

# West Side Story

## Characterizing the “Bad Guy” Through Colour Subconscious

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### ABSTRACT

*West Side Story's* (1961) classic story of rival gangs and star-crossed lovers ties back to Romeo and Juliet not only in story but in colour associations. Just as the Montagues and Capulets were visually separated by colour, so too are the Jets and Sharks. However, once this same colour division is placed along racial lines, a more complicated association of “good” and “bad” emerges and reinforces racial prejudicial tendencies of Puerto Ricans. Epitomized through the beginning sequence of the film, the two gangs colour association are instantly tangible from their costumes and environments. Associating the Sharks with dark colours directs the viewers’ subconscious to identify the Puerto Rican gang as “the bad guy.” These same colour associations appear in Spielberg’s 2021 version of the classic film perpetuating their semiotic connotations.

*WEST SIDE STORY* (Robbins and Wise, 1961) sets up a classic dichotomy between two rival gangs, the Jets and Sharks, and star-crossed lovers who happen to be from either side. In both the original Broadway (1957) and Hollywood (1961) versions of *West Side Story*, costume designer Irene Sharaff chooses practical everyday wear costumes, allowing flexibility for dancing and movement. Additionally, in both renditions, Sharaff utilizes red and blue colour palettes seen in historical depictions of the

Montagues and Capulets, like that of Frederick Leighton’s *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet* (Fig. 1). This binary is harmless enough in its original form depicting two Italian families in *Romeo and Juliet*, yet presents a more complicated association when used to accentuate racial distinctions in *West Side Story*. Associative colours of each gang expand in the film version beyond that of a single-colour division and depict the Anglo Jets in blue, yellow, and khaki, while the Puerto Rican Sharks are shown in red, black, grey, and purple. These colours are in opposition to one another on the colour wheel, creating a semiotic connotation of “good” and “bad” in the film. Although the film focuses on society’s clash along racial lines, the narrative itself appears to avoid establishing which gang is “right” and instead points to the perpetuation of loss by letting hate into one’s heart. Yet, *West Side Story's* mise-en-scene works in contradiction to the core message of the film by reinforcing white “goodness” and the Puerto Rican Sharks as “bad,” advancing prejudicial tendencies.

From the beginning of the film, the visual division between the Jets and Sharks is accentuated not only through their clothing but their environments. The opening tit-for-tat sequence between the gangs visually depicts each group’s dominance; as the Sharks hold the upper hand, the background holds their colour palette and vice versa for the Jets. Beginning by visually building the Jets group, the Jets’ colours are expanded from a medium close up shot of Riff (Russ Tamblyn) in his yellow



**Fig. 1** | Frederick Leighton. *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet*. 1855. Agnes Scott College.

jacket to a medium shot that includes Ice (Tucker Smith) in a blue shirt. Eventually, the entire Jets gang is shown in a long shot with each member in triangle formation behind Riff in their respective colours (Fig. 2). The Jets show their control over the basketball court by picking on people playing, all of whom blend in to the background in greenish brown outfits. As the Jets make it out of the basketball courts and onto the streets, they meet Bernardo (George Chakiris) and mockingly force him to cross the street where we see him on a bright red background. The red accentuates his anger with the situation, but also reaffirms that he's now in Sharks territory as his gang assembles behind him in their respective colours. Eventually, the tables turn and the Sharks find themselves with two lone Jets. The store front behind them is red with a purple and black awning asserting their dominance as they mock the Jets, just as Bernardo was bullied previously. As the group walks behind a car on the street, more Jets are waiting at the other end of the car; the background colour shifts to yellow and white showing the Sharks are yet again outnumbered (Fig. 3). This set up not only shows the tug between the Jets and Sharks, but also furthers the visual connection between colours and each gang, and, in turn, furthers the viewers' semiotic connotation.

The Jets' association with lighter, brighter colours through their costuming and environment and the Sharks' association with darker colours directs the viewer's subconscious to identify the Jets as "the good guys" and the Sharks as "the bad guys." These costuming choices are extensions of deeply embedded cultural biases associating certain colours and tones with moral character. As psychologists Meier, Robinson and Clore assert, these biases can be traced back to the world's earliest influential prophets and philosophers: "...darkness is often associated with evil and death, whereas light is often associated with goodness and life...the prophet Zoroaster characterized the fight between good and evil as the fight between light and darkness, and Plato likened darkness to imprisonment and ignorance and light to freedom and knowledge" (82). Historical connections between colour and metaphorical meaning set up the binary between that of darkness and lightness to create feelings of good and bad. Just as *West Side Story's* opening sequence depicts the push and pull between Jets and Sharks, the fight between good and evil is established visually, too. Socially constructed and deeply embedded cultural semiotic relationships between these simple visual cues rest deep in our subconscious and marks the Sharks as bad, setting up a classic binary on racial lines. Colour associations with good and bad are used consistently throughout film history, and our subconscious connection lies in these established ideals. When surveying subjects, Tham et. al. find universal conceptual colour associations of black with "negative concepts" and white with "purity" (43). The Wicked Witch of the West in her black cloak is an iconic example of these associations and our ability to distinguish a "bad" character by colour. Appearing in the brightly coloured Munchkin Land wearing all black, the Wicked Witch of the West is in direct opposition to the colours of the location and the light pink of the "good" witch, Glinda.



**Fig. 2** | Introduction to the Jets at the beginning of Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins's *West Side Story*, 00:06:48. United Artists, 1961.



**Fig. 3** | The Sharks and Jets power struggle, 00:10:24. United Artists, 1961.



**Fig. 4** | Anita and Bernardo at the dance, with brown make-up stains visible at Anita's waist, 00:38:06. United Artists, 1961.

This common colour association is observed in many characters throughout film history: Ursula of *The Little Mermaid*, Darth Vader, the Joker, and even HAL. The end result is the same: dark colours of black, grey, purple, and red are visual cues that a character is bad. Putting the Sharks in dark colours strengthens our semiotic connotation of them as "bad guys" and instills an association of the "other" as bad.

Part of *West Side Story's* mise-en-scene reaches past the colour of costumes the Sharks wear to include their skin tones, which are significantly darkened to accentuate the difference between the Sharks and Jets visually. Rita Moreno (Anita) likened the brown face make-up the members of the Sharks gang had to wear every day to that of mud because of how thick and dark it was (Moreno 1). The make-up is so thick, during the Mambo scene it can at times be seen on Anita's dress from



Fig. 5 | First cast image shared by Steven Spielberg from the set of *West Side Story*. Amblin Entertainment, 2021.

where Bernardos' hands touched her waist (Fig. 4). Colour in mise-en-scene isolates the audience from the Sharks, enabling our disassociation from the gang. Our emotional separation from the Sharks is guided by the film spending significantly less time with them (other than Maria) than with the Jets. Between the lack of screen time, darkened and unrealistic skin tone, and association with dark colours, the audience's ability to empathize with the Sharks is limited. This lack of empathy supports a damning problem for the audience: “failures in understanding racial or cultural perspectives other than one's own can have negative effects, resulting in [...] an empathy bias...this lack of understanding often creates increased prejudices and negative stereotypes” (Tettegah 176). Empathy is prohibited for the Sharks in the original film version of *West Side Story* by the “bad guys” colour misidentification, which enables racist stereotypes of Puerto Ricans to be perpetuated throughout the film.

As we look towards Steven Spielberg's remake of the classic film, will questions of depicting and creating empathy for stories other than those revolving around whiteness be addressed? Early images and the newly released trailer point to the same divide on colour lines for the Jets and Sharks (Fig. 5). The 2021 remake has a more muted colour pallet than the 1961 version of *West Side Story*, but the lingering visual division is still present. The Jets are in dark blue jeans and dirty white shirts, while the Sharks have black jeans with red and purplish shirts. The two gangs continue to be pitted against one another through mise-en-scene. If anything is learned from the 1961 version, it is that, regardless of the message at the core of the film, the colours

seep into the audience's subconscious. Maria's final monologue deserves to be felt, heard and understood as a poignant (even in 2021) message that hate, and prejudice has no place in the hearts of all Americans. Yet as we watch and visually understand the film, that divide between races and cultures continues and takes a step further by visually tapping into an audiences' subconscious by asserting the Puerto Ricans as bad and white characters as good.

Audiences deserve more from filmmakers when it comes to equal representation on the screen, but it's not just about seeing a character: it's about the way that character is visually portrayed. Continuing to depict the Sharks in dark colours because “that's how it's always been done” is a sad response to the core thesis of the film itself and an even sadder response to the cultural reckoning the United States has been through over the last two years. ■

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