

Title: Color Psychology, Color Theory, and the Animations of Walt Disney Studios

Research Question: To what extent is color used in Disney movies to convey the protagonist's
place in the hero's journey?

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Abstract

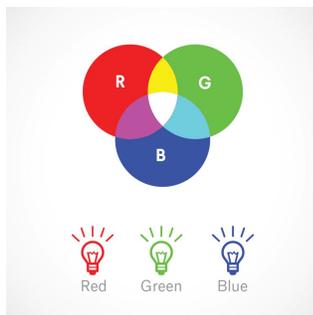
This essay has been written to answer the question “To what extent is color used in Disney movies to convey the protagonist’s place in the hero’s journey?” It begins by giving a brief background the Technicolor process and the meanings of hue, saturation, and value in terms of color theory and color psychology. It then continues by going more into depth with color psychology in the color palettes of the protagonists and antagonists of animated Disney movies, as well as a comparison of two characters who exemplify the traits outlined by their alignments' color palettes. Finally, the essay compares two protagonists and two antagonists with similar color palettes. At the end of the essay the conclusion is reached that color choice is indicative of the characters who wear those palettes, and palette changes are indicative of character growth. Along with this conclusion, this essay also comes to the conclusion that many colors have different meanings based on their saturation and value, and within color families, different hues have different meanings as well.

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Introduction

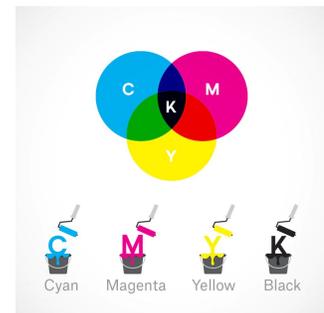
Disney Brothers Studio was founded in 1923 by brothers Walt and Roy Disney, and on December 31, 1937, they released the first ever feature-length animated film to be released in English, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*¹. The movie was met with great acclaim, winning multiple awards both in and outside the US. It was also one of the first full-length movies to use Technicolor.

The Technicolor process was created in 1916, and was the way that older movies went



from black and white to color.² It added color by way of capturing the three main hues (red, green, and blue) on individual negatives. This coloring process is known as additive color mixing, or RGB color mixing, where the three colors can be combined in order to create white. There is also the CMYK, or

subtractive, color mixing, wherein three of the four colors (cyan, magenta, yellow) can be mixed to create the fourth, known as key, or black.³ This essay focuses more on the former type of color mixing, which is used in movies, television, and computers.



Color helps people determine things in connection to the world around them. According to an article posted by 99designs, it takes just about 90 seconds for humans to make a decision with regards to something, the sample in the article being a decision regarding a brand. 90% of that decision is based on color. This idea that color affects the way people think and act is called color theory. Color psychology ties specific colors to different emotions. For instance, in the

¹ History.com

² Museum of Western Film History

³ 99designs

Western world, white is said to represent hope, red is said to represent anger, and green is said to represent prosperity. Though, in different hues green can actually mean jealousy. This has to do with saturation, also called chroma, and value.

Saturation is how intense a color is, whether it's a muddy gray or a vibrant neon. Value, sometimes called brightness or luminosity, is how dark or light a color is. In paint mixing, value is determined by how much black or white is added in order to make a color darker or lighter. In color psychology, desaturated colors and colors with a darker value are more often associated with negative emotions. However, highly saturated colors, or colors with a lighter value, are often associated with positive emotions.

Saturation is the intensity or “purity” of a color, with .⁴ More saturated colors are primarily associated with positive emotions, and less saturated colors are primarily associated with negative emotions. Value, also called brightness or luminosity, is how dark or light a color is. In paint mixing, value is determined by how much black or white paint is added to a hue.⁵ Black creates shades, more often associated with negative emotions. White creates tints, which are associated with positive emotions. In the context of character design and color psychology, characters with positive traits wear more saturated clothing with lighter values, while characters with negative traits wear less saturated colors with darker values.

There is also hue, which is specifically what color something is. Some hues of colors, for example a redder purple, or a green that has more yellow than blue, have different meanings than the “pure” version of that color. This is because they're combinations, and therefore they combine the best, or the worst, of the two colors they're made of. Redder purple has a different

⁴ The Muser

⁵ The Muser

meaning than “pure” purple in color psychology, and both have different meanings than a hue of purple that consists of more blue. Hue, saturation, and value mean that one “pure” color can have hundreds of variations, and therefore many different meanings.

1. Colors in the Context of Disney Protagonists

The most common colors in Disney protagonists are yellow, green, and blue, whether highly saturated, or a desaturated pastel. These colors are commonly connected with feelings of happiness and prosperity, as well as being young, whether mentally or physically. In the case of Disney protagonists, they're often young people filled to the brim with optimism. Not only this, some attention should be drawn to the fact that these colors still cause this overwhelming optimism in anyone who sees the colors. This causes the viewers of Disney movies to automatically root for the protagonists, not just because they're obviously the heroes of the story, but also because the colors that they wear inspire hope.

More specifically, the hues of green that Disney protagonists wear are associated with vitality, youthfulness, and balance. In Hinduism and Buddhism, green is the color of the heart chakra, which, when opened, allows one to love more, and fosters empathy and compassion.⁶ In crystal healing, stones such as jade and malachite are said to bring prosperity, peace, and healing. When these crystals and gemstones are used, they are supposed to aid in growth, both mental and physical.⁷

The hues of yellow kindred to the wardrobes and overall color schemes of Disney protagonists are said to represent warmth, cheerfulness, and optimism.⁸ Yellow is the color of the solar plexus chakra, located just below the rib cage. It's postulated that the solar plexus can



⁶ Sensational Color

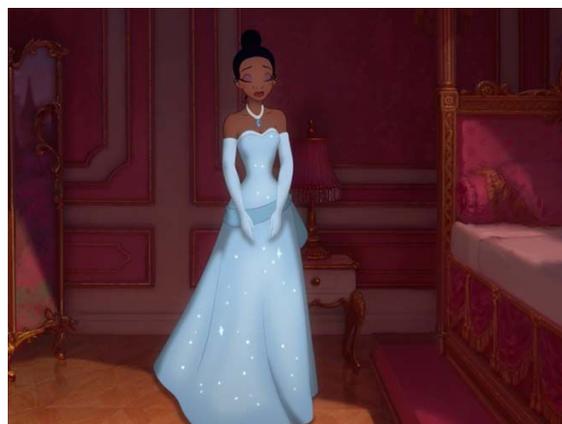
⁷ Crystals and Jewelry

⁸ Bourn Creative

foster confidence, charisma, and leadership when it is open.⁹ Yellow crystals represent happiness and child-like innocence, and are said to uplift and boost energy. They're also said to encourage people to take themselves less seriously and be happy.

It's posited that the color blue represents freedom, intuition and imagination, fostering loyalty, sincerity, and above all, trust. Being in the presence of a calm blue can cause the release of calming chemicals in the human body, and therefore an overwhelming sense of tranquility. More saturated blues are engaging and are used to express exhilaration. Blue gemstones aid in the creation of calm in chaotic situations, and are believed to aid the ability to communicate with friends and family, and foster courage. A blue ribbon represents first place in a competition, and someone with blueblood is someone of superior birth, whether noble, royal, or wealthy and powerful by some other means.¹⁰ The color blue is also related to the throat chakra, which is said to foster self-expression when it is open.¹¹ Blue is loyal and trustworthy, which is consistent with the meanings of the other common colors that protagonists wear.

One character with whom the green, blue, and yellow color palette is most closely connected is Tiana (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009), who primarily wears blue and yellow dresses, and actually spends the majority of the movie as a green frog with a yellow-tinted stomach. She displays all the qualities of these three colors; Tiana is a leader and confident in the majority of things she does, and she is optimistic, even when there's no hope of her becoming



⁹ Color Meanings

¹⁰ Bourn Creative

¹¹ Unlock Your Chakra

human again. She's the cool head when everything is going wrong, and Tiana is shown to be excellent with her words. The message carried by the yellow crystals and gemstones is not lost on her, as one of the foremost, and arguably the most important, messages of the movie is that one shouldn't take themselves so seriously, or they can miss out on some big things in life.

Tiana also exemplifies a color transition that happens in a short period of time, from brown, to blue, to green. Brown, while not a highly relevant color, stimulates appetite, and is associated with stability and dependability.¹² She wears a brown dress while acting as a server at a Mardi Gras costume ball, and, when she gets a bunch of wine and jam spille on her, switches to a blue princess dress. As previously stated, this color is associated with freedom, loyalty, and sincerity. It's the calm after a storm, which is exactly the thing Tiana needs after getting denied her big dream of owning a restaurant, this being the stimulating event in the change of outfits. Finally, she meets Prince Naveen, who promises her the money she needs to get the restaurant, if she can kiss him and turn him from a frog into a prince. However, because she isn't a true princess, and is instead just dressed as one, Tiana is turned into a frog, this being her third final color change in a 5 minute period. To summarize, she switches from a color representing stability and dependability, to a color representing calm and tranquility, to a color that fosters empathy and compassion. While there aren't too many big differences in these colors, it shows the traits that she needs, or that she prioritizes, while wearing these outfits, or, in the case of green, being a frog.

Another character closely linked to the color yellow is Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991). While she doesn't wear yellow the entire film, her personality fits very closely with the

¹² Bourn Creative



color. Similarly to Tiana, she is a leader. She is cheerful and optimistic, even in life-or-death situations. These character traits are especially important in protagonists, as it's hard to defeat evil without the hope that it's actually possible. Belle is also closely linked with the color blue, as it is the color that she wears in the very beginning of the movie. She is the voice of reason, and good with words, these two traits being those she shares with Tiana. She is loyal and courageous and, throughout the movie, proves to be very intuitive and sincere.

Another similarity that Tiana and Belle share is the size of their wardrobes. In Belle's case, she has four outfits, her blue dress that she wears at the beginning of *Beauty and the Beast*, a green dress that she wears at the beginning of her stay at the Beast's castle, a magenta dress



with a matching cape she wears while singing the song "Something There," and, finally, her iconic yellow ball gown. As previously stated, blue is associated with loyalty and sincerity,

as well as tranquility. While wearing this dress, Belle is the voice of reason in whatever situation she is faced with. Belle is wearing this dress when she offers herself in the place of her father as the Beast's prisoner, showing her love towards and loyalty to her father. The light green of the second dress is associated with freshness and revitalization¹³, and Belle is wearing it as the Beast

¹³ Bourn Creative

and his servants begin to heal from their stagnancy and the pain from their curse. Green is associated with relaxation, which is exactly what the Beast has begun to do at this place in the story. However, Belle herself doesn't realize this until the scene where she sings "Something There," when she is wearing the magenta outfit. Magenta is associated with compassion and kindness, two key emotions in Belle's character.¹⁴ Another relevant association with magenta is contentment, something seen in the actions of the scene, where Belle and the Beast are playing in the snow. Finally, she switches to the iconic yellow ball gown, whose hue is associated with the same kind of cheerfulness present in the ballroom scene.

All in all, Disney protagonists often wear brighter, more lively colors that are associated with happiness, optimism, and emotional strength. These colors are very important in any "good" character, because of these psychological connotations. Protagonists' color palettes are brighter and more vibrant than those of antagonists and background characters as well. Note that, in the picture on the right, Tiana and her family are wearing brighter clothes than the others in the shot. Additionally, they are highlighted by a porch light, and the light from their kitchen coming in through the door. While this adds additional accentuation, it does not take away from the claim that a protagonist's color palette is much brighter than the color palettes of secondary or background characters.



¹⁴ Nix Color Sensor

2. Colors in the Context of Disney Antagonists

Disney antagonists often wear dark, depressive colors, especially black, red, and purple. These colors are related to power and ambition, two qualities that are called for in the purpose of fulfilling whatever goal said antagonists are attempting to accomplish. Individually, black, red, and purple are all associated with specific emotional states and ways of being, often negative.

First, black. Black is affiliated with feelings of negativity and mystery. It's commonly worn at funerals, and therefore is also associated with grief, mourning, and death.¹⁵ On a more positive note, it's also representative of strength, power, and authority. There's the phrase "black-hearted," which refers to a person who is totally evil. A black sheep is someone who is an outcast from a family or other societal group. Blacklists, black mail, and black market are all things that are usually bad, or a combination of this with things that are illegal. Black crystals are representative of camouflage and concealment¹⁶, something unknown, maybe even supernatural. They also represent dedication, which, in the event it is used in a negative way, can cause an unrelenting destruction of pain.

Second, the color red. Red is the color of blood and fire, and is said to represent rage, danger, stress, and action. It is connected with war and danger, power and determination.¹⁷ Darker reds mean vigor, willpower, malice, and wrath. The color is linked to the root chakra which, when it is unbalanced, causes greed and cynicism¹⁸, as well as disillusionment and the tendency to lie. Red represents both Cupid and the Devil, and the phrase "red flag" means that something or someone is displaying signs of untrustworthiness or hazard. Too much red can

¹⁵ Bourn Creative

¹⁶ Cape Cod Crystals

¹⁷ Color Wheel Pro

¹⁸ Chakra.Info

cause a temper, and overbearing and oppressive behaviors.¹⁹ In addition to this, red is postulated to be a call to action, and it is emotionally intense. Not only does red cause the aforementioned emotional changes, it also causes changes physically²⁰, such as an increased heart rate. Red crystals are linked with increased conviction and courage, as well as glory and fortitude.

Finally, purple, which combines soothing blue and seething red. Darker purples are associated with gloom, sadness, and frustration. Too much of it causes irritability, impatience, and arrogance, and a drug-induced confusion is called a purple haze.²¹ The color purple is the color of the crown chakra, which causes obsessive thoughts and a disconnect from the present – either obsession with the past or the future – when it is unbalanced. When this chakra is blocked, it can cause rigidity, selfishness, and unethical thoughts and behavior.²² Purple is also associated with decadence and conceit, due to its rarity and nature, and the painstaking process it used to be to make purple dye.²³ Purple crystals are said to be related to the raising of confidence and the sharpening of the mind. They are supposed to keep you in line with your life goals.²⁴

The colors that mark a Disney antagonist are indicators of doom and gloom. It's been noted by many that the entrance of some antagonists is marked by way of a lime green haze – lime green means materialisticness and greed, as well as indifference and envy.²⁵ Spiritually, it's also postulated that lime



¹⁹ Bourn Creative

²⁰ Crystal Vault

²¹ Bourn Creative

²² Color Meanings

²³ Color Matters

²⁴ Crystals and Jewelry

²⁵ Empowered by Color

green is a sign that it's okay to start a new venture or project .²⁶ In light of the fact that green is primarily used with protagonists, it is seen sparingly when associated with antagonists, once again in that lime green haze, or in eye colors and poisons.

A good representative case of this traditionally evil color palette is Maleficent (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959). Not only does she wear a black and purple cloak, she also is sometimes bathed in that signature, villainous lime-green glow, and in her dragon form she has green eyes and breathes green fire. Another prime example of this color palette in the context of villainy is Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989), who has black tentacles, purple skin, and blood red lips.



When she transforms Ariel from a mermaid into a human, they are both surrounded by a lime green fog of sorts. In addition to this, Ursula is sometimes followed around by two gray-green eels with glowing yellow eyes.

While yellow is not often found in antagonists' color palettes, glowing yellow eyes are another common indicator of evil.

Unlike with protagonists, there are few changes in the color palettes of villains, due to the fact that they rarely change over the course of the story. However, this doesn't mean it doesn't happen at all. In the case of Ursula, she has two color schemes, her main palette, and the palette of her alter ego, Vanessa. While the colors of Ursula



²⁶ Crystal Clear Intuition



invoke feelings of malice, irritability, and overall evil, Vanessa wears white and a purple closer to the color lavender, these colors being associated with hope, innocence, grace, and beauty. While the audience knows this to be a facade, the characters in *The Little Mermaid*

wholly believe that Vanessa exhibits these qualities, and she certainly seems to. However, this palette switch cannot be attributed to any sort of character development, as Vanessa returns to her old form by the end of the movie, marking the return and subsequent death of Ursula.

Another example of a change in color palette can be seen in that of Maleficent who, unlike Ursula does have a sort of character development, where she becomes more evil. Close to the end of *Sleeping Beauty*, there is a scene where Maleficent fights Aurora's Prince Charming, Prince Philip. In this scene, Maleficent eventually turns into a



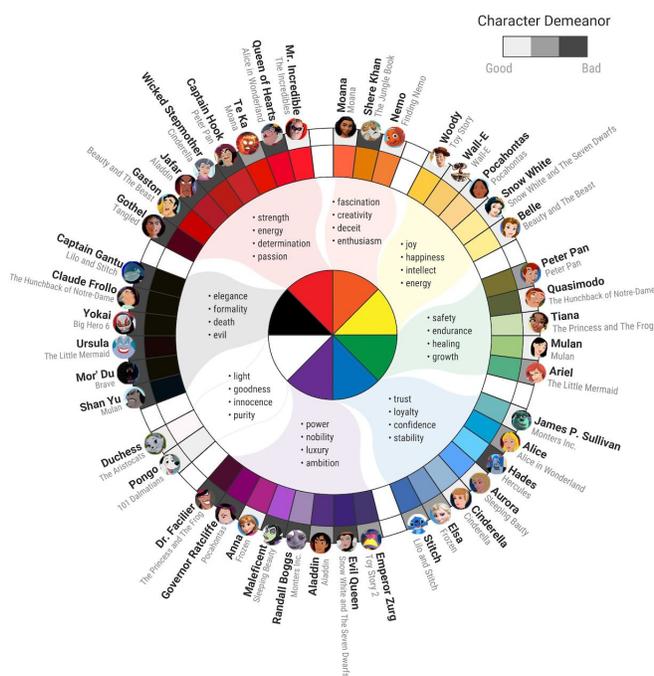
purple-throated dragon who breathes a noxious lime green flame. This serves to reinforce the meaning of her color palette when in her humanoid form, the meanings of those colors being greed, envy, arrogance, and the overwhelming feeling of pain and destruction.

Overall, it may be posited that the colors purple, red, and black, while not necessarily negative colors, are surefire ways to identify a Disney antagonist. Darker hues, desaturated colors, and overall darker values are often more indicative of evil. On top of this, some colors, used sparingly and in specific locations can also emphasize evil, and add variation to an antagonist's color palette.

3. Comparison of Protagonists and Antagonists

There is some overlap between antagonist and protagonist color palettes, however. To give an example, both Anna (*Frozen*, 2013) and Maleficent wear purple. However, Maleficent is the antagonist of the latter movie, and Anna is the protagonist of the former. Another exemplification of this occurrence is with the color blue, with Cinderella and Hades (*Hercules*, 1997). Both characters are associated with the color blue. Hades has blue skin and fiery blue hair. Cinderella's princess dress is blue, and her glass slippers are a pale blue as well. Cinderella is a protagonist, while Hades is an antagonist.

The primary difference between these characters, of course, is the line between good and evil. Anna and Cinderella are the main protagonists of the movies that they're featured in, while Maleficent and Hades are the main antagonists of their movies. The fact that they have similar color palettes can be attributed to the fact that all colors have both negative and positive traits connected with them. Purple can mean leadership, but on the other hand purple in large quantities is considered a depressive color.²⁷ Blue can mean tranquility and trust, and, despite the fact that this is true, too much of it is seen as cold and uncaring.²⁸



²⁷ Empowered by Color

²⁸ Bourn Creative

Some color meanings are determined by way of saturation and value. Violet, the color that Princess Anna wears, is connected with fantasy and fairy tales. The color is said to inspire unconditional selfless love. This is in stark contrast to the dark purple that is worn by Maleficent, which is associated with feelings of sadness and frustration, as well as feelings of arrogance and irritability.²⁹

In the case of blue, navy blue is associated with elegance and intelligence, while royal blue is associated with superiority, and light blue is associated with honesty and trustworthiness. Cinderella, a trustworthy and honest princess herself, wears light blue. A light blue like Cinderella's is also associated with peacefulness and tranquility. Hades' royal blue is the shade of blue most closely related to the blue color family's connection to depression.³⁰ In addition, the shade of blue that is Hades' skin, while not having a specific name and therefore no specific psychological associations, is so desaturated that it mimics the skin of a dead body.



The main color palette of a character is not the only indicator of character. In the cases of both Anna and Cinderella, they go through one palette change each, indicating their character growth into more caring, selfless protagonists. However, there are limited color changes in antagonists, with Hades not changing at all throughout the movie, and Maleficent changing only once, with the color palette of her dragon form being part of what cements her as a fully evil villain.

²⁹ Bourn Creative

³⁰ Color Psychology

These color choices are important in how these characters are perceived, not only because of the inherent emotional connections to the colors that they wear, but also their value and saturation. Anna and Cinderella wear much more saturated, higher value colors. Their clothes often contrast with darker backgrounds. However, Maleficent wears low value, darker colors. Hades' color palette is more desaturated. They blend in to darker backgrounds, and stick out in whiter, brighter places. This emphasis based on location has a lot to do with their role in the story. Lighter color palettes balance out the darker ones in the story.

Conclusion

Finally, it may be concluded that color choice in characters, while it often seems random, is indicative of the characters themselves. A color palette can show a character's strength, their optimism, or their greed. Certain colors can be used in certain ways, for instance, yellow eyes, red lips, and glowing green apples, in order to show that a character is shockingly evil. Some color families can have double meanings, both good and bad, the duality being affected by saturation and value.

Determining whether these colors mean something negative or positive depends on its hue, saturation and value. Highly saturated colors, and colors with a lighter value have more positive connotations. Low saturated colors and colors that have a darker value have more negative connotations. When a color with more positive connotations is mixed with a color that is viewed more negatively, this new hue has more connotations of its own. To give an example, while magenta, lavender, and violet are all considered "purple," the ratio of blue to red, and the value and saturation of the colors, mean that they each have separate, yet still overlapping, meanings and psychological effects.

Throughout every Disney movie, the protagonist learns and changes, and the changes in their clothing color often reflects that. This change isn't present in villains, however, as their nature prevents them from being able to change in any meaningful way.

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