



Winter 2019

Grief and Color in A. E. Coppard's "The Princess of Kingdom Gone"

Sydney Sterrett

Brigham Young University, sydneymsterrett@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sterrett, Sydney, "Grief and Color in A. E. Coppard's "The Princess of Kingdom Gone"" (2019). *Modernist Short Story Project*. 16.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modernist Short Story Project by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Sydney Sterrett

Dr. Jarica Watts

ENGL 376

23 April 2019

Grief and Color in A. E. Coppard's "The Princess of Kingdom Gone"

Only about a year after the horrors of World War I, England was doing its best to reestablish itself as a seat of cultural and artistic value. Many journals and magazines ran new poetry and stories that were meant to relive war time or move on from it, but nearly everything seemed to be colored by the sights that the surviving young men had seen in the trenches. In November of 1919, A. E. Coppard published a short story in the *Voices of Poetry and Prose* magazine—a magazine that was meant to help readers recover from the war through new, powerful literature—and though his story contains little of the common war imagery, through its use of color, "The Princess of Kingdom Gone" displays the universal grieving process and offers hope for the future of individual lives, as well as the life of the country as a whole.

In common Modernist fashion, "The Princess of Kingdom Gone" defies readerly expectation by setting up a fairytale and then failing to follow through with the conventions of one. The title itself seems to point to the common conception of a princess story that should begin with a princess who finds a prince or another upstanding young man, and despite some problems along the way, the two end up living happily ever after. The story even begins following the regular conventions—including the beginning words "long ago" that mirror the cliché "once upon a time" (Coppard 181). Coppard spends many pages leading up to the eventual entry of a male character and sets up a romance quickly and expectedly. However, the classic happily ever after never comes for these characters, instead, the princess' love (the poet) dies

before the story is even halfway over, leaving the audience to wonder what the rest of the story is even for. By changing up the predictable rules of a fairytale, it seems that Coppard has gone outside of the realm of what fiction should be. However, this very rejection of the norms of literature follow exactly the trends of modernism at the time. Just as Virginia Woolf argues, “‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction,” including, and especially, those elements that disorient the reader (164). In setting up the fairytale and then twisting the standard expectations of the audience, by leaving half the story without a male protagonist Coppard’s work is reminiscent of Woolf’s observation that in real life “the moment of importance [comes] not here but there” (160). If Coppard is using this reversal of conventions to redirect the audience’s attention, then there must be something more important in the story to explore.

In exploring the text using the digital analysis tools of Voyant, I found interesting trends in when A. E. Coppard decides to utilize colors in his story that point to a process of grief and renewal. By examining the trends of the use of every color word that appears more than once in

the story, I was shocked to find the complete absence of color words in the eight and ninth segment of the story when they had been used so frequently



throughout the rest of the story. Diving into the text, I found that the spike of color, followed by the loss of color words happens at the moment that the poet dies. The colors are seemingly lost in the princess' period of grief before the end of the story when the shrine built for the poet is stolen and the princess decides to clean up her bower and move on with her life. This trend of loss and renewal seemed to be the emphasis that Coppard draws the audience to as it comes in place of the expected happily ever after.

This use of color to exhibit emotion has precedent not only in literature, but in psychology. Many studies have shown that color effects appetite, motivation, health, and mood. According to Andrew Elliot and Markus Maier, "the mere perception of color evokes evaluative processes" (251). This is especially true in literature where critics are looking for specific connections and symbolism in the author's use of specific words and images. Elliot and Maier continue that "colors can carry specific meanings. Color is not just about aesthetics it also communicates specific information" (251). According to this study, based on associations and biological reactions, colors are connected intuitively to emotion and create an innate reaction in those around those colors. Similarly, choosing to remove color from a situation also communicates specific meaning. This psychological reaction to colors might be why it seems natural that when presented with the trend above, I saw almost instantly that the story seemed to illustrate the grieving process. I could almost picture the vibrant colors of a fairytale going grey and monochromatic as the happily ever after was robbed from the princess. This instinctive response to such vivid imagery seems to illustrate Elliot and Maier's point that "color typically exerts its influence on psychological functioning in an automatic fashion," and so, it seems does the absences of color (251).

While that vivid instance of losing color is so clever to illustrate the grieving process of the princess, the emotions and imagery used in this scene are even more important in their ability to convey the feeling of the time in their relatability to those who lost someone in the Great War. The twisted fairytale structure and the loss of color in the fictional story seem to mirror aspects of real life. The story opens full of color, optimism, and romance, paralleling the war and the romantic perception that it “would end all war” (Korte vii). However, the jarring sentence in the middle of Coppard’s story that reads, “so the poet died,” removes those optimistic delusions along with the hope of the story (185). Similarly, the war left many people dead and many more grieving in an apparent instant—“it traumatized a generation, and gave rise to a nationwide process of mourning” (Korte vii). Having fought in the war himself, Coppard would have been familiar with the sudden shock of loss and the breathtaking pain that came with the death of a loved one. While that grief would not have been new, perhaps expressing it in this way would have been. Perhaps the author’s close acquaintance with the very emotions he was portraying lent power to their intensity, and sentiments of the time made those feelings all the more relatable to those who had interacted in any way with the war.

However, it is not just the structure of the story that reflects the attitudes of the time, it is also the heavy choice of words and phrases that resonate so significantly with the people of post-WWI England. Instead of setting, after the poet’s funeral, the sun “mildly died out of the sky” (Coppard 185). This lethargic treatment of death shows again the disenchanting mindset of the time, having dealt with death so much that it was more of a painful shroud than a shocking, new revelation. Another sentence that conveys this feeling: “she could see only the emptiness from which all her hopes had gone” (Coppard 185). While this could just be another commentary on the pain of loss, it could also refer to the “pointless slaughter” that lost England nearly an entire

generation of young men (Korte viii). Instead of a hope for the future of the country, England could only look back at a generation that did not live long enough to have made a mark on the country. This tired, disappointed outlook could be why Coppard opted to remove color from this part of the story instead of use shades of blues or dark colors that would convey sadness. Instead of invoking a depressed mood, he decided to invoke no mood at all—showing the audience not just the sadness involved in war, but the numbness that comes from overwhelming loss that cannot be properly processed.

If left at that analysis, the story would seem remarkably depressing and perhaps should have been left moldering in the middle of an old, forgotten magazine and not returned to the light of the modern world and digitized for rediscovery. However, due to the aims and view of the magazine that the story was published in, there must have been a different goal for the effect of the story on its audience. Based on an introduction to an edition of the magazine that came out four months after the one in which A. E. Coppard published this story, it is clear that the magazine has more positive intentions than to remind the public of the pain that came from the War. Instead, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch writes in this introduction that *Voices* was “written . . . by some young men who knew about War and yet—strange to say—proclaimed Poetry to be of more value” (1). For some reason, Quiller-Couch was impressed by the magazine's positive tone that emphasized a period of moving on from the War to experience new and more beautiful things than could have been experienced before a period of such pain. According to Quiller-Couch, “these young men had suffered, and were awake and abundantly hopeful” (1). Thus, without denying the war, the authors in this magazine could acknowledge it and move forward. The most beautiful compliment that Sir Quiller-Couch gave this magazine was his belief that it represented “young voices singing renewal” (2). Based on these observations of the purpose of

the magazine, I looked deeper into the loss of color to find the renewal that Quiller-Couch had spoken of, hoping to find a positive conclusion to the picture of grief that pervades a large part of Coppard's story.

In reviewing the Voyant trends of colors, I had not paid as much attention to the return of the colors at the end of the story as I had to their complete loss at the poet's death, so, returning to the text, I hoped to find that renewal in that final section of the story. While the theft of the shrine that the princess had made for the poet seemed to be another nail on the coffin of despair in the story, it actually had the opposite effect on the princess. Coppard makes the observation that due to the princess' obsession with tending to the shrine, "her own once happy bower was left to neglect" (186). This could be Coppard's commentary on dwelling on the loss of war, and how the "happy bower" of England cannot flourish if its citizens are so preoccupied with the tragedies of the past. Indeed, the story continues that "'twas as if the heart of the Princess had left its pleasant bower and had indeed gone to live in its costly shrine" (186). Perhaps this indicates that if England's hearts dwell with the dead, she cannot expect to go on living and retain her position as an important seat of power and art. At no point does the story try to place blame on the Princess for her grief—it is justified—but that hoped for renewal does come in time. The turning point comes when amid the decaying bower, "she saw a strange new tree almost in bloom" (Coppard 187). Despite all the lack of care the bower had received, life continued on. This same pattern contains the hope for England's future—that despite the decay and depression that came out of the war, there is still hope for life to bloom and continue.

To compliment this renewal of hope in the word choice and phrasing of the story, the vibrancy of imagery returns with the reappearance of color. After seeing this symbol of hope in the blooming tree, the princess "flung her black robes of mourning from her," bringing the colors

back into the story by the rejection of the monochromatic depression that had hung over the story at the donning of that black robe during the funeral (Coppard 187). Though the reemergence of the colors is only a brief section of text at the end of the story, it does a sufficient job at “depicting the long processes of trauma and healing” in a compact setting providing only a glimmer of hope that would have been more realistic and understandable at the time (Korte xi). It is the reset of colors that, though robbing the story of its cliché happily ever after, still gives the reader a hope for an eventual happy ending of the story.

Ultimately, the reason Coppard’s story is of worth today is its ability to represent a realistic approach to the grieving process. Like much of Modernist fiction at the time, it is less focused on the conventions of plot or the usual representations of certain stories and instead focuses on how emotions and feelings bring meaning into a story. Though it is framed like a fairytale, Coppard subverts readerly expectation by replacing the happy ending of the story with a loss of color and an illustration of the grieving process. This provides a more realistic conduit for building a hopeful ending than the usual way because Coppard’s audience at the time would have had to deal with a massive amount of grief and despair from the war. Instead of a conventional plot line, the plot seems to derail in order to emphasize a slow reconstruction of normal life instead of a magical fairytale ending. Thus, Coppard’s story reflects the reality of living after a war that has claimed a generation and rebuilding a severely traumatized nation by playing with standards of a well known story-line. Coppard’s story should receive more recognition than it has for its positive outlook on the possibilities of the recovery of England and its survival past the War in a negative, difficult time. To quote Virginia Woolf, “If we want life itself, here surely we have it” (161)—a powerful depiction of the effects of grief and the will and hope to overcome it.

Works Cited

- Coppard, A. E. "The Princess of Kingdom Gone." *Voices in Poetry and Prose*, vol. 2, no. 5, Nov. 1919, pp. 181–187.
- Elliot, Andrew J, and Markus A Maier. "Color and Psychological Functioning." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 16, no. 5, Oct. 2007, pp. 250–254. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20183210. Accessed 23 Apr. 2019.
- Korte, Barbara. "Introduction." *The Penguin Book of First World War Stories*, Penguin Books, 2007, pp. vii-xviii.
- Quiller-Couch, Arthur. "A Year Ago..." *Voices in Poetry and Prose*, vol. 3, no. 1, Feb. 1920, pp. 1-2.
- Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction." *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume 4: 1925 to 1929*, edited by Andrew McNeille, The Hogarth Press, 1984, pp. 157–165.