty things like social status, “keeping up with the Joneses,” and other useless topics that only teenagers and underdeveloped young adults generally seem to put stock in. Her blond hair (and later, the gold bobby pin that Stephanie finds) signifies her pursuit of the trivial and her need to discover greater aims and aspirations. La Doll is similar to Kathy in this way—she is concerned with placing

herself at the top of the social hierarchy and making sure her clients are on the tips of everyone's tongues. This need is proven through the large failure of a party La Doll throws, the dreadful results of which cause her to return to her original name and hair color. This change in La Doll/Dolly's hair color and her behavior after her party helps demonstrate the idea that frivolity and immaturity can only last so long—eventually, people must move on to more productive ideals and behaviors.

Kitty embodies a sense of youth and desperation. Her blond hair and ripe-for-Hollywood age conjure up images of happy, carefree (perhaps careless) teenagers living the American dream. Although she is described as washed up at the relatively young age of twenty-eight, her blond hair remains, and the yellow sweater she wears on her flight to see the General shows that while she no longer meets society's standards of youth or vanity, she still has enough spontaneity and recklessness in her to call out the General in the bold, unexpected way that she did.

All of these characters have a different background, but their common hair color alerts readers that each of the book's blonds has some type of impairing maturity issue that needs to be corrected. Their immaturity is not explicitly stated anywhere in the book, but their actions and thoughts allude to it, and their common hair color unites them together in the theme of naïveté. By using blond hair to symbolize this particular characteristic, Egan enhances the theme's presence in the book. In addition to telling stories whose actions formally display naïveté and carelessness of youth, the underlying and recurring color choices make it clear that blond hair is a silent nod to readers who are searching for symbolism in the book.

What is so significant about yellow itself, though? Yes, it is being used symbolically in this novel, but what specifically makes yellow Egan's color of choice for this endeavor? Chesken and Masken Inc. state that yellow represents youth and brightness in American culture (quoted in Aslan 25) as well as spontaneity, expectance, aspiration, and hope (Hoss 5). By using a color that most of her readers already have a certain disposition towards, Egan is planting a seed in her readers' minds. Yellow is already considered the color of youth to most (if not all) of her audience, so this lays the foundation for her use of it. This sense of familiarity that the audience already has with the color yellow sets them up to unconsciously pick up on some of the symbolism and development of the theme that yellow provides for them.

The use of yellow to evoke a sense of youthfulness is not new to American literature. The poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay" by Robert Frost speaks of yellow/gold in a way that Egan's usage of the color reflects. The first two lines "Nature's first green is gold/Her hardest hue to hold" supports the notion that before one is "green" and mature, they are "gold" and young. The idea that nature's gold as well as humans' youth is "hard to hold" and quickly slips away relates to the overwhelming sense of nostalgia many of Egan's characters feel. This nostalgia and craving for the past drives her characters to seek the youthfulness they once had and in some cases causes them to ignore the present day realities around them. The lines "So dawn goes down to day/Nothing gold can stay" allude to the idea that youth is just a fleeting notion that will pass before one realizes it. In the context of *Goon Squad*, though, it can also be taken to mean that not only will youth be over

soon, but also the behaviors exhibited by the golden-haired characters and symbolized by the yellow objects cannot always exist. Things can and do change, sometimes because people want them to, and sometimes because change is inevitable.

It is very likely that Frost's poem may have inspired Egan to use yellow to augment her theme of youth and naïveté. The way she uses the color matches up well with how the color is described in the poem. Additionally, this poem was also used in the novel *The Outsiders* in order to describe a similar theme—innocence. One of this novel's characters, Ponyboy, recites this poem to his friend Johnny, and together the two reflect on the meaning of the poem, ultimately deciding that it represents innocence and how growing up and dealing with the "real world" is inevitable. Johnny urges Ponyboy to "stay gold" and hold on to his youthfulness and evasion of adulthood and responsibility for as long as possible. Egan may also have been familiar with this novel, given that its usage of the poem and the characters' decision of yellow's symbolism match up with what she presents in her own work. If nothing else, Frost's poem and its use in another novel show that Egan is not alone in her desire to illustrate youthful concepts through the color yellow.

To a lesser extent, Egan uses dark tones to add to her illustration of accepting the past and moving on. This is first seen in the story "You (Plural)" through the tiles of Lou's pool—they are both yellow and dark blue. The yellow represents the wild antics and youthful behavior that Lou will always be remembered for, but the dark blue serves to illustrate that Lou has grown up since his prior appearances in the book. This slight hint of a darker color relatively early on in the book does not

immediately herald the color's significance, but it definitely foreshadows the role that darker colors will play later on in the book.

The next instance of dark color appears in the story "A to B." The readers discover that Bennie made the choice to move to Crandale because it is the furthest place he could be from his "dark-eyed grandmother." His grandmother's dark eyes are the embodiment of the responsibility and acceptance of adulthood that Bennie is attempting to find in his life. Bennie is still "yellow" at this point in time (it is in this chapter that he has his affair with Kathy), so it makes perfect sense that he would want to run away from the "darkness" that is the idea of fully maturing and accepting that his youth has passed him by.

Interestingly enough, though, another dark-eyed woman appears near the end of the novel—Bennie's second wife, Lupa. This shows that Bennie has finally accepted his age and the maturity that comes along with it. He has finally moved on from his fixation on the past, and he has learned to take joy in the present. The "dark-eyed woman" of adulthood that Bennie once fled from turned into something he cherishes and admires.

Darker tones are also present in reference to Sasha. Many characters that describe Sasha speak of her hair color and how it has changed. In her younger years, her hair is a bright red, but it dulls and darkens over time. As Sasha matures and changes, her hair darkens. An example of this can be found in the story "Good-bye, My Love," in which Sasha's uncle Ted is shocked to find that her hair has darkened so much. Sasha has certainly matured since the last time he has seen her, but she is by no means a mature and properly functioning adult. Although her hair

has darkened and she has partially matured, the yellow smiley face on the entrance to her neighborhood is a reminder to readers that she is still far from fully developed mentally.

A second indication of darker tones relating to Sasha is found at the end of the same story. Ted visits Sasha, and she is described as “aflame with orange light” from the sun. In this moment, orange represents Sasha’s happiness with her current lifestyle and her fond remembrance of her youth’s passing. Yellow and red combined make orange; the book’s constant reference to yellow blends with Sasha’s red hair to create the orange symbol presented in the final lines of this story. Sasha has made peace with her youth and the grinding immaturity that came with it: although this new color is not one that has been used in reference to Sasha up to this point, it is a reminder that the “colors” of our lives change, and that darker colors of adulthood and maturity are no less beautiful than the lighter ones of youth.

Though the colors are absent from the pages of the book, several slides from the digital version of the PowerPoint presentation Sasha’s daughter created are laden with dark tones. To a lesser extent, these hues signify the growth and development of Sasha as well as that of her family. However, this usage of color is important to note due to the fact that Egan’s colorization of the PowerPoint was not random at all: “I spent hours calibrating the hues, trying to intimate...particular characters,” she has stated. (Cox) This is a clear indicator that color is significant in interpreting the ideas and situations present in the PowerPoint, among them these darker colors that are present.

Egan's motives for selecting these darker colors are less defined, and there is little to no repetition among the specific colors she uses—just the darkness. In American culture, dark colors as a whole have the tendency to represent “richness and value.” (Aslan 23) This implies that Egan is using darker tones to highlight the value of moving on and accepting the life one has instead of the life one desires or misses. In a broader sense, darkness can also represent the “death of the ego” or a “potential personality change.” (Hoss 16) Both of these are trials faced by the characters that have dark colors applied to them.

Using color to augment her themes is a clever idea indeed, but Egan's usage of yellow and darker colors extends beyond merely serving to illustrate themes. These colors and the places they occupy in the individual characters' timelines say something greater. Egan is using these colors to document the maturation of her characters. Sasha and Bennie both start out as incredibly yellow people, but by the end of the books, they have transformed themselves into dark ones. Consider the disappearance of yellow at the end of the book: after constant references, yellow pops up one final time in the story “Good-bye, My Love” and then (with one exception) it is entirely absent from the two chapters. Instead, the yellow is replaced by the darker tones in order to signal the ultimate growth and success of the two main characters.

This sort of color timeline is used even in the PowerPoint presentation—there is an abundance of dark colors present here, but one slide in particular sticks out. The twenty-fourth slide (the aforementioned exception) is about Sasha's youth, and it is presented in concentric yellow circles in the digital version. Though Sasha's

present life is still shaded in darkness, her youthful years are represented by yellow. The digital version of the PowerPoint provides an in-color representation of the textual color/character development timelines that Egan uses to illustrate the progression of her characters' personalities.

Egan's use of these colors as a way of marking personal development in her characters also encourages readers to delve deeper into texts and probe for more meanings. While the book as a whole would make perfect sense without a manifestation of color, the symbolism and importance that Egan attaches to these colors add a certain depth to the story that allows for a richer reading experience to be had. By peering between the lines of this book and picking up on things that are not explicitly stated, the audience can work their imaginations and develop a greater sense of the characters than what actually lies on the pages in front of them.

Throughout her book *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan develops multiple important themes, two of the most significant being youth/naïveté and acceptance/moving on. Egan goes a step further by carefully enveloping each theme in layers of color that readers can unwrap and use to interpret the text in a brighter light. The usage of yellow to represent youth and the usage of dark colors to represent acceptance not only augments the themes, but strings them together in a way that creates a personal color timeline for Sasha and Bennie, the two main characters. For them, the colors go beyond mere symbolism and extend into a reflection of their lives and how they lived them.

Works Cited

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