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Colour in Robert W. Chambers' *The King in Yellow*

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Seznam doporučené literatury:

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ANNOTATION

The thesis deals with a collection of short stories *The King in Yellow* (1895) by the American writer Robert W. Chambers (1865-1933). It primarily focuses on the role of yellow as a meaning-making and symbolic component of the narrative. The theoretical part concerns the aesthetic perception of yellow and its popularity during the *fin de siècle* period, i.e. in the context of Symbolism, Aestheticism, decadence, degeneration and the feeling of decline or perversion. The practical part concentrates fully on the selected work *The King in Yellow*. It examines the motif of yellow, present in the character of The King in Yellow and Yellow Signs, against the background of the theoretical part and verifies the degree of participation of other authors in the turn-of-the-century trend to thematize this colour in their literary works.

KEYWORDS

yellow, Chambers, The King in Yellow, colour, symbol, decadence, *fin de siècle*

ANOTACE

Tato práce se zaměřuje na sbírku povídek *The King in Yellow* (1895) amerického spisovatele Roberta W. Chamberse (1865-1933). Primárně se soustředí na roli žluté barvy jako významotvorné a symbolické složky vyprávění. Teoretická část pojednává o estetickém vnímání žluté barvy a o její popularitě v období *fin de siècle*, tedy v kontextu symbolismu, aestheticismu, dekadence, degenerace a pocitu úpadku či zvrácenosti. Praktická část se plně soustředí na vybrané dílo *The King in Yellow*. Prozkoumává motiv žluté, přítomný v postavě Krále ve žlutém a Žlutém znamení, na pozadí teoretické části a ověřuje míru participace ostatních autorů na dobovém trendu tuto barvu ve svých literárních dílech tematizovat.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

žlutá, Chambers, Král ve žlutém, barva, symbol, dekadence, *fin de siècle*

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INTRODUCTION

The fact that a painter uses colour as a means to express his feelings is perceived quite naturally. The image of a composer who expresses his inner impressions with the help of various musical instruments of different sound colour requires more imagination. But what if a writer lets his words speak colourfully? When a litterateur uses colour aesthetics as a tool of self-expression? A colour palette as an intermediary of imaginings and abstraction or a vehicle of expression and meaning? With this conjunction of perceptions and moods a man of letters enhances the aptness of his message in the same manner as a painter or a composer.

On canvas, in tones and certainly also in language, the colour can be associated with various things, be a symbol and even carry a hidden meaning. The ability of literature to use colour as a device of articulation is demonstrated by the manifold motley art collections of the entire Victorian period. Many diverse colour examples can be found in the nineteenth century book titles itself. The dark red bloody shine in *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) by Edgar Allan Poe and the scarlet adulterer letter A in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Further the eccentric distinguishing white in *The Woman in White* (1859) by Wilkie Collins or the false pretended grey in *The Grey Woman* (1861) by Elizabeth Gaskell. Of course, examples of the yellow colour used in the title of the books can also be found. For example, the pathological faded yellow in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman or mysterious face masking yellow in *The Adventure of the Yellow Face* (1893) by Arthur Conan Doyle.

Nevertheless, compared to the solitary occurrences of colour symbolism during the Victorian era, the upswing of yellow inspiration during *fin de siècle* is truly a gush. It is no coincidence that art and magazines of the late nineteenth century abounds and brims with yellow. *Fin de Siècle* is sometimes called the Yellow Nineties or the Yellow Decade for its aesthetic ideas and decadent spirit. The iconicity of the yellow colour is symbolised by *The Yellow book*. This British quarterly literary periodical served as a herald of revolting decadent authors of the 1890s. A cheap novels termed a yellowback or 'mustard plaster' bound in boards. Oscar Wilde wrote or even 'painted' *Symphony in Yellow* (1889) under influence of the Aesthetic Movement. Yellow journalism or yellow press is typical of the pursuit of sensation and gets its name from the American comic strip *The Yellow Kid*. A racist colour-metaphor Yellow Peril or Yellow Terror was employed in British popular culture namely in M. P. Shiel's *The Yellow Danger*, Sax Rohme's *Yellow Shadows* or Kenneth Mackay's *The Yellow Wave*.

The thesis concerns with the short story collection *The King in Yellow*¹ (1895) by American writer Robert W. Chambers (1865-1933). It primarily deals with the role of yellow as a meaningful and symbolic component of narration. The aim of the work is to map not only Chambers' use of this motif, but also the extent of his participation in the contemporary trend of other authors to thematize this colour in their literary works. The theoretical part pursues the aesthetic perception of yellow colour and its popularity in the period of Fin de Siècle, i.e. in the context of Symbolism, Aestheticism, decadence, degeneration and sense of decay or perversion characteristic of many late Victorian authors and their work. The practical part of the thesis is fully focused on the selected work *The King in Yellow*. The yellow motif, which is present in the character of The King in Yellow and Yellow Sign, is analysed against the background of the theoretical part of the work.

The work is structured into four chapters. The first theoretical chapter presents the perception of yellow and its semantic component in the late nineteenth century. Many meanings of yellow are delineated in the context of selected characteristic phenomena of *fin de siècle*. Such as the British quarterly periodical *The Yellow Book*, yellow peril, yellow journalism, and so forth. The publication *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change in the Victorian Novel* (2018) by Jessica Durgan serves as a principal literary source for establishing a methodological framework for the interpretation of colour during *fin de siècle*. The aesthetic and symbolic perception of yellow in fine arts and in historical contexts is summarized as well. Constance Classen's *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (1998) proved to be a source of invaluable information on this theme. Subsequently, the three Chambers' metaphors of yellow are analysed on the background of cultural, social, and scientific aspects reflected in the decadent literary and artistic work characteristic of *fin de siècle* period. The yellow metaphors of the poisonous play, the supernatural king and inscrutable sign form the essence of *The King in Yellow* and are treated in the three chapters of the practical part.

¹ To avoid ambiguity, references to Chambers' collection of stories *The King in Yellow* are italicized. References to the namesake fictional play appearing in the plot are in single inverted commas: 'The King in Yellow'. References to the character called The King in Yellow are unmarked.

1. YELLOW IN DECADENT ART OF THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

The period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries labelled *fin de siècle* brought considerable dynamism in terms of the symbolism of colours, including yellow. Especially the last decade of the nineteenth century, known as the ‘yellow nineties’ was filled with the precipitous development of science and subsequent dramatic changes in the nascent modern society. The speed of Western world social and cultural transformation declares the 1913 citation of French essayist Charles Péguy: “The Western world has changed less since Jesus Christ than it has in the last thirty years.”² Artistic trends such as Symbolism, Aestheticism or Decadence catalysed a new understanding of colours and a different view of their interpretation.

Jessica Durgan understands colour as “a vibrant cultural construction with a wide web of possible meanings, it is often employed discursively to both challenge and reinforce the idea of difference.”³ The difference can be seen in any deviation from generally accepted values and can be represented by moral decline or apostasy. Decadence is commonly associated with “behaviour or attitudes, that show a fall in standards, especially moral ones [...]”⁴ Efforts to connect colour and such a behaviour pattern can be traced back to Hildegard of Bingen. To illustrate her ‘theology of the senses’ she “employs the medieval association of poisons with colours”⁵ Audrey L. Meaney enumerates ‘Lay of the Nine Herbs’ of Anglo-Saxon medical text effective against red, foul, white, purple, yellow, green, dark, blue, brown and crimson poisons⁶ Hildegard refers to five poisonous areas of human passion tested by the devil through the senses. “All five of these areas were full of deadly poison. The greenness shows the sadness of the world, the whiteness shows tasteless irreverence, the redness false glory, the yellowing stinging withdrawal, and the blackness lukewarm imitation.”⁷ According to Hildegard's approach, colours and poisons would then be sorted as follows “the green poison would be associated with sight, the white with hearing, the red with smell, the yellow

² Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (London: J. Cape, 1969), 1.

³ Jessica Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change in the Victorian Novel* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 1.

⁴ “Decadence,” Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/decadence?q=decadence>.

⁵ Constance Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2005), 18.

⁶ Audrey L. Meaney, “The Anglo-Saxon View of the Causes of Illness,” in *Health, Disease and Healing in Medieval Culture*, ed. S. Campbell, B. Hall, and D. Klausner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 16.

⁷ Hildegard and Bruce Hozeski, *Scivias* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear, 1986), 165-166.

with taste and the black with touch.”⁸ This is a remarkable proof of how complex and refined the symbolism of colours appeared already in the Middle Ages.

Durgan further points out that Victorian authors “make use of the multiplicity inherent in color [...] to treat cultural issues indirectly.”⁹ For example, the colour of yellow obliquely evinced various meanings associated with decadence during *fin de siècle*. And the essence of symbolism was basically “[...] to evoke ideas and emotions indirectly through the employment of symbols.”¹⁰ The colour shares character of significant multiplicity with the concept of *fin de siècle* and the content of decadence. Walter Laqueur points to *fin de siècle* multivalent overlap. “*Fin de siècle* has meant and still means a great variety of things.”¹¹ And he adds an extensive list of meanings. “In France it signified to be fashionable, modern, up to date, recherché, sophisticated. It has also been a synonym for morbidity, decline, decadence, cultural pessimism. On occasion it has stood for symbolism, aestheticism, l’art pour l’art, narcissism.”¹² Similarly Charles Bernheimer finds essential to accept that the decadence does not represent something concrete, that is seen as some sort of initiator or factor, but it was formed by works of various authors and artists.¹³ Bernheimer “signals the necessity to return to those authors and artists [Nietzsche, Zola, Hardy, Flaubert, Wilde, Moreau, Beardsley, Lombroso, and Freud] whose work constitutes the topos of the decadent, to understand how one can articulate the varieties of the provocation of ‘the decadent’ without reducing its cause to any specific agent.”¹⁴ All these designations, colour, *fin de siècle* and decadence, are described as polysemous. In Arthur Rimbaud's *Sonnet of Vowels*, one colour is assigned to each of the five vowels “ostensibly on a quasi-psychedelic or synesthetic experience.”¹⁵ The poem starts “A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels”¹⁶ and then associates vowels with specific images e.g. “A, black fur-clad brilliant flies”¹⁷ or “E, blank spread of mists and tents.”¹⁸ The vague meaning of the poem encourages speculation and repeated attempts by readers to reveal that “these colors somehow correspond, semantically speaking, to the

⁸ Classen, *The Colour of Angels*, 165.

⁹ Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change*, 2.

¹⁰ Classen, *The Colour of Angels*, 111.

¹¹ Walter Laqueur, “Fin-de-siecle: Once More with Feeling,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 1 (1996): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261094>.

¹² Laqueur, “Fin-de-siecle: Once More with Feeling,” 1.

¹³ Charles Bernheimer, T. Jefferson Kline, and Naomi Schor, *Decadent Subjects the Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin De siècle in Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 3.

¹⁴ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 6.

¹⁵ Victor Ginsburgh and Stamos Metzidakis, “On Rimbaud’s ‘Vowels,’ Again: Vowels or Colors?,” *Athens Journal of Philology* 6, no. 4 (2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajp.6-4-1>.

¹⁶ Arthur Rimbaud and Martin Sorrell, *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 135.

¹⁷ Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, 135.

¹⁸ Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, 135.

selected vowels.”¹⁹ On the example of Rimbaud's poem, it is possible to observe high combinative potential of colour imagery and its enormously variable symbolism.

Constance Classen draws attention to the theory of ‘universal correspondence’ of eighteenth-century philosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg which was popular among symbolists including Charles Baudelaire. Swedenborg refers to the correspondence of the spiritual and natural worlds. “But the spiritual, in which heaven is, is above nature, and altogether distinct from the natural; neither do they communicate with each other except by correspondences.”²⁰ Baudelaire elaborates on this idea in *L'art romantique*: “Everything, form, movement, number, color, smell, in the spiritual as well as in the material world, is significant, reciprocal, converse, correspondent.”²¹ “Balzac promulgated the doctrines of Swedenborg in his novel *Seraphita*²² “I know where the singing flower grows, where the talking light shines, where living colors blaze that scent the air.”²³

David Batchelor heeds the theory of universal correspondence and states in *Chromophobia* that “colour is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological.”²⁴ It can be seen that these correspondences are entirely about the qualities that society seeks to marginalize. In this spirit Durgan delineates the concept of colour as “particularly ripe for tropological use because it already carries multiple meanings of otherness in Western culture.”²⁵ The trope of colour attributed to semantic otherness can be traced to ostracized and taboo topics of decadents. “Charles Baudelaire was the definitive exponent of ‘decadent style,’ and followers of the fin de siècle movement inspired by his example were fascinated by all things abnormal, artificial, morbid, perverse, and exotic.”²⁶ Baudelaire took over this intention to bring aberrant themes to literature directly from Edgar Allan Poe. “His [Poe’s] elevation of disease, perversity, and decay to the level of artistically expressible themes was likewise infinitely far-reaching in effect.”²⁷ It is obvious that the meanings of otherness are very often associated with inspiration in the extremity during *fin de siècle*. Holbrook Jackson selects these main themes from the eccentric content of decadence.

¹⁹ Ginsburgh, “On Rimbaud’s ‘Vowels’,” 1.

²⁰ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Concerning Heaven and Its Wonders, and Concerning Hell: from Things Seen and Heard* (Boston: Otis Clapp, 1849), 61.

²¹ Paul De Man, “The Double Aspect of Symbolism,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 74 (1988): 7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930287>.

²² Classen, *The Colour of Angels*, 116.

²³ Honoré de Balzac, *Seraphita* (Philadelphia: Avil Pub. Co., 1901), 85.

²⁴ David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London, England: Reaktion, 2013), 22-23.

²⁵ Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change*, 2.

²⁶ Brian M. Stableford, *The A to Z of Fantasy Literature* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2009), 100.

²⁷ Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *The Fiction: Complete and Unabridged* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008), 1066.

“The chief characteristics of the decadence were (1) Perversity, (2) Artificiality, (3) Egoism and (4) Curiosity.”²⁸ The thematic scope of decadence corresponds to the condensed notion of otherness.

Victorian “[...] writers took to the imagination and used their knowledge of the visual arts and color to envision difference through inquiries into purpleness, blueness, redness, and yellowness.”²⁹ In this respect, painting everything decadent to yellow sent out a clear signal during the end of the nineteenth century. Holbrook Jackson in *The Eighteen Nineties* describes that “yellow became the colour of the hour, the symbol of the time-spirit. It was associated with all that was bizarre and queer in art and life, with all that was outrageously modern.”³⁰ Artistic inclination to support “the tradition of Goethe's moral and symbolic values for colours, developed elaborate schemes of symbolic correspondences during the nineteenth century and early modern period.”³¹ Art theorist Wassily Kandinsky considers the feelings associated with colours in relation to senses other than sight. For example, regarding touch, he mentions that “[m]any colours have been described as rough or sticky, others as smooth and uniform, so that one feels inclined to stroke them.”³² Kandinsky focuses on the senses of smell and hearing as well. “The expression ‘scented colours’ is frequently met with. And finally the sound of colours is so definite that it would be hard to find anyone who would try to express bright yellow in the bass notes, or dark lake in the treble.”³³ The emphasis on sensory interconnectedness in the symbolism of colours is very common and can be found already before Rimbaud and Kandinsky. The turn of the century gave rise to a profusion of symbolic correspondences of yellow which fruitfully gathered Richard Le Gallienne in an essay *The Boom in Yellow*.

Michel Pastoureau claims that colour is “first and foremost a social phenomenon.”³⁴ But surprisingly, the yellow colour appears in a rather negative connotations at the end of the nineteenth century. “[T]he hue's [yellow] negative meanings drift from one group to another in nineteenth-century fiction. [...] and] the discourses of color, racial politics, physical infection, and moral corruption become entangled together in polysemic signifiers of intense

²⁸ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties; a Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1922), 64.

²⁹ Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change*, 12.

³⁰ Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, 46.

³¹ John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1999), 191.

³² Wassily Kandinsky and Michael Sadleir, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (The Floating Press, 2008), 60.

³³ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 61.

³⁴ Michel Pastoureau and Mark Cruse, *Blue: the History of a Color* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 7.

power.”³⁵ In Charlotte Perkins Gilman case, *The Yellow Wallpaper* “[...] evokes the themes of journalism and racism, which were about to be named in yellow (‘yellow journalism’ and the ‘yellow peril’).”³⁶ The negative meaning of yellow fear is also associated with garments. “Through yellow clothing and an overall saturation of these caricatures in yellow, the catchword of the “yellow peril” is thereby established visually in its racist and apocalyptic dimension.”³⁷ This connection between religious otherness and the colour of skin or clothing can be found in Wilkie Collins’ gothic short story *The Yellow Mask* (1855) where “an explicit connection between Brigida's corrupt Catholicism, the demonic yellow of her domino, and the ‘dull yellow’ tone of her Mediterranean skin is made.”³⁸ Inspiration from japonism can be found in Camille Saint-Saëns’ comic opera *The Yellow princess* (1872). “Colorist that he [Saint-Saëns] was the composer's score for *La princesse jaune*, especially, is notable for its melodic and harmonic ‘exoticism.’”³⁹ The opera features student Kornélis fascinated by Japan and obsessed with a portrait of a girl named Ming.

Jessica Durgan notes the effect of the growing popularity of colour in art on literature. “The rising status of color in the visual arts throughout the nineteenth century is also visible in the literary art forms of the period.”⁴⁰ At the same time, she discovers an interesting connection between painting and literature or more precisely painters and writers. “It is no coincidence that many of the authors that turned to these color tropes in their fiction were also amateur artists, such as Charlotte Bronte, Wilkie Collins, and Thomas Hardy”⁴¹

Considering the close connection between painting and literature in the *fin de siècle* period, one cannot fail to notice Joris Karl Huysmans' artistic literary rebirth within his purely painterly family. It is as if Huysman's transition from one muse to another, with a mixture of the advantages of both, determined a typical decadent feature, bringing the beauty of painting and its means of expression to literature. Unlike his ancestors, Joris Karl has used “the pen instead of the brush, yet retaining precisely those characters of ‘veracity of imitation, jewel-like richness of colour, perfection of finish, emphasis of character.’”⁴² Finding this transition in this author, the leading representative of decadence, can be considered absolutely

³⁵ Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change*, 100.

³⁶ Sabine Doran, *The Culture of Yellow, or, The Visual Politics of Late Modernity* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 74.

³⁷ Doran, *The Culture of Yellow*, 126.

³⁸ Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change*, 101-102.

³⁹ C.-P. Gerald Parker, “La Princesse Jaune. Camille Saint-Saëns,” *The Opera Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1986): 165, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/4.1.165>.

⁴⁰ Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change*, 9.

⁴¹ Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change*, 9.

⁴² Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain* (N.Y.: Lieber and Lewis, 1922), VI.

symbolic. Henry James notes on this topic: “The analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete.”⁴³

Chambers follows in Huysmans' footsteps regarding the synergy of image and writing. He experienced the European atmosphere of a bohemian creed ‘art for art's sake’ “as an art student in Paris from 1886 to 1893.”⁴⁴ Most of the collection's short stories feature painters, and much of them take place in Paris. Undoubtedly also his visit of Paris during the heyday of painting art inspired Chambers to set *The King in Yellow* in a very visual colour mode. And what is more, Robert Chambers is author of the original artwork for *The King in Yellow's* book cover of first edition published by F. Tennyson Neely.⁴⁵

The Victorian period provides “ample room for Victorian authors to push the limits of aesthetic and textual boundaries in their representations of fantastically colored characters.”⁴⁶ It is noticeable that decadence shifts aesthetic boundaries towards uncongenial and unpalatable. Unpleasant becomes prominent in it. “[...] decadence was both a revolt against one kind of Romanticism and a continuation of another Romanticism's perversely deliberate choice of what is unpleasant.”⁴⁷ What Mario Praz terms “Beauty of the Medusa, beloved by the Romantics Beauty tainted with pain, corruption, and death—we shall find it again at the end of the century, [...]”⁴⁸ To exhaustively describe all its uninviting inspirations, decadence compiles its own odd thesaurus from all available sources. Théophile Gautier describes accurately the style of the decadence as “gathering all the delicacies of speech, borrowing from technical vocabularies, taking colour from every palette, tones from all musical instruments, forcing itself to the expression of the most elusive thoughts.”⁴⁹ Decadence draws uncanny motifs and weird content from ancient legends. “Decadence’s subject matter tended to recall ancient myths and supernatural tales.”⁵⁰ In contrast to the classical style decadence countenances “[...] backgrounds where the spectres of superstition, the haggard phantoms of dreams, the terrors of night, remorse which leaps out and falls back noiselessly, obscure

⁴³ Henry James, *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1948), 5.

⁴⁴ Paul StJohn Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart: Robert W. Chambers and ‘The King in Yellow’,” review of *The King in Yellow: Annotated Edition*, by Robert W. Chambers, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 3, 2020.

⁴⁵ “Procedures,” Poster Mountain: Posters, accessed January 12, 2021, <http://www.postermountain.com/form/posters/formatted/4911>.

⁴⁶ Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change*, 13.

⁴⁷ Philip Stephan, *Paul Verlaine and the Decadence, 1882-1890* (Manchester, Eng: Manchester University Press, 1975), 18.

⁴⁸ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (Oxford England: Oxford University Press, 1951), 45.

⁴⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Charles Baudelaire* (Dogma, 2012), 20.

⁵⁰ Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113.

fantasies that astonish the day, and all that the soul in its deepest depths and innermost caverns conceals of darkness, deformity, and horror, move together confusedly.”⁵¹

Fredric Jameson describes decadence as a kind of presentiment.

‘Decadence’ is thus in some way the very premonition of the postmodern itself, but under conditions that make it impossible to predict that aftermath with any sociological or cultural accuracy, thereby diverting the vague sense of a future into more fantastic forms, all borrowed from the misfits and eccentrics, the perverts and the Others, or aliens, of the present (modern) system.⁵²

Stephen Arata embodies this unfortunate and impending metaphorical expectation of Jameson in the form of irredeemable decay. “Late-Victorian fiction in particular is saturated with the sense that the entire nation - as a race of people, as a political and imperial force, as a social and cultural power – was in irretrievable decline.”⁵³ Durgan adds that “These anxieties are exemplified in the development of narratives of ‘reverse colonization’[... which ...] present England as the victim of foreign colonization [...] by supernatural and alien forces (Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in 1897 and H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* in 1898).”⁵⁴ Arata says that these concerns stem from the belief that “[...] ‘civilized’ world is on the point of being colonized by “primitive” forces [...] and] such fears are linked to a perceived decline - racial, moral, spiritual”⁵⁵ The end of the 19th century was perceived contradictory, both as an age of decadence and degeneration, but also as an age of hope for a new beginning. “Fin de siècle crystallizes certain anxieties that are typical of this era: the period is characterized by a particular striving for modernity, while at the same time it is also perceived as an end.”⁵⁶ The polysemous character and belief in the beginning riven by the expectation of the end comprise the typical turn-of-the-century features. “The *fin de siècle* mind-set is marked by an ensemble of shared features, in particular an ambivalent fear for the end.”⁵⁷ One of the hallmarks of the turn of the century is the ubiquitous fear of impending decline and inevitable and unknown change.

The world at the end of the nineteenth century was undergoing inevitable sequence of social transformations driven by the impact of accelerating progress, resulting in poisoned atmosphere of anxieties and threats. This dismal ambience of *fin de siècle* society is reflected

⁵¹ Gautier, *Charles Baudelaire*, 20-21.

⁵² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 382.

⁵³ Stephen D. Arata, “The Occidental Tourist: ‘Dracula’ and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization,” *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1990): 622, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3827794>.

⁵⁴ Durgan, *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change*, 99.

⁵⁵ Arata, “The Occidental Tourist,” 623.

⁵⁶ David Martens, “Fin de siècle,” *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, October 1, 2016, <https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/fin-de-siecle>.

⁵⁷ Martens, “Fin de siècle.”

in the then art and literature. “The fears that haunted late 19th-century society [such as] fears of immigration [...] and moral degeneration”⁵⁸ together with “attitudes to sexuality, class and scientific discovery”⁵⁹ are mirrored by the work of Robert Louis Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Machen, Bram Stoker, Henry James or H. G. Wells. Assuredly, collected short stories *The King in Yellow* (1895) by Robert W. Chambers (May 26, 1865–December 16, 1933) could be ranked among such turn-of-the-century writings. Chambers, like the others, “may have felt he had done his duty in issuing the Awful Warning.”⁶⁰ In agreement with “a series of seminal horror works published within the same period,”⁶¹ *The King in Yellow* develops themes and motifs “that dealt with hidden menaces to Western society.”⁶² The embodiment of these terrors contained in Chambers’ *The King in Yellow* is represented by three forms of imminence. A play in book form entitled ‘The King in Yellow’, a mysterious and malevolent supernatural entity known as The King in Yellow and finally an eerie symbol called the Yellow Sign. Obviously, it is the yellow colour that is an essential attribute of those three sinister metaphors. It is not used by chance, but intentionally as a symbol of specific qualities and features typical of the *fin de siècle*.

Yellow king, yellow book, and Yellow Sign. It would seem like an excessive overuse of yellow if it had no justification. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask why so much emphasis is placed on colour and why yellow is preferred. The experimental book Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *À rebours* (1884), “the ‘breviary of decadence,’ in Arthur Symons’s phrase”⁶³, brings a completely new fundamental approach to the literature. It tries to accentuate sensory perception in the written text and reserve more space for the visual and thus also for colours. This idea is further elaborated by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The novel mentions a yellow book, which is a kind of guide on how to delight the senses. Wilde’s rendition of the book portrays it as poisonous, and Dorian himself describes it as the origin of his perversion. Although only the cover of the book is yellow, in connection with its poisonous immoral content, the colour becomes a symbol bearing the meaning of decay. Thus, in this interpretation of *fin de siècle*, yellow equals decadent. This is evidenced, for example, by British quarterly literary periodical *The Yellow Book* (1894 - 1897) which is well

⁵⁸ Greg Buzwell, “Dracula: vampires, perversity and Victorian anxieties,” *The British Library*, May 15, 2014. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/dracula>.

⁵⁹ “Fin De Siecle,” *The British Library*, February 12, 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/themes/fin-de-siecle>.

⁶⁰ Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart.”

⁶¹ Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart.”

⁶² Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart.”

⁶³ David A. Ross, *Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats: a Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Facts On File, 2009), 439.

known in the context of decadence. “FIN-DE-SIÈCLE decadence's aesthetic yellow fevers we associate with the 1894 publication, and circulation, of the *Yellow Book*, with the dissemination of French texts (known as ‘yellow backs’) across the Channel.”⁶⁴ “*The Yellow Book* was a fashionable magazine which ran from 1894–97, taking its name from the notorious covering into which controversial French novels were placed at the time.”⁶⁵ The designation Yellow Decade or Yellow Nineties used for the last ten years of the nineteenth century also clearly demonstrates the popularity of yellow at the time. Besides frequent usage of yellow directly in the sense of decline, this colour also appears in many other contexts. Mostly in the negative pejorative meaning such as yellow peril and yellow journalism or in the meaning of dubious quality namely yellow back novels. In any case, yellow has become a certain thematic sign of *fin de siècle*. *The King in Yellow* is also an example of such collocation.

It is generally believed that the symbolism of Dorian's poisonous book derives its visual appearance from the literary periodical *The Yellow book* and its content from Huysmans's *À rebours*. Brian Stableford confirms that “the central document of decadent prose fiction is Huysmans's sarcastic comedy *À rebours*, the ‘yellow book’ that led Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray to damnation and inspired John Lane's famous periodical.”⁶⁶ In other words, a fashionable magazine *The Yellow Book* was “in fact, a ‘yellow book’ which corrupts Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; this generally thought to be Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*.”⁶⁷ This ‘yellow triad’ of influential decadent publications representing visual aspect of *The yellow book*, content of Huysmans's *À rebours* and symbol of Dorian's ‘yellow book’ can be applied to Chambers' yellow myth. Such a synthesis indicates three pairs: visualisation of the king, content of the play and the sign as a symbol. Chambers introduces this Trinitarianism which defines yellow as visual, content and symbol coexisting consubstantially as one collective vehicle. He employs yellow as a bearer of decadent tradition of his aforesaid literary predecessors while maintaining all three aspects of their legacy. The bequest is the conceptual origin of Chambers' yellow book, yellow king, and Yellow Sign. However, Chambers is here monotheist who believe not only in pure decline of yellow but in unity of decadence and fear. Dismay is a new aspect of yellow besides decadence that comes along with *The King in Yellow*.

⁶⁴ Liz Constable, “‘Fin-de-siècle’ Yellow Fevers: Women Writers, Decadence and Discourses of Degeneracy,” *L'Esprit Créateur* 37, no. 3 (1997): 25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26288098>.

⁶⁵ “The Yellow Book,” The British Library, March 10, 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-yellow-book>.

⁶⁶ Brian M. Stableford, *The A to Z of Fantasy Literature* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2009), 101.

⁶⁷ “The Yellow Book,” The British Library.

2. THE YELLOW BOOK

One of three devices that evokes a feeling of imminent danger in the book of short stories *The King in Yellow* is a theatre script in the form of a book entitled 'The King in Yellow'. *The King in yellow* is an example of 'mise en abyme' which stands for "[a] formal technique in Western art of placing a small copy of an image inside a larger one."⁶⁸ In this case a story within a story which is "[a] reflexive strategy where the content of a medium is the medium itself."⁶⁹ 'The King in Yellow' is described as "[...] a book of great truths"⁷⁰ and it is a "[...] Chambers's master metaphor for so much of the '90s."⁷¹ The aim of this chapter is to analyse the content of those truths even that there are "[n]o definite principles [...] violated [...], no doctrine promulgated, no convictions outraged"⁷² on 'The King in Yellow' pages. The influence of the book on the reader is part of the analytical examination as the metaphorical difficulty of reading is evoked by the physical weight of the book: "the yellow book in my least injured hand [...] seemed heavy as lead."⁷³

The appearance of the book is described by Mr. Scott who finds it in his bookcase in the short story *The Yellow Sign*. Although he knew "every volume by its color and examined them all,"⁷⁴ a "book bound in yellow standing in a corner of the top shelf of the last bookcase"⁷⁵ still escaped his attention. Not surprisingly, it was 'The King in Yellow'. Importance of binding can already be found in the story of Dorian Gray or Jean des Esseintes. While Dorian obtained "nine large-paper copies of"⁷⁶ his 'yellow bible' "and had them bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods,"⁷⁷ "Des Esseintes took a much more extreme attitude to unusual and aesthetically pleasing bindings."⁷⁸ This demonstrates how important the aesthetic appearance of objects played in the decadent period of *fin de siècle* and Art Nouveau. For completeness, it should be added that the original book Lord Henry sent to Dorian was "bound in yellow paper, the cover slightly torn and the edges soiled."⁷⁹ What is more "[...] when Wilde was arrested in 1895, there were rumours he had

⁶⁸ "mise-en-abîme," Oxford Reference, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100201557>.

⁶⁹ "mise-en-abîme," Oxford Reference.

⁷⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 32.

⁷¹ Mackintosh, "The Secret Chambers of the Heart."

⁷² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 7.

⁷³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 95.

⁷⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 93-94.

⁷⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 93-94.

⁷⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 1986), 126-127.

⁷⁷ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 126-127.

⁷⁸ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 231.

⁷⁹ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 123.

been carrying a yellow-bound book. Though this was actually Pierre Louÿs's French novel *Aphrodite*.⁸⁰ And all this inspirational yellow explosive charge was bursting when 'The King in Yellow' was created. As if the yellow colour was a tell-tale sign of the book. Like yellow hair of aged heavy smoker. Even the weird occurrence of the book on the bookshelf contributed to unfathomable mystery. Mr Scott groped in the dark: "I was dumfounded. Who had placed it there? How came it in my rooms?"⁸¹ After identifying 'The King in Yellow' with the book, he perceives its yellow colour as a symbol of warning. "I stared at the poisonous yellow binding as I would at a snake. 'Don't touch it, Tessie,' I said; 'come down.'"⁸² The connection between the content and the visual appearance of the book can be observed in its comparison to a snake. It is bound in yellow, more precisely a 'poisonous yellow' colour, and its accidental discovery in the bookcase is compared to encounter with a snake. Tessie, unfamiliar with the dangers of the book, was "crouching white and silent, [...] seemed dazed, and [...] she neither stirred nor spoke."⁸³ However, its malicious content compared to extract of undiluted venom is also toxic and dangerous.

"The idea of a work of art as a public danger and social hazard was very real in the '90s."⁸⁴ Can a theatrical play of aesthetic value be perceived as an immoral threat to society? "Yet what else but exactly such fears could lead the English authorities to ban *Salomé* in 1892?"⁸⁵ The same fear drives censorship in the case of the fictional book 'King in Yellow'. "Government seized the translated copies which had just arrived in Paris, London, of course, became eager to read it."⁸⁶ As if this very clash of potentially bad influence on the reader and the aesthetic values of the work Chambers embodied in the fictional play 'The King in Yellow'. Mr. Scott and Tessie discussing 'The King in Yellow' find these two aspects of the book essential for its toxicity or more precisely for the 'yellowness' of the book. "Words which are clear as crystal, limpid and musical as bubbling springs, words which sparkle and glow like the poisoned diamonds."⁸⁷ And the same idea emphasized differently. "Words which are more precious than jewels, more soothing than Heavenly music, more awful than death itself."⁸⁸ This condensed authentic review of book's content discerns its ability to poison the human soul and being highly artistic at the same time. On the one hand there are

⁸⁰ "The Yellow Book," The British Library.

⁸¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 94.

⁸² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 94.

⁸³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 95.

⁸⁴ Mackintosh, "The Secret Chambers of the Heart."

⁸⁵ Mackintosh, "The Secret Chambers of the Heart."

⁸⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 7.

⁸⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 95.

⁸⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 95.

“wicked pages [...] in which the essence of purest poison lurked”⁸⁹ on the other hand “the very supreme essence of art”⁹⁰ which “could not be judged by any known standard.”⁹¹ The reader's doom does not result only from identification with the latent evil of the book or reflection of corruption already dormant in soul. But the aesthetic greatness and brilliance of the book is used as a captivating tool and engages in reader's devastation as well. The book whispers its malicious content with the help of delightful music. Consequently, beauty and art become a tool for more effective delivery of poison. The aesthetics of the form is an arrow to the poisonous tip of the contents.

Both authors, Robert W. Chambers and Oscar Wilde, refer to the same period of history that corresponds to the reign of the House of Medici. That period is the Renaissance. Chambers compares ‘sinful words’⁹² of King in yellow to “the poisoned diamonds of the Medicis!”⁹³ and Wilde indicates a connection between being “poisoned by a book”⁹⁴ and “the Renaissance [which] knew of strange manners of poisoning”. Medici and Renaissance are basically synonymous as “the Medici family are called the Godfathers of the Renaissance.”⁹⁵ The allusions in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in Robert W. Chambers' *The King in Yellow* could “possibly [be] a guarded reference to the ‘poisonous’ quality of Pater's Renaissance.”⁹⁶

The perusal of the fictitious book could be so intense that it brings damage to the human psyche, madness or even death to avid reader. Max Nordau mentions “moral insanity and emotionalism”⁹⁷ among conditions observable in the degenerate, which are, however, states that are induced by the reading of ‘The King in Yellow’. In Nordau’s opinion the *fin de siècle* period produced a morally insane and degenerate individuals, especially among decadent artists. James Cowles Prichard defines moral insanity as “consisting in a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect [...]”⁹⁸ The first short story *The Repairer of Reputations* is dedicated to the madness and begins with the epigraph in French characterizing this hallmark of *fin de siècle*: “Ne raillons pas les fous;

⁸⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 7.

⁹⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 32.

⁹¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 7.

⁹² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 124.

⁹³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 124.

⁹⁴ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 146.

⁹⁵ Jacqueline Martinez, “The Medici Family: Ultimate Power and Legacy In The Renaissance,” *TheCollector*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.thecollector.com/the-medici-family-legacy/>.

⁹⁶ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 234.

⁹⁷ Max Simon Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: Heinemann, 1898), 19.

⁹⁸ James Cowles Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity* (London, 1835), 6.

leur folie dure plus longtemps que la notre . . . Voilà toute la différence,” which can be translated as: “Don't laugh at the fools; their folly lasts longer than ours [...] That's the whole difference.”⁹⁹

The very first mention of the fictional book ‘The King in Yellow’ describes a tempestuous response from the reader. Mr. Castaigne “flung the book into the fireplace”¹⁰⁰ after reading the first part. The book aroused deep emotions manifested by “[...] a cry of terror, or [...] of joy so poignant that I [Mr. Castaigne] suffered in every nerve, [...] and wept and laughed and trembled with a horror [...]”¹⁰¹ Reading seems emotionally very exhausting, after reading the whole book at one time Mr Scott “faint with the excess of my [his] emotions, [...] dropped the volume and leaned wearily back.”¹⁰² The emotional storm caused by reading a fictional play is reminiscent of the turmoil that ensued from the publication of the two real books *À rebours* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Mere emotional strain or psychological shock does not seem to be the ultimate danger lurking in reading the book. The book might act as a trigger for madness and that makes it perilous. Louis Castaigne knows about the book only by hearsay, but it is clear from his answer that he threatens to read it. “No, thank God! I don't want to be driven crazy [...] and I for one shall never open its pages.”¹⁰³ Similarly, Mr. Scott decided that he “should never open that book, and nothing on earth could have persuaded me [him] to buy it.”¹⁰⁴ Louis Castaigne is clear that “it's a crime to have written a book of great truths, which send men frantic and blast their lives.”¹⁰⁵

The character of Mr. Castaigne resembles the type of unreliable narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, who also constantly insists on his sanity. “There is only one word which I loathe more than I do lunatic and that word is crazy.”¹⁰⁶ And the mention of the topic of lunacy in conversation always upsets him. “If Hawberk knew how I loathe that word ‘lunatic,’ he would never use it in my presence. It roused certain feelings within me which I do not care to explain.” Similarly, the narrator in *The Tell-Tale Heart* wants to avoid confusing madness with “over acuteness of the senses”¹⁰⁷ that causes his nervousness. Although Mr. Castaigne apparently damaged his brain when he fell off his horse, underwent

⁹⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 9, translation mine.

¹⁰⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 6.

¹⁰² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 95.

¹⁰³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 31-32.

¹⁰⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 94.

¹⁰⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 32.

¹⁰⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 32.

¹⁰⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, *Portable Edgar Allan Poe* (Penguin Books Ltd, 2006), 189.

treatment for insanity, and suffered a personality change still claiming that “[...] knowing that my mind had always been as sound as his [Doctor Archer’s], if not sounder [...]” Both Poe in *The Tell-Tale Heart* and Chambers in *The Repairer of Reputations* offer two ways to read the story with the help of a probably mentally ill unreliable narrator. “Sickness is valued as a dimension that can give new insights into the lives of characters, and even reveal fundamental truths that are hidden from ‘the healthy.’ Art needs sickness to be true art.”¹⁰⁸ It is up to the reader to choose whether the words of Mr. Castaine are a true or illusory vision of a madman.

Is Hildred Castaigne a king or a madman? Which of the two statements is more credible? That of Dr. Archer: ““You were completely cured,”” or that of Hildred Castain: ““I suppose you mean that I was simply acknowledged never to have been insane.””¹⁰⁹ Hildred suspects that Doctor Archer doubts his mental health. ““He looked at me narrowly [...] and I knew he thought I was mentally unsound.”” However, Hildred knows the answer to Doctor Archer’s unspoken assumption. ““No, [...] I am not mentally weak; my mind is as healthy as Mr. Wilde’s.””¹¹⁰ That is exactly how Hildred sees Mr. Wilde. ““Many called him insane, but I knew him to be as sane as I was.”” But are they really, or is it just a fraternity in madness? Hildred admires Mr. Wilde, but he is perceived as ““the lunatic””¹¹¹ by Hawberk, ““stark mad””¹¹² by Louis and ““poor fellow, crippled and almost demented””¹¹³ by Constance. One can only guess whether Mr. Wild is an influential repairer of reputations or a degenerated paranoid who ““had double-locked the door and pushed a heavy chest against it.””¹¹⁴

Allusion to Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Black Cat* serves to highlight Mr. Wilde’s eccentricity. ““I do not deny that he was eccentric; the mania he had for keeping that cat and teasing her until she flew at his face like a demon, was certainly eccentric.””¹¹⁵ Mr. Wilde succumbed to a strange delight in fighting a cat in his room. ““I never could understand why he kept the creature, nor what pleasure he found in shutting himself up in his room with the surly, vicious beast.””¹¹⁶ Following the example of Poe’s story, Mr. Wilde predicts that the cat will bring him death. ““It’s the cursed cat,’ he said, ceasing his groans, and turning his colorless eyes to me; ‘she attacked me while I was asleep. I believe she will kill me yet.’””¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁸ Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen, *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 85.

¹⁰⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 23.

¹¹⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 26.

¹¹¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 12.

¹¹² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 22.

¹¹³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 12.

¹¹⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 14.

¹¹⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 22.

¹¹⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 22.

¹¹⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 42.

The end of the nineteenth century brought many contemporary theories in medicine and psychology. According to many of them *Fin de siècle* is widely concerned as a period of degeneration. “The Hungarian social critic Max Nordau’s influential book *Degeneration*, an impassioned attack on what he regarded as the prevalent air of hysteria and moral decline in Western Europe.”¹¹⁸ According to the theory of degeneration a civilization is in decline, which is closely connected to art and artists who depict this decadence and are at the same time its product. “Late-Victorian society was haunted by the implications of Darwinism [... and] the balance between ‘faith’ and ‘doubt’ had tipped disturbingly in favour of the latter”¹¹⁹ Discussions about ‘natural selection’, “process that results in the adaptation of an organism to its environment”¹²⁰ newly admitted that “in certain circumstances degeneration into less-complex forms was just as likely as progress into more complex ones.”¹²¹ At the same time Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) “tried to discern a possible relationship between criminal psychopathology and physical or constitutional defects.” “He argued that the ‘born criminal’ could be recognised by [...] unusually sized ears, for example, or asymmetrical facial features; particularly long arms or a sloping forehead.”¹²²

In this context, physical description of Mr Wilde's head is noteworthy. “It was flat and pointed, like the heads of many of those unfortunates whom people imprison in asylums for the weak-minded.”¹²³ The vestigial physique of Mr. Wild is also extraordinary: “He was very small, scarcely higher than a child of ten, but his arms were magnificently developed, and his thighs as thick as an athlete's.”¹²⁴ Mr. Caistaigne seems enthralled by the appearance of Mr. Wilde and delineates him as “hideously fascinating.”¹²⁵

The anomalies of Mr. Wilde's body and his prosthetic devices come to the fore with another significant feature of decadence, namely artificiality. “[...] the ideal aesthetic life was a life of artifice, a life opposed to nature.”¹²⁶ Artificiality is considered a privilege in the protest of decadence against all nature. “He had no ears. The artificial ones, [...] were made of wax and painted a shell pink, but the rest of his face was yellow. He might better have

¹¹⁸ Buzwell, “Dracula.”

¹¹⁹ Greg Buzwell, “Gothic Fiction in the Victorian Fin De Siècle: Mutating Dodies and Disturbed Minds,” *The British Library*, May 15, 2014. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gothic-fiction-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle>.

¹²⁰ “Natural selection,” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed January 28, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/science/natural-selection>.

¹²¹ Buzwell, “Dracula.”

¹²² Buzwell, “Gothic Fiction.”

¹²³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 14.

¹²⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 14.

¹²⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 14.

¹²⁶ Classen, Constance (1998). *The Colour of Angels*, 115.

revelled in the luxury of some artificial fingers for his left hand, which was absolutely fingerless [...]”¹²⁷ The wax itself evokes the idea of yellow, and the struggle to repaint it pink seems futile when the rest of the face is paradoxically yellow. Together with the non-adjacent prosthesis and the permanently bent and protruding fixing silver wires, it increases the grotesqueness of the whole appearance of Mr. Wild. “Mr. Wilde clambered nimbly into his chair again, and rubbing his mangled ears with the stump of his hand”¹²⁸ One cannot overlook the apparent allusion to Lambroso’s criminal theory in Louise’s reaction to Wilde’s appearance. ““He’s not well-bred, to put it generously; he’s hideously deformed; his head is the head of a criminally insane person. You know yourself he’s been in an asylum.””¹²⁹

Mr. Castaigne’s shabbiness and gauntness seem to refer to artists’ decline and recall references to Nordau’s degeneration theory. ““I turned defiantly to the mirror. I stood for a long time absorbed in the changing expression of my own eyes. The mirror reflected a face which was like my own, but whiter, and so thin that I hardly recognized it.””¹³⁰ As if des Esseintes and Castaigne were decimated by an unhealthy lifestyle. ““It’s four years now that you’ve shut yourself up here like an owl, never going anywhere, never taking any healthy exercise, never doing a damn thing but poring over those books up there on the mantelpiece.””¹³¹

“Malady becomes a trope that functions metaphorically to refer to the core ideas within fin-de-siècle Decadence. The malady often remains unspecified, referring to sickness in the broadest sense, as a sign of distinction separating the world of the Decadents.”¹³² The character of church watchman in short story *The Yellow Sign* shows illness with extremely repulsive physical manifestations. “[T]he young man with the pasty face [...] he does look fat and soft.”¹³³ “[H]is face was so white and— soft? It looked dead—it looked as if it had been dead a long time.”¹³⁴ Because of symptoms of decay, encountering this character of watchman evokes a feeling of disgust and rejection. “I thought of a coffin-worm. [...] the impression of a plump white grave-worm was so intense and nauseating [...] he turned his puffy face away with a movement which made me think of a disturbed grub in a chestnut.”¹³⁵

¹²⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 14.

¹²⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 35.

¹²⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 23.

¹³⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 29.

¹³¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 31.

¹³² Härmänmaa, *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End*, 85.

¹³³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 103.

¹³⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 105.

¹³⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 100.

This pathological feature of decadence, helps to subtly define decay not only in a figurative sense, but in the original meaning of rot.

Thomas, the bellboy, confirmed the decomposition of the night-watchman speaking with a Cockney accent. “[...] but, ugh! 'is 'ed was that cold and mushy it ud sicken you to touch 'im.”¹³⁶ “[...] and when I twisted 'is soft, mushy fist one of 'is fingers come off in me 'and.”¹³⁷ The description of the watchman and the softness and plasticity of his body reminds “the features of the ‘abnormal and misbegotten’ Hyde, his ‘body an imprint of deformity and decay,”¹³⁸ This reminiscence of Robert Louis Stevenson's novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* refers to an abnormality. The guard resembles a living corpse, which, however, is completely contrary to recognized norms and beliefs. “The inversion or revaluation of well-established values is an integral part of the literary stance that defines Decadence, and the exaltation of sickness is one of its central aspects”¹³⁹ Chambers subvert these values by exposing a slushy body and this repugnant spectacle. “[...] the doctor said as he pointed to a horrible decomposed heap on the floor the livid corpse of the watchman from the church: ‘I have no theory, no explanation. That man must have been dead for months!’”¹⁴⁰ The character of church watchman coincides with M. Valdemar from Poe’s short story *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*. “‘M. Valdemar,’ kept together by hypnotism for seven months after his death, and uttering frantic sounds [...]”¹⁴¹ Similarly the watchman muttered: “‘Have you found the Yellow Sign?’” and his abrupt decomposition markedly resemble end of M. Valdemar. “As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes [...], there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity.”¹⁴²

The theatre script ‘The King in Yellow’ spreads its poisonous content and causes emotional shock, insanity, and degeneration. It uses a highly aesthetic form to disseminate its infectious content. The direct effect on the reader is detrimental and leads to his degradation. The yellowness of the reader influenced by the ideological content of the book expresses the otherness of degeneration. As described by Max Nordau under the influence of character Jean des Esseintes and the contents of Huysmans’s *À rebours*.

¹³⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 108.

¹³⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 109.

¹³⁸ Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin De siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 34.

¹³⁹ Härmänmaa, *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End*, 85.

¹⁴⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 127.

¹⁴¹ Lovecraft, *The Fiction*, 1067.

¹⁴² Poe, *The Portable*, 79.

3. THE KING IN YELLOW

“The King in Yellow is presented by Chambers as a very real supernatural force, yet we learn far less about him than we do about a play of the same name”¹⁴³ The malicious transcendent existent called The King in Yellow is the second artifice applied to elicit extreme emotional distress. *Fin de siècle* is full of anxiety about new age coming, scores of precipitous alterations, and this trepidation straightforwardly reflects many evolutionary, scientific, social, and medical theories. Confrontation with stressful circumstances and exposure to the negative psychological effects of omnipresent development is metaphorically expressed through the personification of The King in Yellow. The analysis of the different embodiments of The King in Yellow is the aim of this chapter. An integral part of the analysis will be the revelation of the visual incarnations of the king and his expansion.

This supernatural King in Yellow can be ranked among “unspeakable, mind-withering entities [...] associated [with] apocryphal texts harmful to sanity if not to life.”¹⁴⁴ The King in Yellow is largely a mere metaphor indistinguishable from a theatrical play distributed in the form of a book. It is no coincidence that it bears the same name. “The eponymous ‘King in Yellow’ is not a person but a verse play in book form which [...] drives its readers to despair, madness and even suicide.”¹⁴⁵ Even if the victim feels that he hears his voice, it might be only a mental reminiscence of the words previously read from the book. “Then I sank into the depths, and I heard the King in Yellow whispering to my soul.”¹⁴⁶ For Mr. Castaigne, it is not the form of the king that is important, but rather the horror that accompanies him: “I pray God will curse the writer, as the writer has cursed the world with this beautiful, stupendous creation, terrible in its simplicity, irresistible in its truth—a world which now trembles before The King in Yellow.”¹⁴⁷

“The eponymous King in Yellow is the title character of a printed verse play, a book which functions as a *mise en abîme* or Basilisk that drives its readers to despair, madness and even suicide.”¹⁴⁸ This book within a book intensifies the position of the king's ubiquity. Basilisk based on the “concept of pure information as a Weapon which adversely affects the

¹⁴³ Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart.”

¹⁴⁴ “Basilisks,” Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, accessed January 10, 2021, <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/basilisks>.

¹⁴⁵ John Clute, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 205.

¹⁴⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 96.

¹⁴⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 13

¹⁴⁸ “Chambers, Robert W,” Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, accessed January 10, 2021, http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/chambers_robert_w.

mind or body.”¹⁴⁹ According to the Merriam-Webster “Basilisk, in Greek basiliskos means little king, kinglet which is a diminutive form of basileus, king.”¹⁵⁰ And further basiliskos is used “in Greek legend in reference to a fabulous reptile that could kill any living thing with a mere look or breath [... and] attributed its name to a crownlike spot the basiliscus was believed to have on its head.”¹⁵¹ Another term for basilisk is “Cockatrice, [...] in the legends of Hellenistic and Roman times, a small serpent, possibly the Egyptian cobra [...] credited with powers of destroying all animal and vegetable life by its mere look or breath.”¹⁵² Basilisk in Mythology is “an imaginary creature which (like Medusa and her sister Gorgons) can kill with a glance.”¹⁵³ In the case of Medusa which is “a formidable foe, since her hideous appearance was able to render any onlooker into stone”¹⁵⁴ corresponds with the case of King in yellow. Because reading the book could be compared to “sights too dreadful to look upon.”¹⁵⁵ Even a brief glance or reading just a few words can be fatal and the reader can be overcome by the book. Alec in the story *The Mask* read the book only for “a few moments which seemed ages”¹⁵⁶ and he “was putting it away with a nervous shudder.”¹⁵⁷ Mr. Castaigne only “caught a glimpse of the opening words in the second act”¹⁵⁸ and his “eyes became riveted to the open page.”¹⁵⁹ The mere moment of exposure can be devastating.

“One of the most important explicators of decadence was the poet Arthur Symons, whose essay ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’ (1893), described decadence as ‘a new and beautiful and interesting disease’.”¹⁶⁰ Fear of a cultural and artistic contagion is accompanied by the first edition of the fictional book ‘King in yellow’. “It is well known how the book spread like infectious disease, from city to city, from continent to continent, barred here, confiscated there.”¹⁶¹ Surprisingly, this is reminiscent of passing on the idea of a real yellow book on the route from France of Karl-Joris Huysmans’ *À rebours*, to England of

¹⁴⁹ “Basilisks,” Encyclopedia of Science Fiction.

¹⁵⁰ *The Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1991), 39.

¹⁵¹ *The Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories*, 39.

¹⁵² “Cockatrice,” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cockatrice>.

¹⁵³ “Basilisks,” Encyclopedia of Science Fiction.

¹⁵⁴ Brittany Garcia, “Medusa,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, August 20, 2013, <https://www.ancient.eu/Medusa/>.

¹⁵⁵ “Basilisks,” Encyclopedia of Science Fiction.

¹⁵⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 58.

¹⁵⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 58.

¹⁵⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 6.

¹⁵⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 6.

¹⁶⁰ Carolyn Burdett, “Aestheticism and decadence,” *The British Library*, March 15, 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/aestheticism-and-decadence>.

¹⁶¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 7

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and to the United States of Robert W. Chambers' *The King in Yellow*.

“Decadence as cultural and literary phenomenon is invariably figured as another culture's disease, dangerously threatening from beyond imaginary boundaries, the spread of this figurative yellow fever remains untreated.”¹⁶² Chambers took up the gauntlet and masterfully interconnected this propagation of sickness with morbid yellow on canvas. To do so, he cleverly used the plot of the painter being cursed by the churchman in the short story *The Yellow Sign*. “That horrid-looking man you saw in the churchyard [...] probably bewitched the picture.”¹⁶³ Can evil be transferred to art subconsciously, so that the artist's mind is infected by looking at something disgusting. Yellow with a mixture of brown is quite typical for the symbolism of rot. The colour of the fallen leaves rotting in the clay in autumn represents the disgust at the yellow representing putrefaction. “Why should certain chords in music make me think of the brown and golden tints of autumn foliage?”¹⁶⁴ Just like Mr. Scott looked at the decomposing figure of church watchman.

The result is a morbid colour on the canvas. Chambers might draw this inspiration during his stay in Paris, where he witnessed “genuine horror at the prospect of death and madness from syphilitic infection.” “The flesh tones were sallow and unhealthy, and I did not understand how I could have painted such sickly color [...] I've made a mess of this arm, and for the life of me I can't see how I came to paint such mud as that into the canvas,”¹⁶⁵ An attempt to remove ghoulish paint from the canvas was unsuccessful. Is it turpentine or perhaps a defective canvas? “It must be the turpentine.” Turpentine is “the resinous exudate or extract obtained from coniferous trees”¹⁶⁶ and natural resin is substance “yellowish to brown in colour.”¹⁶⁷ “I applied rag and turpentine to the plague spot on my canvas, [...] but the more I scrubbed the more that gangrene seemed to spread. [...] yet the disease appeared to creep from limb to limb of the study before me. [...] the color on the breast changed and the whole figure seemed to absorb the infection as a sponge soaks up water.”¹⁶⁸ It can be theoretically agreed that “decadence infects. It's contagious [...]”¹⁶⁹ Contamination by decay under the influence of repulsive images seems at least metaphorically possible. “I

¹⁶² Constable, “‘Fin-de-siècle’ Yellow Fevers,” 25.

¹⁶³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 102.

¹⁶⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 99.

¹⁶⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 100.

¹⁶⁶ “Turpentine,” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/turpentine>.

¹⁶⁷ “Resin,” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/science/resin>.

¹⁶⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 101.

¹⁶⁹ Constable, “‘Fin-de-siècle’ Yellow Fevers,” 25.

remembered Camilla's agonized scream and the awful words echoing through the dim streets of Carcosa [...] For those poisoned words had dropped slowly into my head, as death-sweat drops upon a bed-sheet and is absorbed.”¹⁷⁰ There are “various associations of yellow with disease and decay — the quarantine flag, yellow fever, jaundice, et cetera.”¹⁷¹ At the end of the story *The Demoiselle d'Ys* the epitaph on the tombstone can be read. “Pray for the soul of the Demoiselle Jeanne D'Ys, who died in her youth for love of Philip, a stranger. A.D. 1573.”¹⁷² “Whiffs of The King in Yellow are found in the [...] heroine’s name (Jeanne D’Ys, a homonym of “jaundice”).”¹⁷³

“If you accept Chambers’s fiction [...] as a coded warning against syphilis and degenerate living or both then”¹⁷⁴ makes sense the allegory of the King in Yellow as a self-proclaimed ruler. “The ambition of Cæsar and of Napoleon pales before that which could not rest until it had seized the minds of men and controlled even their unborn thoughts.” The infection will conquer everyone, and the syphilis causing madness will subdue every thought and every person who ‘sins’ and claims his crown. It sounds like a warning: “Woe! woe to you who are crowned with the crown of the King in Yellow!”¹⁷⁵ From the mouth of the degenerate Mr. Wild, the words about the domination of the disease sound especially threatening, given how many aristocrats have historically succumbed to syphilis. “He is a king whom Emperors have served.”¹⁷⁶

The coincident desire and fear of ‘reading the book’ has made it a forbidden fruit. The irresistibility of the ‘book’ is also related to big temptation to read it: Mr. Scott “Fearful lest curiosity might tempt me to open it, I had never even looked at it in book-stores.”¹⁷⁷ “Chambers’ terror in the face of syphilitic infection is [...] grounded and legitimate [... as] Maupassant died mad from syphilis in 1893, and Chambers had seen the example of countless lesser figures before him.”¹⁷⁸ But the Garden of Eden ends the pleasing introductory part of the play and is in sharp contrast with the devastating effect of the second part: “The very banality and innocence of the first act only allowed the blow to fall afterward with more awful

¹⁷⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 29.

¹⁷¹ Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart.”

¹⁷² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 120.

¹⁷³ M. Grant Kellermeyer, “Robert W. Chambers’ *The Demoiselle DY's*: A Two-Minute Summary and a Literary Analysis,” *Oldstyle Tales Press*, January 30, 2019, <https://www.oldstyletales.com/single-post/2019/01/29/robert-w-chambers-the-demoiselle-dys-a-two-minute-summary-and-analysis-of-the-classic-tim>.

¹⁷⁴ Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart.”

¹⁷⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 44.

¹⁷⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 18.

¹⁷⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 94.

¹⁷⁸ Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart.”

effect.”¹⁷⁹ As well as the enormous difference between the early and late stages of Syphilis. Mr. Scott even “refused to listen to any description of it, and indeed, nobody ever ventured to discuss the second part aloud.”¹⁸⁰ Talking about the late stages of the disease in public was taboo.

The image of The King in Yellow as an errant monk crisscrossing the country in his yellow robe evokes issues of yellow peril. The connection of yellow clothes with a different ethnicity or religion occurs already in *The Yellow Mask* by Wilkie Collins. “He turned round immediately, and saw a masked woman standing alone in the room, dressed entirely in yellow from head to foot. She had a yellow hood, a yellow half-mask with fringe hanging down over her mouth, and a yellow domino, cut at the sleeves and edges into long flame-shaped points [...]”¹⁸¹ The ragged ends of the king's yellow robe are as menacing as the trimmed sleeves of the yellow domino. Visual appearance of the king's yellow robe might symbolize the East and its threat. The abraded quality of the robe evokes an endless journey, migration and the incessant wandering of a monk spreading a terrible faith. ““The scalloped tatters of the King in Yellow must hide Yhtill forever.””¹⁸² Yellow peril belongs to significant hallmarks of *fin de siècle*. This period “anxieties about the decay of the individual body were inseparable from anxieties about the decay of the collective ‘body’ figured in national or racial terms.”¹⁸³ “I thought, too, of The King in Yellow wrapt in the fantastic colors of his tattered mantle, and that bitter cry of Cassilda, “Not upon us, oh King, not upon us!”¹⁸⁴

The menace from the Eastern world, migration in general and “the phenomenon itself of cultural diffusion through contact—more familiarly defined as influence or its shady counterpart contamination.”¹⁸⁵ The elimination of such a contamination threat is clearly described in the depiction of the totalitarian state in the short story *The Repairer of Reputations*. It resides in “the exclusion of foreign-born Jews as a measure of self-preservation, the settlement of the new independent negro state of Suanee, the checking of immigration, the new laws concerning naturalization.”¹⁸⁶ The solution to the issue of indigenous peoples must not be overlooked either. “When the Government solved the Indian problem and squadrons of Indian cavalry scouts in native costume were substituted for the

¹⁷⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 7.

¹⁸⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 94.

¹⁸¹ Wilkie Collins, *The Yellow Mask: a Story* (New York: Optimus Print. Co., 1893), 115-116.

¹⁸² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 36.

¹⁸³ Arata, *Fictions of Loss*, 6.

¹⁸⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 60.

¹⁸⁵ Constable, “‘Fin-de-siècle’ Yellow Fevers,” 25.

¹⁸⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 4-5.

pitiable organizations tacked on to the tail of skeletonized regiments.”¹⁸⁷ A mention of “the statue of Peter Stuyvesant, which in 1897 had replaced the monstrosity supposed to represent Garibaldi”¹⁸⁸ may also be a reminder of this racist colour-metaphor. On one hand there is “Peter Stuyvesant (1592-1672), the Dutch colonial governor with an anti-Semitic reputation”¹⁸⁹ and on the other hand Giuseppe Maria Garibaldi (1807 – 1882) who refused Lincoln’s offer of a Union command “partly because Lincoln would not make a sweeping enough condemnation of slavery.”¹⁹⁰ Another example from sculpture indicating fear of different ethnicities is that “the Dodge Statue was removed.”¹⁹¹ Not surprisingly William E. Dodge “was opposed to [...] the extension of slavery.”¹⁹² These mentioned illustrative references of “ideological pigmentation recalls the turn-of-the-century racist horizons of a supposed encroaching Asian ‘yellow peril.’”¹⁹³

Another incarnation of *The King in Yellow* can be considered yellow journalism. The role of the mass media at *fin de siècle* and its declining standard is directly linked to the pursuit of sensational news stories. Information spreads rapidly as a contagion and immoral and evil thoughts might be spread like the plague. Popularity and curiosity became a breeding ground for yellow journalism at the *fin de siècle* period. In his last hour, Mr. Scott anticipates the eagerness of the outside world after the sensation. “They will be very curious to know the tragedy they of the outside world who write books and print millions of newspapers, but I shall write no more, and the father confessor will seal my last words with the seal of sanctity.”¹⁹⁴ Louis Castaigne comments the rumours about the author of ‘King in Yellow’ from press as he thinks the book is dangerous. “I only remember the excitement it created and the denunciations from pulpit and press. I believe the author shot himself after bringing forth this monstrosity, didn't he?”¹⁹⁵ Sensationalism of yellow press caused unreliability of reported facts. Which confirms Hildred's response to Louis's conjecture. “I understand he's

¹⁸⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 5.

¹⁸⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 21.

¹⁸⁹ Michael Feldberg, “New Amsterdam’s Jewish Crusader,” *The Jewish Virtual Library*, Accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/about-aice>

¹⁹⁰ “Kingdom Of Italy,” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giuseppe-Garibaldi/Kingdom-of-Italy>.

¹⁹¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 5.

¹⁹² D. Stuart Dodge and William Earl Dodge, *Memorials of W.E. Dodge* (New York; Cambridge Mass, printed: Randolph and Co, 1887), 72.

¹⁹³ Constable, “‘Fin-de-siècle’ Yellow Fevers,” 25.

¹⁹⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 97.

¹⁹⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 31-32.

still alive” That's enough for Louis to change his mind. “That's probably true, [...] bullets couldn't kill a fiend like that.”¹⁹⁶

The popularity of the book is connected to mystery about the death of the writer and to Mr. Castaigne tragedy. That all makes the theme attractive for newspapers: “If I ever had any curiosity to read it, the awful tragedy of young Castaigne, who I knew, prevented me from exploring its wicked pages.”¹⁹⁷ Public press has become a powerful tool. This is directly related to the Mr. Wilde’s entrepreneurship - a repairer of reputations. Until then, the limited possibilities of influencing public opinion receive an invaluable helper in the form of this media channel. “Arnold Steylette, Owner and Editor in Chief of the great New York daily”¹⁹⁸ was one of a number of information channels that Mr. Wilde controlled. Mr. Scott despises the ‘yellow kids’ of journalism and considers them vultures parasitizing on someone else's misfortune. “They of the outside world may send their creatures into wrecked homes and death-smitten firesides, and their newspapers will batten on blood and tears, but with me their spies must halt before the confessional.”¹⁹⁹

The supernatural entity The King in Yellow expands in all directions and its Medusa-like visualisation comprises disease, syphilitic infection, yellow peril, or yellow journalism. Various material manifestations of this Yellow Basilisk multiply the certainty of the infection. Yellow incarnations of King manifest the difference of contamination. King's yellow robe heavily stained with fantastic colours resounds with a visual aspect of *The Yellow Book*.

¹⁹⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 40.

¹⁹⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 123.

¹⁹⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 24.

¹⁹⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 126.

4. THE YELLOW SIGN

Receiving a Yellow Sign painted on paper, in the form of an Art Nouveau-style decorative buckle or in any other way indicates madness, damnation or death. It is reminiscent of Arthur Conan Doyle's short story *The Sign of the Four*, where a piece of paper with such a message means death. "In the light of the lantern I read, with a thrill of horror, 'The sign of the four.' 'In God's name, what does it all mean?' I asked. 'It means murder,' said he, stooping over the dead man."²⁰⁰ Even the theme of the Yellow Sign, the third device to evoke fear, is complemented by textual ambiguity. "[...] a curious symbol or letter in gold. It was neither Arabic nor Chinese, nor as I found afterwards did it belong to any human script."²⁰¹ Many meanings of yellow can be found in the *fin de siècle* period. Likewise, the Yellow Sign, when understood as a symbol, can hide many meanings and the meaning can be multifaceted and variable. Therefore, the Yellow Sign cannot be assigned a single meaning. The purpose of this chapter is to map the multiplicity of the Yellow Sign meanings. In accordance with the understanding of yellow as a symbolic component, the occurrences of yellow or more precisely gold associations will also be analysed.

The basic principle of assigning meaning is association, and with the contribution of colours, this approach can be intensified. Chambers employs colours including yellow to evoke moods or feelings rather than for simple descriptiveness. "The Symbolists wished to liberate poetry from its expository functions and its formalized oratory in order to describe instead the fleeting, immediate sensations of man's inner life and experience."²⁰² Therefore, colours in *The King in Yellow* facilitates building the atmosphere of narration and stimulation of imagery. There is yellow-brown of homely smoking-room: "I looked among the tawny Eastern rugs for the wolf's head [...]"²⁰³ Faded yellow of regular touch: "I turned my eyes to the spinet; every yellow key seemed eloquent of her caressing hand."²⁰⁴ Fresh spring goldish flood of light, scent and vitality: "A spring sun was shining on the rue St. Honoré, as I ran down the church steps. On one corner stood a barrow full of yellow jonquils, [...], and white Roman hyacinths in a golden cloud of mimosa."²⁰⁵ Or repellent yellow-green liquid of whey:

²⁰⁰ Arthur Conan Doyle and Julian Wolfreys, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Chatham, Kent: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), 78-79.

²⁰¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 120.

²⁰² "Symbolism," Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Symbolism-literary-and-artistic-movement/Symbolist-painting>.

²⁰³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 80.

²⁰⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 80.

²⁰⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 90-91.

“‘What a horrible color it is now,’ she continued. ‘Do you think my flesh resembles green cheese?’”²⁰⁶

In the spirit of symbolism, Chambers selects appropriate groups of words to control the resulting impact on the reader's multi-sensual imagination. The aim is to evoke various deep emotions, including fear, distaste, or disgust. “Thus, to the Symbolists, the theme within a poem could be developed and “orchestrated” by the sensitive manipulation of the harmonies, tones, and colours inherent in carefully chosen words.”²⁰⁷ The involvement of all human senses in the perception of the text is quintessential for symbolism. Their mixing was typical of Joris Karl Huysmans, who interchanges the features of sounds, smells, and light. Chambers is also involved in this wordplay. “A ray of moonlight silvered one edge of the old spinet, and the polished wood seemed to exhale the sounds as perfume floats above a box of sandal wood.”²⁰⁸ Or next example: “It filled my head, that muttering sound, like thick oily smoke from a fat-rendering vat or an odor of noisome decay.”²⁰⁹

In connection with such free handling of sensory properties, Chambers' reasoning about the tightness of the association bond seems important. As part of the introduction to the short story *Yellow Sign*, Chambers theorizes about complex associations connected with the symbol by a vague bond. It shows that association, as one of the basic techniques of symbolism rather than physical similarity, works with the fine and delicate bond of fantasy. “HERE are so many things which are impossible to explain!”²¹⁰ There was heard perhaps a sigh over the impenetrability of the mystery of the yellow association, or even the motto of the whole book *The King in Yellow*. Chambers asks about the origin of these associations. The autumn leaves remind him of music: “Why should certain chords in music make me think of the brown and golden tints of autumn foliage?”²¹¹ The service evokes a silver mineral to him: “Why should the Mass of Sainte Cécile send my thoughts wandering among caverns whose walls blaze with ragged masses of virgin silver?”²¹² Chambers gives full passage to these fleeting thoughts capriciously connecting meanings and symbols in metaphorical prose poems *The Prophets' Paradise*. The names of the individual parts themselves evoke a symbolic position. *The Studio*, *The Phantom*, *The Sacrifice*, *Destiny*, *The Throng*, *The Jester*, *The Green Room*, *The Love Test*. Even the names of the short stories that connect the names of the

²⁰⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 101.

²⁰⁷ “Symbolism,” Encyclopædia Britannica.

²⁰⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 67.

²⁰⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 118.

²¹⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 99.

²¹¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 99.

²¹² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 99.

streets and form the second part of the collection do not deny a certain symbolism. *The Street of the Four Winds, The Street of the First Shell, The Street of Our Lady of the Fields, Rue Barrée.*

A variant of the yellow colour, the golden, occupies a significant space of colour symbolism in *The King in Yellow* collection. The world of yellow madness in the case of Hildred is represented by the golden crown of power and wealth. Besides the jewelled crown “the silken robe embroidered with the Yellow Sign”²¹³ belong among the symbols of the dominion. Hildred's chimera is based on the notes of Mr. Wilde comprised of “the bundle of manuscript entitled ‘THE IMPERIAL DYNASTY OF AMERICA.’”²¹⁴ Mr. Wilde's holograph identifies Hildred as the king's cousin and points to his French aristocratic origins. “Hildred de Calvados, first in succession.”²¹⁵ Hildred adopts this theory and already uses the king's suffix next to his name, “Hildred-Rex.”²¹⁶ Since the manuscript is signed by Mr. Wilde, his informative value is highly debatable. Chambers incorporates into the text the centrepiece of the yellow symbolism, the “crown, a diadem of purest gold, blazing with diamonds.”²¹⁷ The flood of golden glow is used for the culminating exposure of the yellow motif of power. “The diamonds flashed fire as I turned to the mirror, and the heavy beaten gold burned like a halo about my head.”²¹⁸

Mr. Hawberk is an armorer. Mr. Castaine loves the ambience of his workshop, which is full of the fine tones of armory tools, full of the luster of metals and references to the old reign of kings. The atmosphere is very calm, there is “the banner which she [Constance] was embroidering from a colored plate.”²¹⁹ And Mr. Hawberk is “riveting the worn greaves of some ancient suit of armor.”²²⁰ Following the Huysmans' example Chambers works with the senses. Mr. Castaigne can sit in Hawberk's workshop for hours and indulge in the pleasures of his senses like Jean des Esseintes. He listens to the clang of a hammer, the soft rattling of a sheet metal, and the sound of steel strikes him as a melody. At the same time, he indulges in a sunbath of metal-reflected rays. “[...] when a stray sunbeam struck the inlaid steel, the sensation it gave me was almost too keen to endure. My eyes would become fixed, dilating

²¹³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 42.

²¹⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 25.

²¹⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 25.

²¹⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 46.

²¹⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 28.

²¹⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 37.

²¹⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 16.

²²⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 16.

with a pleasure that stretched every nerve almost to breaking [...]”²²¹ These flashes of the yellow sun and the sounds of the tingling of armour evoke the knighthood and the power of the royal state of a shiny crown. Castaigne is engaged sensually in imaginations of the state he dreams of.

Gold is above all a symbol of wealth and the desire for it begets evil. “‘There are enough precious metals now in the world to cut throats over.’ I pricked my ears. ‘Have you struck gold, Boris?’ ‘[...] Ah! How sinister and covetous you look already!’” Gold production has always been associated with alchemy and the desire to obtain it. “I was devoured by the desire for gold”²²² so [...] we had turned our backs on alchemy.”²²³

The experimental process of transforming a living organism into a fossil is an enthralling theme of the short story *The Mask*. The life-giving or life-repelling light emanating from the bath perhaps symbolizes the departing soul. This process substituting ‘divine’ brings the dilemma between preserving life or meaning decease. “‘Is it death?’”²²⁴ “‘Destroyed, preserved, how can we tell?’”²²⁵ Light and the yellow sun have been symbols of life since ancient times. “‘[...] where the ray of sunlight comes from? [...] It looked like a sunbeam true enough.’”²²⁶ Perhaps life returns to its source during this process opposite to the warm light emanating from the sun. “‘We’ll send this one after the other--wherever that is.’”²²⁷ Fantastic colours and light effects can be found in text describing the processes of transformation. The subject of the first experiment was a goldfish. “[...] the stone was beautifully veined with a faint blue, and from somewhere within came a rosy light like the tint which slumbers in an opal.” A bright light appeared during the test. “Then came the milky foam, the splendid hues radiating on the surface and then the shaft of pure serene light broke though from seemingly infinite depths.”²²⁸ The subject of the second experiment was an Easter lily. “Changing tints of orange and crimson played over the surface, and then what seemed to be a ray of pure sunlight struck through from the bottom where the lily was resting. [...] ‘That golden ray is the signal.’”²²⁹

Fin de siècle is a trope of modernism and is understood as transition to the modernist period and symbolism. In the *The King in Yellow* collection, an eerie symbol called the

²²¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 17.

²²² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 61.

²²³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 61.

²²⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 57.

²²⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 48.

²²⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 48.

²²⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 57.

²²⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 58.

²²⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 47.

Yellow Sign similarly functions as a trope of transition to the world of Carcosa. The Yellow Sign serves as a message, such a draft notice. Mr. Wilde mobilizes the whole country uprising with the help of the Yellow sign. He appeals to all states except California and the Northwest. “I shall not send them the Yellow Sign.”²³⁰ It also serves as a warning and a symbol of threat. “Then I unfolded a scroll marked with the Yellow Sign.”²³¹ If the question ““Have you found the Yellow Sign?”²³² is ever heard, their recipient is probably lost. It was “[...] the Yellow Sign which no living human dared disregard.” The Yellow Sign is more powerful than the hundreds and thousands of words and the whole land “[...] tremble before the Pallid Mask, [...] bow to the Black Stars which hand in the sky over Carcosa.”²³³

Carcosa is not just a simple association but an already complex allegorical world. One of the symbols that distinguishes the world of Carcosa from ours is the metaphor of black stars. “[...] I cannot forget Carcosa where black stars hand in the heavens [...]”²³⁴ Similar comparison of dimmed stars mentions Max Nordau in his book *Degeneration*: “The old Northern faith contained the fearsome doctrine of the Dusk of the Gods. [...], in which all suns and all stars are gradually waning, and mankind [...] is perishing in the midst of a dying world.”²³⁵ The Nordau’s description approximates the world of Carcosa - a world parallel to the human, divine. And the Yellow Sign is an entrance ticket to this dismal world. Nordau borrowed the term morally insane from Bénédict Morel. It marks the decadents who paid for their perverted lives with madness. According to Morel morally insane patients “[...] have delirious presentations of ruin and damnation, and all sorts of imaginary fears.”²³⁶ These are the potential inhabitants of Carcosa. The solution for them seems to be an escape to another artificial world beyond the reach of nature. “Incomplete and unsuccessful attempts to escape the human condition by means of posing, artifice, and evil, all of which are conceived of as unnatural and therefore better than nature.”²³⁷ But is such a leak safe?

The King in Yellow “[...] looks to be a warning against [... t]his ‘impossible world which believes in itself’ has a power to distort, corrupt, and ultimately supplant reality.”²³⁸

²³⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 26.

²³¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 50.

²³² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 118.

²³³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 46.

²³⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 13.

²³⁵ Nordau, *Degeneration*, 2.

²³⁶ Nordau, *Degeneration*, 20.

²³⁷ George P. Landow, “Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s -- Points of Departure,” *The Victorian Web*, March 30, 2021, <http://www.victorianweb.org/decadence/decadence.html>.

²³⁸ Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart.”

Such a world seems to be the mythical Carcosa. The idea of such an escapist world or whatever Carcosa might represent is exemplified by the fictional play ‘The King in Yellow’.

Along the shore the cloud waves break,
The twin suns sink behind the lake,
The shadows lengthen

In Carcosa.

Strange Is the night where black stars rise,
And strange moons circle through the skies,
But stranger still Is

Lost Carcosa.

Songs that the Hyades shall sing,
Where flap the tatters of the King,
Must die unheard In

Dim Carcosa.

Song of my soul, my voice Is dead,
Die thou, unsung, as tears unshed
Shall dry and die In

Lost Carcosa.

Cassilda's Song in ‘The King in Yellow.
Act 1. Scene 2.’²³⁹

This mysterious world, referring to mythical places and characters, can be understood as the world of the king in yellow. Black stars, twin suns as if something is wrong with such world “[...] almost as if to suggest the insignificance of the things which humans value and honor.”²⁴⁰ This world leaves many mysteries unexplained and contributes to the overall mystery of the collection. Allusions Hali and Hastur comes from short stories of Ambrose Bierce. “Chambers took the name Carcosa from Ambrose Bierce's story, ‘An Inhabitant of Carcosa’”²⁴¹ Carcosa is as obscure as the world at the turn of the nineteenth century with all the challenges of *fin de siècle*. And Chambers “certainly created a very effective warning against the threat of such a world.”²⁴²

The spread of immoral behaviour reopens the question of faith in relation to decline. Chambers introduces a contrast of yellow decline and white unbelief. While yellow is a sign of decadence the white colour of face represents loss of faith and feeling distant from God. Turning from the symbol of the Christian cross to the Yellow Sign, the symbol of the fallen deity and decadence. “Western culture in the 1890s, it seems, was in a fever pitch of anxiety

²³⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 9.

²⁴⁰ Michael Kellermeyer, “Robert W. Chambers’ In the Court of the Dragon: A Two-Minute Summary and Literary Analysis,” *Oldstyle Tales Press*, January 18, 2021, <https://www.oldstyletales.com/single-post/robert-w-chambers-in-the-court-of-the-dragon-a-two-minute-summary-and-literary-analysis>.

²⁴¹ “Chambers, Robert W,” *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

²⁴² Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart.”

about its own incipient decadence — moral and social rot”²⁴³ The decline of society goes hand in hand with the loss of faith without determining the reason and cause. With the help of science, the millennial foundations of world order are being undermined. Mainly because of Darwinism a “questions about the origins, nature and destiny of humankind had become matters for science, rather than theology to address.”²⁴⁴

The Loss of Faith is illustrated by the central character from the short story *In the Court of the Dragon*. He “live[s] in the Court of the Dragon, a narrow passage that leads from the rue de Rennes to the rue du Dragon.”²⁴⁵ After reading ‘the king in yellow’, he loses his pillar of life and his reluctance to admit his heresy is full of duplicity. His guilty conscience is portrayed by a character of the black-figure organist with white face. “He was a slender man, and his face was as white as his coat was black.”²⁴⁶ This personification of heresy haunts the main character and, as an indomitable idea, is still on his heels. His relentlessness casts the soul of the lost into the hands of the fallen god the king in yellow. The short story *In the Court of the Dragon* is full of juxtapositions of faith and heresy or more precisely God and Leviathan in the form of a king in yellow. To achieve the implicit contrast, Chambers uses “[...] hyperbolic juxtapositions and a reference to standards or beliefs for intense effect in which the speaker supposedly does not believe.”²⁴⁷ St. Barnabé is a Christian church but what if “the nave [...] did not get any blessing.”²⁴⁸ Are the vespers divine service or “something not usually supposed to be at home in a Christian church, might have entered undetected.”²⁴⁹ The church music was rather “the chancel organ which supported the beautiful choir”²⁵⁰ or “[...], a sinister change”²⁵¹ to “[...]wicked music!”²⁵² The main character mocks the sermon, as he suddenly does not believe its contents. “This was a likely place to harbor supernatural horrors!”²⁵³

The white-faced organist, with his inevitable and graduated threat, symbolizes the process of losing faith and juxtaposes the world of faith and the world after its loss. Organist is described by words such as “deadly malignity”²⁵⁴, “menace”²⁵⁵ or “malignant hatred.”²⁵⁶

²⁴³ Mackintosh, “The Secret Chambers of the Heart.”

²⁴⁴ Buzwell, “Gothic Fiction.”

²⁴⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 93.

²⁴⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 88.

²⁴⁷ Landow, “Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s.”

²⁴⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 86.

²⁴⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 86.

²⁵⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 86.

²⁵¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 85.

²⁵² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 88.

²⁵³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 89.

²⁵⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 91.

The decadence starts with a loss of faith and end with loss of soul. “He showed no signs of haste, nor of fatigue, nor of any human feeling. His whole being expressed but one thing: the will, and the power to work me evil.”²⁵⁷ The motif of a pale face without an expression not embodying any human qualities corresponds to the imagination of depicting the devil. “He is not a person. He may have many masks, but his essence is a mask without a face. The apparent face of the Devil [...] is pasteboard mask with neither personality nor feeling behind it.”²⁵⁸

The white colour of his face is symbolic. It resembles nun’s “pale shadow of their white headdress.”²⁵⁹ Black and white are in contrast “[...] black figure and his white face”²⁶⁰ White should symbolize purity without impurities, purity of faith without mundane coloured ornaments. “The organ gallery gets a strong white light from a row of long windows in the clere-story, which have not even colored glass.”²⁶¹ However, in connection with the man in black, it seems apostate. “How his face gleamed in the darkness, drawing swiftly nearer !”²⁶²

During the sermon, there is a strange assurance that “[n]othing can really harm the soul.” A bit “[c]urious doctrine [...] for a Catholic priest”²⁶³, despite its origin is unknown as well as the name of “Monseigneur C——”. Whispering of decadence, reading from a yellow book, a man with a white face that cannot be escaped. The first sin is followed by a path that no longer leads back, followed by a steep fall. The protagonist went to church for healing after he had been reading ‘The King in Yellow.’²⁶⁴ And Monseigneur C—— says from Psalm 104: ““The sun ariseth ; they gather themselves together and lay them down in their dens.””²⁶⁵ Beside this passage cited by Chambers the psalm preaches: “Let the sinners be consumed out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless thou the LORD, O my soul.”²⁶⁶ It emphasizes God's power, but it also mentions Leviathan: “There go the ships: there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein.”²⁶⁷

²⁵⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 91.

²⁵⁶ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 92.

²⁵⁷ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 92.

²⁵⁸ Luther Link, *The Devil: a Mask without a Face* (London: Reaktion, 1995), 5.

²⁵⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 87.

²⁶⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 88.

²⁶¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 89.

²⁶² Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 95.

²⁶³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 88.

²⁶⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 87.

²⁶⁵ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 87.

²⁶⁶ Robert P. Carroll and Stephen Prickett, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 698.

²⁶⁷ Carroll, *The Bible*, 697.

There are many forms of Leviathan contained in the myths. Incidentally, a 16th-century German demonologist Peter Binsfeld compiled the “list of the seven demons which provoked people into embracing the Seven Deadly Sins.”²⁶⁸ He attributes the “yellow” envy to the “realm of [...] Leviathan.”²⁶⁹ Nevertheless, “Leviathan is a female monster dwelling in the watery Abyss,”²⁷⁰ and “dragon-like, fire-belching chaos monster”²⁷¹ as well. Thus, Leviathan could be understood as “the Dragon in the Sea”²⁷² and “the fire-breathing monster.”²⁷³ Such a description is completely in line with the last moments of the main character of *In the Court of the Dragon*.

“And now I heard *his voice*, rising, swelling, thundering through the flaring light [...] poured over me in waves of flame. Then I sank into the depths, and I heard the King in Yellow whispering to my soul: ‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!’”²⁷⁴ It is actually citation from Bible, Hebrews 10:31. It means that you will be judged if you continue to sin, even if you already know the truth. “For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins.”²⁷⁵ “[...] Leviathan is described as a voracious sea monster endangering God’s creatures by his attempt to consume them.”²⁷⁶ “[...] the Leviathan Hell Mouth [...] is a powerful, primitive force, a denizen of the deep who receives what Satan casts in.”²⁷⁷ Such a terrible place reminiscent of Leviathan Hell Mouth is not unknown to the main character. “Death and the awful abode of lost souls, whither my weakness long ago had sent him they had changed him for every other eye, but not for mine.”²⁷⁸ A sin committed cannot be redeemed. Seemingly sank into oblivion, but it always re-emerges. And the king in yellow wants always to repay the sin. “I knew that while my body sat safe in the cheerful little church, he had been hunting my soul in the Court of the Dragon.”²⁷⁹ “[...] whether literally, psychologically, spiritually, or metaphorically – in a stunning and otherworldly moment, he finds his soul delivered to the Court of the King in Yellow.”

²⁶⁸ Fred Gettings, *Dictionary of Demons: a Guide to Demons and Demonologists in Occult Lore* (London: Guild Publ., 1989), 55-56.

²⁶⁹ Gettings, *Dictionary of Demons*, 56.

²⁷⁰ Bob Becking and van der Horst Pieter W., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 205.

²⁷¹ Becking, *Dictionary of Deities*, 206.

²⁷² Becking, *Dictionary of Deities*, 276.

²⁷³ Becking, *Dictionary of Deities*, 167.

²⁷⁴ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 96

²⁷⁵ Carroll, *The Bible*, 276.

²⁷⁶ John Mulryan, *Milton and the Middle Ages* (Lewisburg u.a.: Bucknell Univ. Press u.a., 1982), 127.

²⁷⁷ Link, *The Devil*, 76.

²⁷⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 96.

²⁷⁹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 96

The pale face theme appears in several places in the king in yellow collection. In the short story *The Yellow Sign*, it is the night-watchman of the church who the white face belongs to. “Then I saw the white face of the hearse-driver looking at me through the coffin-lid.”²⁸⁰ Jean from the short story *The Demoiselle d'Ys* turns white in the face after an incident with a snake. “I saw Jeanne's white face bending close to mine.”²⁸¹ And finally, there is the slender man with white face from the short story *In the Court of the Dragon*. “The phantom [...] is notable for his ghastly white face and awkward body (it reminds him of torture devices, feels like iron, and gives him a grotesque and otherworldly appearance), which effortlessly calls to mind the lore of the Pallid Mask.”²⁸² The Pallid Mask is a character from the play ‘King in Yellow’ and it is probably him who appears in a short excerpt from the play at the beginning of the short *The Mask*.

CAMILLA: You, sir, should unmask.

STRANGER: Indeed?

CASSILDA: Indeed it's time. We all have laid aside
disguise but you.

STRANGER: I wear no mask.

CAMILLA: (Terrified, aside to Cassilda.) No mask? No
mask!

THE KING IN YELLOW: Act I—Scene 2d.²⁸³

Undoubtedly here Chambers refers to Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Masque of the Red Death*. Prince Prospero hides from the pestilence “Red Death” in castellated abbey. There were seven chambers which “windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations.”²⁸⁴ The colours used in rooms were blue, purple, green, orange, white, violet and “scarlet—a deep blood color.”²⁸⁵ The stranger arrived at a masked ball masqueraded as a stiffened corpse. Presence of a masked figure causes “expressive of disapprobation and surprise—then, finally, of terror, of horror, and of disgust.”²⁸⁶ Prince Prospero commands: “Seize him and unmask him.”²⁸⁷ The characters Red Death and Pallid Mask are connected by a mask. Both characters are more like an illusion. In fact, they are phantoms only to a certain extent because they also have a very real form. While in the case of *The Masque of the Red Death* it is a plague in the case of *The King in Yellow* it is lues. When Alec is stricken with fever and delirium then Jack summons a doctor. “For

²⁸⁰ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 113.

²⁸¹ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 150.

²⁸² Kellermeyer, “Robert W. Chambers’ In the Court of the Dragon.”

²⁸³ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 57.

²⁸⁴ Poe, *The Portable*, 38.

²⁸⁵ Poe, *The Portable*, 38.

²⁸⁶ Poe, *The Portable*, 40.

²⁸⁷ Poe, *The Portable*, 41.

Heaven's sake, doctor, what ails him, to wear a face like that?' and I thought of 'The King in Yellow' and the Pallid Mask."²⁸⁸ Stiff facial expressions caused by illness can turn into a kind of mask. Even a bored decadent face expression can resemble a mask. "An exceptional relationship with sickness is a well-known characteristic of decadent literature. In the decadent perspective on life, malady attains value at the expense of health; moreover, the embrace of decay characteristic of the movement constitutes in itself a manifesto for sickness."²⁸⁹

The eerie symbol the Yellow Sign occupies as a symbol the associations of mad king's crown, armour luster obsession, craving for precious metal, and power over life and death. It appears in complex allegories as an entrance ticket to the escape world of sinners. The symbolism of yellow contained in various representation of meaning illustrates multiplicity of damnation. The sign of accursed Carcosa is stigmatized as symbolism of Dorian's 'yellow book'.

²⁸⁸ Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 71.

²⁸⁹ Härmänmaa, *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End*, 85.

CONCLUSION

The multi-layered plot of *The King in Yellow* is like a jigsaw, a conundrum or riddle. Its pages are full of moods and feelings that have not been soothed and evoke inscrutable mystery. An enigma shrouded in metaphors and tropes surrounded by allusions and resonating with symbolic speech. By suppressing descriptiveness, Chambers in *The King in Yellow* makes the inner world stand out and thus subscribes to symbolism.

Chambers resolved an issue that indirectly arose from debates about *art for art's sake* and the critique of Oscar Wilde's work. Is there an immoral book or just a well written, artistic book? He created a fictional theatrical play 'King in Yellow' and combined an aesthetic and moral function into one book. In keeping with his general goal of building an impenetrable atmosphere of fear around the figure of the king in yellow.

Chambers in *King in Yellow* combines two literary inspirational sources. He adds a dimension of fear along with decadence. It refers not only to Oscar Wilde and the decadence represented by Mr. Wild's character, but also to Ambrose Bierce and scary stories defined through the place of Hastur. Moreover, Chambers alludes to Edgar Allan Poe, the master of short stories with the secret. Interestingly, he borrowed from Poe the short stories where colour plays a significant role. Besides, *The Masque of the Red Death* where the role of colours is indisputable, there is also symbolic black in the story *The Black Cat*. In addition, he refers to Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* when using an unreliable narrator accentuates the treachery of the senses. And he alludes to Poe's *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* when describing the scene of immediate decomposition. Chambers thus invokes the unity of decadence and fear through an alliance with Bierce and Poe.

It is assumed that the collection *The King in Yellow* (1895) reflects the negative effects of the rapid development on *fin de siècle* human and society as its main theme. Turn-of-the-century progress is construed as an imminent threat and *The King in Yellow* as an ominous warning against it. Collected short stories *King in Yellow* offered three main thematic motifs for deeper analysis. There is a play in book form entitled 'The King in Yellow', a mysterious and malevolent supernatural entity known as The King in Yellow and finally an eerie symbol called the Yellow Sign. All these yellow metaphors represent forms of menaces to *fin de siècle* society, which are associated with fears of its decline.

Yellow became a synonym for 'decadent' at the end of the nineteenth century, mainly due to the influence of Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À rebours*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the literary periodical *The Yellow book*. These fundamental publications essential

for interpreting the meaning of yellow in the *fin de siècle* period facilitated the analysis of Chambers' three metaphors of yellow. As stated at the beginning of this thesis, synthesis of those three influential decadent publications and three main thematic motifs of Chamber' yellow myth indicated three pairs: visualisation of the king, content of the play and the sign as a symbol. These were applied to *The King in Yellow*.

Visual aspect of the magazine *The Yellow Book* corresponds to the visualization of the king, that is, to the material manifestations of its form. It materialises in the form of Basilisk, the little king causing madness, if only seen. Horrid-looking church watchman spreading infectious disease such as jaundice or syphilis manifested by morbid yellow colour. Yellow cultural disease disseminating contamination of mass media afflicted by propagating sensationalism of yellow press. An errant monk crisscrossing the country in his yellow robe evoking issues of yellow peril. The malicious transcendent existent called the King in Yellow and visualisation of this yellow metaphor attributes to yellow the meaning 'contaminated'.

Content aspect of the novel *À rebours* accords with the content of the play, that is, with the ideational coverage of the subject. It appears in the form of Mise en abyme, embedded narrative of both the aesthetic and immoral quality dangerous to public. A book of great truths witnessing stressful transformation of society causing spiritual damage by urban modernity. A poisonous book imitating a repugnant catalogue of turn-of-the-century anxieties and fears of accelerating development in science. A paradoxical book recounting degeneracy as a by-product of modernity and retrogression to the king's world in yellow afflicted with madness, immorality, and degeneration. It is comprehensively drawn in the hideous and eccentric figure of the degenerate Mr. Wild caught in his artificial world of repairer of reputations and prosthetic devices. The theatre script in the form of a revealing poisonous book entitled 'The King in Yellow' and content of this yellow metaphor ascribes to yellow the meaning 'degenerated'.

Symbolic aspect of Dorian's 'yellow book' coincides with the sign as a symbol, that is, with the representation of meaning. It projects in the form of an Art Nouveau design style ornament, heretical emblem not pertaining to any human script and threatening faith. Yellow symbol assigning the same meaning whether inlaid on decorative buckle, painted on paper, or embroidered on silken robe. Sign representing enigma of the tightness of the association bond and the interconnectedness of the senses. Emblem hidden in the golden symbolism of mad king's crown of power, armour luster obsession, craving for precious metal of alchemy, and reversion of divine sun principle. Icon that is coded message from the parallel cosmos of Carcosa, the fallen world of sinners. Token accepted as escape ticket to another artificial

world beyond our natural dying one. Ensign serving as draft notice mobilizing the whole Mr. Wilde's insane world. White representing loss of faith and white face personifying heresy haunting the soul in the purgatory of "Court of the Dragon." Yellow colour of envy belonging to the realm of Leviathan and white mask without a face of the Devil. Red and yellow symphonies of sickness symbolizing pestilence and syphilis. An uncanny emblem called the Yellow Sign and symbol of this yellow metaphor attaches yellow the meaning 'damned'.

Chambers reflects the broad range of *fin de siècle* hallmarks and crucial topics. Among others, they are the idea of Symbolism; Art for Art's Sake and aesthetic vs immoral; Darwinism and the question of faith; Lombroso's theory of 'born criminal' and Nordau's degeneration theory; supremacy of artificial over nature; issues of progress and modernity etc. They are united through the common denominator of immorality, transgression, decadence, degeneration, malady, insanity, simply expressed degradative processes.

This degradation principle can also be traced in the occurrences of the yellow and other colours symbolism in *The King in Yellow*. The sunbeam emanating from the chemical bath of transformed objects mean the departure of life. Brown and golden tints of autumn foliage, those morbid colours of decadence and syphilitic infection are a sign of contamination, madness, and death. Jewelled golden crown is lunacy, Yellow shining of armour means obsession and the desire for gold of alchemists means greed. Yellow envy attributes to the dragon-like monster Leviathan. White mask belongs to devil and white to loss of faith. Yellow is syphilis and red is plague. Black Cat is an omen of someone's death.

These are all retrograde processes and mean a loss of quality as in the case of yellow journalism, controversial or taboo content as yellow peril, or just a negative connotation or low quality as yellow back.

In conclusion, it could be said, taking into account also the predefined meaning of Chambers' yellow metaphors - 'contaminated', 'degenerated' and 'damned' - that the resulting meaning of yellow is a degradation of the original value, i.e. a kind of devaluation. If *fin de siècle* is the trope of modernism, then *The King in Yellow* is the trope of fear of it. Yellow no longer plays the role of colour but it is *idée fixe* which intersects the whole text and as an ever-present threat it is hidden in every story.

RESUMÉ

Tato práce se zaměřuje na sbírku povídek *Král ve žlutém* (1895) amerického spisovatele Roberta W. Chamberse (1865-1933). Primárně se soustředí na roli žluté barvy, jako významotvorné a symbolické složky vyprávění. Schopnost literatury používat barvu, jako vyjadřovacího prostředku, dokládají rozmanité příklady pestrých literárních děl z celého průběhu viktoriánského období. Nicméně ve srovnání s osamělými výskyty barevné symboliky během viktoriánské éry, lze vzestup inspirace žlutou barvou během období *fin de siècle* přirovnat k hotové bouři. Cílem práce je zmapovat nejen Chambersovo použití motivu žluté, ale také rozsah účasti ostatních autorů na dobovém trendu tematizovat tuto barvu ve svých literárních dílech.

Teoretická část se zabývá estetickým vnímáním žluté barvy a její popularitou v období *fin de siècle*, tj. v kontextu symbolismu, aestheticismu, dekadence, degenerace a pocitu úpadku či zvrácenosti, charakteristickým pro mnoho autorů pozdně viktoriánského období a jejich tvorbu. Sémantická složka žluté barvy a její četné významy se promítají do řady fenoménů charakterizujících konec devatenáctého století. Dokladem toho je například britský čtvrtletník *The Yellow Book*, rasisticky zabarvená metafora žlutého teroru nebo přejmenování senzacechtivého tisku na žlutou žurnalistiku. Jessica Durgan v publikaci *Art, Race, and Fantastic Color Change in the Victorian Novel* (2018) stanovuje metodologický rámec pro interpretaci barvy v literatuře na konci devatenáctého století. Její koncept vychází z užití barvy pro označení jinakosti, odlišnosti a rozmanitosti. Žlutou barvu vidí jako prostředek nepřímého označení takové vlastnosti literární postavy, která vybočuje svým charakterem z běžně uznávaných norem. Takovou specifickou vlastnost charakteru, jakou může být například úpadek neboli dekadence označuje za tzv. „žlutavost.“ Estetické a symbolické vnímání žluté barvy ve výtvarném umění a v historických kontextech, tak jak je přibližuje teoretická kapitola, usnadňuje pochopení těchto procesů.

Analytická část práce se soustředí na vybrané dílo *Král ve žlutém*, a především na tři metafory žluté, které jsou pro sbírku zásadní. Jsou jimi divadelní hra v knižní podobě s názvem *Král ve žlutém*, zlovolná nadpřirozená entita stejného jména a tajemný symbol *Žluté znamení*. Tři po sobě jdoucí kapitoly postupně rozebírají tuto trojici metafor žluté na pozadí kulturních, sociálních a vědeckých aspektů odrážejících se v dekadentní literatuře a uměleckých dílech charakteristických pro období *fin de siècle*. Jejich společným průsečíkem je reflexe úzkostí a hrozeb přítomných v atmosféře světa konce Viktoriánské éry. Ten se stále více podřizuje zrychlujícímu se pokroku a nevyhnutelným sociálním a kulturním změnám.

Analýza používá pro vyřídění výskytů „žlutavosti“ dobová díla nápomocná pro orientaci v tehdejší víceznačnosti rozpínavé žluté. Všeobecně je přijímaná teze, že symbolika Dorianovy zničující knihy odvozuje svůj vizuální vzhled z literárního periodika *The Yellow book* a svůj obsah z Huysmansova *À rebours*. Tato žlutá triáda vlivných dekadentních publikací představujících vizuální stránku *The Yellow Book*, obsah Huysmansova *À rebours* a symboliku Dorianovy zničující knihy, lze aplikovat na tzv. Chambersův žlutý mýtus. Z takové syntézy krystalizují tři páry: vizualizace krále, obsah hry a znak jako symbol. Jakoby Chambers v této nesvaté trojici, která definuje žlutou jako vizuální, obsahovou a symbolickou existenci propojil v jednom kolektivním nosiči významu. Využívá žlutou jako nositele dekadentní tradice svých výše zmíněných literárních předchůdců při zachování všech tří aspektů jejich odkazu. A právě tento odkaz je konceptuálním původcem Chambersovy žluté knihy, žlutého krále a žlutého znamení.

Prvním ze tří literárních nástrojů, který v knize povídek evokuje pocit bezprostředního nebezpečí, je divadelní scénář v podobě knihy s názvem *Král ve žlutém*. Je popisována jako kniha velkých pravd a slouží jako metafora pro mnohé fenomény konce devatenáctého století. Cílem druhé kapitoly je analyzovat obsah těchto pravd ‘mise en abyme’ a jejich zdrcujícího vlivu na čtenáře. Hra šíří svůj jedovatý obsah a způsobuje emoční vypětí vedoucí až k šílenství a následné degeneraci. Svůj vysoce infekční obsah šíří za pomoci vysoce estetické formy ztvárnění. Její přímý účinek je škodlivý a vede k degradaci čtenáře. Tato jeho „žlutavost“ ovlivněná ideovým obsahem knihy vyjadřuje jinakost degenerace. Tak jak ji popisuje Max Nordau a tak jak ji lze nalézt v postavě Jean des Esseintes a v obsahu Huysmansova *À rebours*.

Fantom a transcendentální bytost *Král ve žlutém* je druhou literární pomůckou využívanou pro vyvolání extrémního emocionálního utrpení. Konfrontace se stresujícími okolnostmi všudypřítomného vývoje a vystavení jeho negativním psychologickým účinkům je metaforicky vyjádřeno prostřednictvím personifikace *Krále ve žlutém*. Cílem třetí kapitoly je analýza různých inkarnací *Krále ve Žlutém* a odhalení vizuálních vtělení tohoto baziliška. Nadpřirozená entita *Král ve žlutém* expanduje všemi směry a její proměnlivá vizualizace a odpudivost bájně Medúzy obsáhne tak odlišné koncepty jako nemoci, syfilitickou infekci, žluté nebezpečí či žlutou žurnalistiku. Jistotu infekce znásobují různé hmotné projevy tohoto žlutého baziliška. Žluté inkarnace krále představují odlišnost kontaminace. Skrytou v králově žlutém rouchu poskvrněném fantaskními barvami a rezonující s vizuální stránkou časopisu *The Yellow Book*.

Dokonce i metafora Žlutého znamení, třetího literárního prostředku vyvolávajícího strach, je spojena s textovou nejednoznačností. V období *fin de siècle* lze pozorovat mnoho významů žluté. Podobně může Žluté znamení, když je chápáno jako symbol, skrývat řadu významů a tyto můžou být mnohostranné a proměnlivé. Žlutému znamení tedy nelze přiřadit jediný význam. Účelem čtvrté kapitoly je zmapovat rozmanitost významů žlutého znamení. V souladu s chápáním žluté jako symbolické složky je analyzován také výskyt žlutých nebo přesněji zlatých asociací. Děsivé Žluté znamení symbolizuje korunu šíleného krále, posedlost leskem brnění, touhu po drahých kovech a moc nad životem a smrtí. Ve složité alegorii potom vstupenku do únikového světa hříšníků. Symbolika žluté obsažená v různých vyjádřeních významu ilustruje zatracení v mnoha podobách. Znamení prokleté Carcosy, Žluté znamení je stigmatizováno jako symbolika Dorianovy zničující knihy.

Vícevrstvá zápletka *Krále ve žlutém* je jako skládačka, hlavolam nebo hádanka. Jeho stránky jsou plné nálad a pocitů, které nebyly uklidněny a evokují nevyzpytatelné tajemství. Záhada zahalená metaforami a tropy obklopená narážkami a rezonující symbolickou řečí. Potlačením popisnosti nechává Chambers v *Králi ve žlutém* vyniknout vnitřnímu světu, a tím se hlásí k symbolismu. Zdá se, že sbírka *Král ve žlutém* odráží jako hlavní téma negativní dopady rychlého vývoje na člověka a společnost *fin de siècle*. Pokrok na přelomu století je vykládán jako bezprostřední hrozba a *Král ve žlutém* jako zlověstné varování před ní. Chambers zpracovává širokou škálu charakteristických znaků *fin de siècle* a jeho zásadních témat. Mimo jiné je to myšlenka symbolismu; art for art's sake a estetické vs nemorální; Darwinismus a otázku víry; Lombrosovu teorii „rozeného zločince“ a Nordauovu teorii degenerace; nadřazenost umělého nad přírodním; otázky pokroku a modernity atd. Jsou propojeny společným jmenovatelem nemorálnosti, prohřešení se, dekadence, degenerace, nemoci, šílenství, zjednodušeně vyjádřeno degradačními procesy.

Tento princip degradace lze vysledovat také ve výskytu symbolů žluté barvy v *Králi ve žlutém*. Hnědé a zlaté odstíny podzimního listí, morbidní barvy dekadence a syfilitické infekce jsou známkou kontaminace, šílenství a smrti. Žlutá závist se připisuje dračímu monstru Leviathanovi. Bílá maska patří d'áblu a bílá ke ztrátě víry. Žlutá je syfilis a červená je mor. Černá kočka je předzvěstí něčí smrti. S přihlédnutím k předdefinovanému významu Chambersových žlutých metafor - degenerovaná, kontaminovaná a zatracená - lze uzavřít výsledný význam žluté jako degradaci původní hodnoty, tj. druh devalvace. Pokud je *fin de siècle* tropem modernismu, pak *Král ve žlutém* je tropem strachu z něj. Žlutá již nehraje roli barvy, ale je to *idée fixe*, které protíná celý text a jako všudypřítomná hrozba je ukryta v každém příběhu.

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