

Light in the World, Light of the World - Class Assignment

“When Jesus spoke to the people again, he said: ‘I am the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’” In this passage from St. John’s Gospel (8:12) Jesus tells His disciples and the people gathered about His mission on earth. In a very straightforward description, Christ calls Himself the Light of the World. Those listening are able to comprehend, if only at a basic level, what Jesus is claiming to be and provide. “The Light of the World” is Jesus proclaiming, in a new way, His role (or belief in His role) as the Son of God. “The light of life” is another way of declaring the eternal salvation He promised to His followers. Jesus makes it clear that those who do not follow Him will not be afforded the salvation of His followers by pointing out that they “walk in darkness”.

In modern times the idea of light and dark as synonyms for good and evil is widespread and common. At the most basic, secular level, “good guys” tend to be portrayed with white and light colors and “bad guys” are clothed in black. This coupling of good with light and evil with dark clearly existed at, and before, the time of Jesus. He gives the analogy its most significant interpretation, as explained above, and in so doing, sets the precedent for the entire future of Christianity. We associate light with “good guys”, Jesus, and eternal salvation in Heaven. Over the past 2000 years since Christ’s life, Heaven has been almost always depicted as a place of extreme, bright light as a sign of the presence of God. In fact, most descriptions and depictions of holy people throughout time include brightness and light, often in the form of a halo. The two examples that this paper will compare are Gualitieri di Giovanni da Pisa’s Madonna and Child painting, currently in the Sinite museum of art, and passages from Umberto Eco’s novel The Name of the Rose.

Gualitieri di Giovanni da Pisa’s Madonna and Child in the Sinite museum of Art was painted in Italy in the 14th century. To begin, the wood panel around the painting is covered with gold, or a gold-like substance. As the title suggests, the painting depicts Mary holding the infant Jesus. They both have orange-red hair, somewhat plump features, and narrow eyes. Most of the details of the images of the Madonna and Child can be attributed to the painter’s tastes and what must have been norms for the time. More importantly for this discussion, however, is the gold leaf surrounding the figures on the canvas. Surrounding images in gold leaf was a very common practice in churches throughout Europe at the time. Gold was used for three important reasons: the effects light has upon it, its value, and its durability. During the day, when sunlight filled the church, the light would have a jewel-like quality. The sun’s rays would reflect off of the gold leaf and break into many different colors that would spread throughout the church. This gave the images a magical aura as multi-colored light moved all around them, and even seemed to come from the images themselves. At night when the only light source in churches was candles, the gold would seem to flicker with the candles behind the images. The images would not reflect light though, they would be still against a backdrop of shimmering, gold light. Gold’s significant value and durability made it the easy choice for pieces of art such as this. It evoked the notions of power and royalty in the common people, who would probably only ever see gold in churches. At all times of the day, therefore, Jesus and Mary appeared heavenly, regal, and powerful.

Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose is something of a murder mystery set in an Italian monastery in the 14th century. Two visitors to the monastery, Brother William of Baskerville and his scribe Adso, set out to solve the murders and uncover the secrets of the abbey in advance of a delegation from the Pope meant to discuss other matters. It is with this context that Brother William and Adso are able to see much more of the abbey than a usual visitor. At two different occasions during their explorations of the grounds, Adso finds himself so in awe of features of the church that he has heavenly thoughts and visions. As with da Pisa's painting, light plays an extremely important role in these situations. The first is on page 41 when Adso is staring at the door of the church. Unlike the painting, light does not reflect off the carvings in the door to make them more magnificent, rather the vision that Adso has includes the imagery of the Light of the World. "The face was illuminated by the tremendous beauty of a halo...while around the throne and above the face of the Seated One I saw an emerald rainbow glittering." Adso's conception of Jesus in heaven, as an adult, is very similar to the effect that light has on da Pisa's painting of Christ as a child. Both include brilliant illumination of the Light of the World and bejeweled light around Him. The manifestation of heaven to Adso, a young Benedictine novice, is Jesus surrounded by light and countless figures around Him in perpetual adoration.

The second example of light's profound role in the church in The Name of the Rose comes on page 142 when the abbot is sharing the wealth of the abbey with Brother William and Adso. Most churches were arranged to allow as much light as possible to enter them during the day, so as to have the most profound effects on what was inside. Paintings like da Pisa's, the Altar, and adornments of the church were made all the more glorious with light, symbolizing the One True Light. As Adso explains, "...light came in bursts through the choir windows...creating white cascades that, like mystic streams of divine substance, intersected at various points of the church, engulfing the altar itself...eventually the whole altar seemed of gold, from whatever direction I looked at it." Adso receives the full effect intended by those who built churches and the abbots and priests who filled them with precious objects and religious art. Paintings like da Pisa's, bejeweled chalices and other articles, and the altar were all beautified by the presence of light. Adso is supposed to be an intelligent, well-read old man when he is writing the book, but most non-residents of that abbey would be poor commoners from the villages surrounding it. They would not even be able to describe the effects of the light on the riches and were likely to be even more inspired.

Jesus told us to call Him the Light of the World and to follow in His path. Throughout the history of Christendom, those who attempted to follow in that path understood the importance of this Light. They chose to portray that light literally through their art and in their churches in order to glorify God and pass his message on to others. Eco's The Name of the Rose includes strong literary examples of how an individual might have reacted to these phenomena. Da Pisa's Madonna and Child gives the Notre Dame community an actual example of the art common in this time that would aim for these effects. These two pieces together reflect the importance and significance of light as an image for good in the Christian tradition.

Works Cited

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