

Sylvia R. Karasu M.D.
The Gravity of Weight

Entering The Gray Zone

Through a dimension not of sight and sound but of mind.

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KEY POINTS

- **The same color can have different and even opposite meanings, depending on its context.**
- **The color gray can be a metaphor, an indicator of mood, and reflective of political and moral ambiguity.**
- **The gray zone is an area of non-transparency and suggests illegality and rule-breaking.**

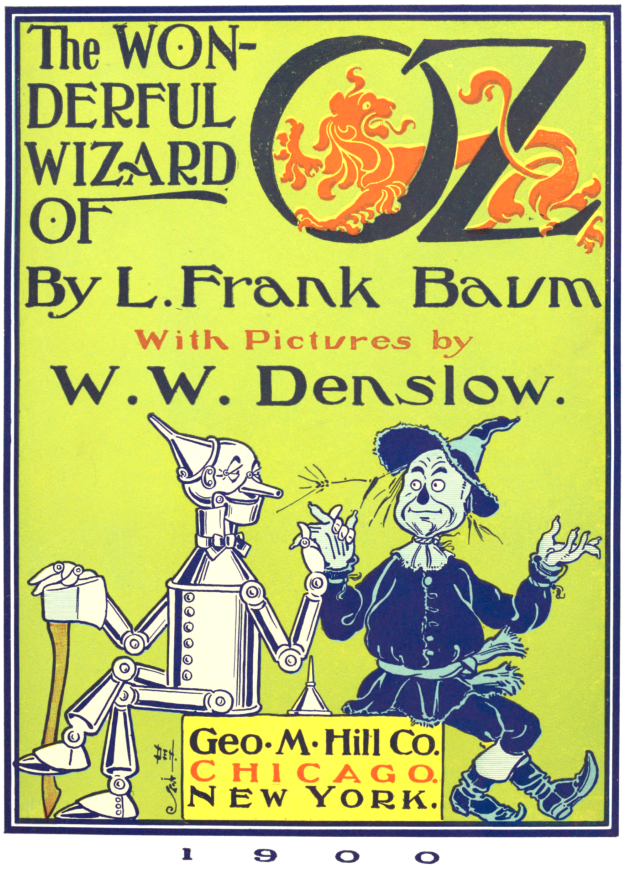


"Wilderness Battlefield," by American Artist G.O. Brown, 1866. Though this art reflects the devastation from the American Civil War, it evokes the apocalytic scene of McCarthy's novel.
Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC, Public Domain.

"When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night, he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world," begins Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic nightmarish novel, *The Road.* Father and son were "looking for anything of color." "The shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing stretched across the waste."

Though hardly apocalyptic, L. Frank Baum's original 1900 novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,* paints a vista similarly devoid of color in its first chapter. The house is dull and gray, as

is the prairie on every side, the burnt grass, and Aunt Em, whose eyes lost their sparkle “and left them a sober gray,” and Uncle Henry too. Only her dog Toto made Dorothy laugh and "saved her from growing as gray as her other surroundings.” Kansas was gray, gray, gray.



Title page for Baum's book, "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," 1900. For Dorothy, Kansas was "gray, gray, gray." Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

"Every colour produces a distinct impression on the mind, and thus addresses at once the eye and feelings. Hence it follows that colour may be employed for certain moral and aesthetic ends," writes Goethe, in his classic theory on color.

People "systematically and reliably" associate color with emotion, studied under the rubric of *synesthesia* (D'Andrade and Egan.) This connection is seen across cultures and historical time periods (Jonauskaite and Mohr.)

Some of these connections are universal and may have "strong roots in evolution," such as the blackness of night associated with fear, while other emotions, such as envy or jealousy, are more culture-based and more variable (Hupka et al.)

The understanding and communication about color may be affected by someone's language, as well as the physical environment (Lindsay and Brown). Defining color for a dictionary can be particularly challenging (Stamper.)

People use color to judge health, as, for example, the yellow of jaundice (Elliot and Maier.) Color, as a signal, can indicate when a fruit is ripe or when meat is cooked; the color of the sky can signal the time of day, the weather, and the seasons (Maule et al.)



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe by German painter Joseph Karl Stieler, 1828. Goethe wrote of the emotional connection we have to colors.
Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

Color can affect the perceived effectiveness of medication: red, yellow, and orange pills are typically associated with a stimulant effect, while blue and green pills are more associated with calm and sedation (deCraen et al.) It can affect how we perceive flavor and taste (Elliot and Maier) and even our relationship to flowers (Sachs et al.) Many people have preferences or personal favorite colors.

The effects of color, though, are context-specific: the same color can have different and even opposite meanings in different contexts (Elliot and Maier.) For example, red can signify danger or anger ("seeing red") or have a positive connection on a Valentine's card or a Coca-Cola bottle.

What about the color gray?

Gray, whether spelled with an "a," as in the American spelling or an "e," as by the English, is more than just a color—it can be a "metaphor, an indicator of mood, an aura of bureaucracy, and an indicator of political and moral ambiguity," writes philosophy professor Peter Sloterdijk. Ultimately, gray represents neutrality or indifference, or even corporate conformity, as



"Gray Tree," by Dutch artist Piet Mondrian, 1911. Many artists appreciate the importance of using gray in their paintings.
Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

evidenced in Sloan Wilson's 1950s, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit.*

Cautions Sylvia Plath in her 1958 journal entry, "Read only the great poets: let their voices live in my ear & not the dregs...of the young modern grey-flannel suit poets."



"The Artist's Father," by Paul Cezanne, 1866. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Cezanne declared, "You are not a painter if you haven't painted gray."
Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

In other contexts, gray can signify the maturity and wisdom of old age or even the elegance of fashion. Back in the 1960s, designer Geoffrey Beene created magnificent rhinestone-studded evening gowns with gray flannel, a fabric typically associated with formality in men's clothing, and he named his perfume "Grey Flannel," (spelled with an "e.")

Gray is nuanced. Black and white films are really shades of gray, "an endlessly flexible grayscale," as is the world for those who are colorblind (Sloterdijk.)

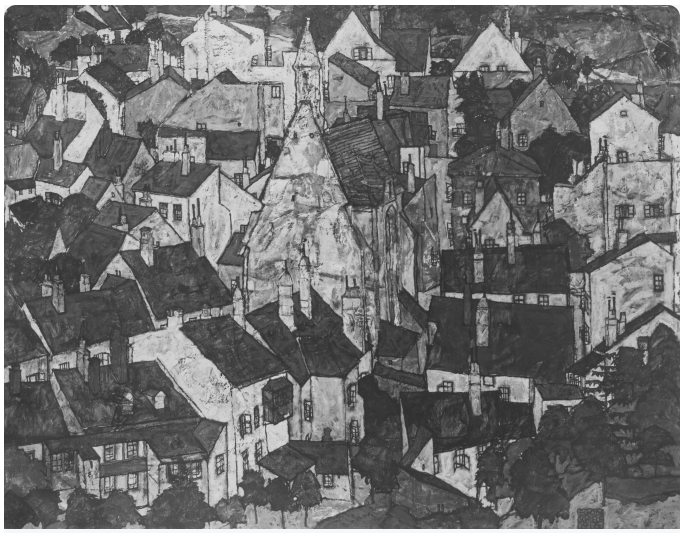
Sloterdijk provocatively declares, "You are not a philosopher if you have never thought gray," in his recent book of the same name. He quotes French painter Paul Cezanne, "You're not a painter if you haven't painted gray." (See also Doran's *Conversations with Cezanne*.)

The color gray, says Sloterdijk, can connote "the undecided, the indefinite, the drawn-out, the monotonous, the one-dimensional, the irrelevant, the amorphous, the inexpressive, the shrouded, the nebulous, the dubious, the ambiguous..." Gray is Kafkaesque, and the color of cement and hallways, not of balconies and beautiful

vistas. For Goethe, gray represents "half-shadow, which partakes more or less of light and darkness."

Sloterdijk "has delivered a startingly original theory of an uncolor," writes Ben Hutchinson, in his review of Sloterdijk's book. Hutchinson asks, "At what point do black and white become gray?" Gray is, par excellence, the "compromise color, with no existence of its own."

"What makes gray a neutral color? Is it physiological or something logical?" asks Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his essay on color. For Wittgenstein, there is no "luminous" gray. Ironically, Dorothy's famous ruby red slippers were originally silver and changed for the film version.



Modlin I (Gray City) by Austrian artist Egon Schiele, 1916. Source: Photo credit: Kallir Research Institute/Bridgeman Images. Used with permission.

What about the *gray zone*? It is an area of "non-transparency, even to the point of impenetrability---suggesting actions of illegality, rule-breaking...The gray zone forms a moral-geographical dimension on a scale that eludes measurement..." (Sloterdijk). Entering it has its own consequences.

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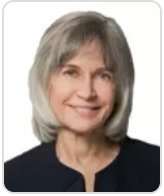
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About the Author



Sylvia R. Karasu, M.D., is a clinical professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College and the senior author of *The Gravity of Weight.*

Online: my own website