

Synesthesia in Literature

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[-] Abstract and Keywords

Synaesthesia in Literature focuses on a particular facet of the broad set of possibilities its title may suggest: portrayals of fictional characters with neurological synesthesia in selected 20th and 21st century English-language works. These works cover a range of genres: mystery, comedy, drama, graphic novel, "literary" fiction. I will suggest that depictions of synaesthesia fall into five categories: Synaesthesia as Romantic Ideal, as Pathology, as Romantic Pathology, as Emotional Completeness, and as Accepted Anomaly. These different categories show tendencies to either disparage or glorify the perceptions of synaesthetes. I trace these tendencies back to descriptions of synaesthesia in 19th century seminal European works (written during a very fertile period of research into *audition colorée*), including Arthur Rimbaud's "Letter of a Seer", J-K Huysman's *Against Nature*, and Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, which either endorse or eschew notions of transcendence. I connect the increased number of contemporary fictional works with synaesthete-characters in late 20th and early 21st centuries with increased scientific research into synesthesia. As information about neurological synaesthesia filtered into the mainstream, it stirred the imaginations of writers of fiction. I conclude that synaesthesia has come to take on meanings beyond the mere fact of synaesthetic percepts, and describe what research is still needed, particularly regarding fictional works in languages other than English.

Keywords: synaesthesia and fiction, synesthesia and literary depictions, cross-sensory metaphor, Arthur Rimbaud "Voyelles", Charles Baudelaire "Correspondances", Max Nordau, J-K Huysmans "Against Nature", Max Nordau, TJ Parker "The Fallen", Kathryn Vaz "Saudade"

Introduction

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925/1995), the author describes the "yellow cocktail music" at the character Jay Gatsby's lavish Long Island parties. By putting together the sight word, "yellow" with the sound word, "music," the author evokes the parties' ambiance by letting readers both hear and "see" the pervasive music. When we think of the subject of "synesthesia and literature," this may bring to mind just such literary uses of synesthetic or cross-sensory metaphor, where perceptions from two different sensory modalities are blended together, for effect.

Literature around the world is full of cross-sensory metaphors, and this has been explored in numerous studies both scientific and literary, including such influential works as George Lakoff's (1980) classic *Metaphors We Live By*, Lawrence Marks' *Synaesthesia: the Unity of the Senses*, and Glenn O'Malley's *Shelley and Synaesthesia*. In both everyday language and literature, metaphor allows us to bring to light different aspects of the thing perceived, heightening the experience of it. But what of the people whose everyday perceptions of the world appear to resemble those cross-sensory metaphors in an automatic, real-life, *perceptual* sense—who in some ways appear to experience, literally, what the metaphor tries to express figuratively? What of the people who literally "see" the color yellow upon hearing the cocktail music? In other words, what of those with the neurological condition of synesthesia? The daily experience of such individuals (whom we can describe as "neurological synesthetes") involves a dual or multisensory response to stimuli that would produce only a unisensory response for most people. For example, synesthetes can experience music or even noise as both sound *and* color, as something both heard *and* seen.

While the field of synesthesia and literature covers a broad area, this chapter focuses on a particular "place" in that vast territory: how the experience of neurological synesthesia has been portrayed in literary works, with a special focus on twentieth- and twenty-first-century writings, particularly in English.¹ It also focuses on the roots of these portrayals in nineteenth-century European literature.

The term, "neurological synesthesia" can be used to describe those individuals with "developmental" or "congenital" synesthesia (i.e., those who have experienced synesthetic perceptions since infancy/childhood) and also "acquired synesthesia" (i.e., those who have acquired the perception as a result of drug use, head injury, or other trauma in later life). Neurological synesthetes have long been an object of curiosity and the "meaning" of their perceptions has elicited different theories, some exalting and some denigrating the "condition." The nineteenth-century Romantics glorified synesthetic perception. As Kevin Dann writes in his historical account of synesthesia, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*:

To many observers, synaesthetes...have been permitted a view of something that seems to hold more truth than their own non-synaesthetic...imagery.

(Dann 1998, 15)

Other thinkers, however, have not viewed strong synesthetic experiences in this lofty way. Instead, some have viewed neurological synesthesia as an unwholesome, unnatural, even pathological fusion and "confusion" of different sensory perceptions—compared to the "normal" perceptions of "healthy"

persons (i.e., “normalcy” is equated with “health”). This chapter will focus on the various “meanings” ascribed to the experience of neurological synesthesia in fictional portrayals of synesthetes.

We can find occasional synesthete-characters in fictional works of past centuries; however, in recent years, with renewed interest in synesthesia research, the appearance of synesthete-characters in fiction has multiplied, almost constituting a new literary genre and introducing a new literary type. This has been fed by a resurgence of scientific and artistic research into synesthesia in recent decades, with information subsequently filtering from the research community into popular media. It has led a range of artists, including fiction writers (some synesthetes themselves, some not) to portray neurological synesthetes as characters in their creative works. The nature of the different portrayals can be indicative of our developing general understanding of synesthesia and those who experience it. These fictional portrayals may or may not always be “accurate,” i.e., they may or may not correspond to reports of actual “real-life” synesthetes. Not surprisingly, some of the most realistic depictions of synesthetic experience tend to come from synesthete authors themselves (e.g., Vladimir Nabokov, Jane Yardley; see later in this chapter). Elsewhere, an author might simply see a dramatic or symbolic possibility in attributing the trait of synesthesia to a character. By doing so, the author may be more interested in producing a desired literary effect than in producing a portrayal faithful to the scientific data on synesthetes. Nevertheless, the different portrayals tell us something about how the human imagination has approached and tried to understand the phenomenon of neurological synesthesia and of those who are hosts to it.

We shall see in this chapter that synesthetic perception also takes on symbolic meaning, representing either a human capacity to transcend familiar perceptual boundaries or a degeneration of sorts to an earlier, “primitive” form of perception. While research shows that neurological synesthesia can take many forms, the types in literary depictions are mostly “word-color,” “music-color,” “taste-color,” and “word-taste” (i.e., synesthetes who experience colors from words, music, or taste, and those who experience taste from words). Our exploration of the different fictional representations of synesthetes and synesthesia will also move through some nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century works by a range of writers, both “popular” and “literary,” who have depicted the experience of synesthesia. We will see how later American and European literary portrayals of synesthetes had their roots in earlier depictions, particularly those by nineteenth-century poets Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, along with an influential work of Joris-Karl Huysmans—and the responses to those portrayals by admirers and critics alike.

The purpose of this chapter is not to judge the literary merits of the works discussed, but rather to go across the literary spectrum and consider the images of synesthetes that emerge from a range of fictional genres: from Romantic, to avant-garde, to naturalist, to realist, to magic-realist, to science-fiction, to mystery, to those in comic book/graphic novels. I begin by describing some of the literary roots of synesthesia, stemming from the Symbolist movement in nineteenth-century French poetry. I then more generally review fictional portrayals of synesthesia and synesthetes. In doing so, I show that they appear to fall into one of five categories (which become the subsequent sections of this chapter): (1) synesthesia as Romantic ideal, (2) synesthesia as Romantic pathology, (3) synesthesia as pathology, (4) synesthesia as emotional completeness, and (5) synesthesia as accepted anomaly.

The Roots of Portrayals of Synesthetes and Synesthesia

A prominent early appearance of synesthesia in literary works came at the end of the nineteenth century. At that time, the circle of French Symbolist poets were particularly captivated by “colored hearing” or “chromosthesia” (colored sensation). The nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud, author of the famous poem, “Vowels” (originally, “Voyelles”) about the perception of colored vowel sounds, first came across “audition colorée” (colored hearing) while combing through medical journals for scientific accounts of visionary experience² (and perhaps for understanding some of the drug-related hallucinations he had experienced). As John Harrison wrote in his *Synaesthesia: The Strangest Thing*:

Rimbaud had been fascinated with the idea of sensory fusion and spent much of his time searching French medical literature for descriptions of visionary experience.

(Harrison 2001, 13)

And, as Kevin Dann writes in his historical account of synesthesia, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*, Rimbaud connected visionary experience with the ability to “hear colors”:

Rimbaud linked synaesthesia with mystical visions not out of his own experience...but because he was following his sources, the early nineteenth century medical literature. An inveterate reader of encyclopedias and dictionaries, he searched those texts...and came upon descriptions of audition colorée the critic Felix Feneon had suggested that Rimbaud’s poem “Voyelles” was inspired by the medical literature on audition colorée...a suggestion later echoed by Rimbaud’s friend Ernest Delehay in his biography of the poet.

(Dann 1978, 23, 25)

Rimbaud’s fascination with “colored hearing” (later called synesthesia) led him to write the poem, “Vowels” in 1871 (later published in 1883). This comprised four stanzas of surreal associations, starting with descriptions of colored vowel sounds:

A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels,
I shall tell, one day, of your mysterious origins:
A, black velvety jacket of brilliant flies
which buzz around cruel smells,
Gulfs of shadow; E, whiteness of vapours and of tents,
Lances of proud glaciers, white kings, shivers of cow-parsley;
I, purples, spat blood, smile of beautiful lips

in anger or in the raptures of penitence;
U, waves, divine shuddering of viridian seas,
the peace of pastures dotted with animals, the peace of the furrows
which alchemy prints on broad studious foreheads;
O, sublime Trumpet full of strange piercing sounds,
Silences crossed by words and by angels:
—O the Omega! the violet beam of His Eyes!
(Rimbaud in Bernard (translator) 1962, 171)

Rimbaud and the other Symbolists believed that synesthetic perceptions were an indication that the “ordinary” things of this world were charged with an aesthetic and spiritual intensity which only a few “sensitives” or “seers” were able to apprehend. In the Symbolists’ view, the true function of poets was to transmit to others this heightened vision of “the ordinary” through the language of their poetic works—and synesthetic perception was exalted as a manifestation of such heightened vision. Indeed, in the final stanza of Rimbaud’s “Voyelles,” the synesthete-speaker’s exploration of his vision culminates in reaching a mystical state, “crossed by worlds and by angels.” However, it seems that Rimbaud, himself, may never have experienced the congenital, neurological variety of synesthesia that he and his fellow poets so admired. As the poet wrote, “I invented the colors of the vowels!” (Rimbaud 1873/1937, 285). In other words, writing the poem, “Voyelles” was perhaps a way for Rimbaud to imaginatively project himself into the synesthetic form of perception that he’d read about and which intrigued him (although Rimbaud possibly *had* experienced synesthetic perceptions as a result of the drug experimentation popular among his Symbolist circle) (Baron-Cohen and Harrison 1997, 9).

The Symbolist circle linked synesthesia and other non-ordinary perceptual states with the ability to glimpse the Romantic “sublime,” the ultimate truth and beauty the Romantics viewed as a source of artistic and mystical vision. Some believed that non-ordinary perceptual states like synesthesia were indicative of a future development of human consciousness. This view had descended from earlier Romantic poets such as Charles Baudelaire, who believed that “sensitives” and “seers” were able to perceive the mysterious subterranean connections among what appeared as discrete sensory experiences. In his poem, “Correspondences,” Baudelaire describes the faint “echoes” of synesthetic merging into a single unity, described as the “one low shadowy note”—the harmonious union of things heard, smelled, and seen, where “sound calls to fragrance, color calls to sound”:

Like echoes long that from afar rebound,
merged till one deep low shadowy note is born,
vast as the night or as the fires of morn,
sound calls to fragrance, colour calls to sound.
(Baudelaire in Shanks (translator) 1931)

Baudelaire, and later Rimbaud’s circle, believed this hidden unity was directly accessible only to the true poet—and to the synesthete—and Baudelaire returned to it in his later book, *Artificial Paradises*, where he describes his experience of sensory unity while under the influence of hashish:

Sound holds color, color holds music. Musical notes become numbers.

(Baudelaire in Diamond (translator) 1996, 19)

This “unity” was also described almost 100 years later by neuroscientist Lawrence Marks in his now classic work on the nature of metaphor, *Synaesthesia: the Unity of the Senses*, and by Kevin Dann, in *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*, his historical account of synesthesia:

To comprehend...that there are correspondences between dimensions of auditory and visual experience...is to discern, however dimly or remotely, that amidst the diversity of sensory perceptions, there is unity.

(Marks 1978, 2)

One can understand synaesthesia as a natural metaphor that is easily transferred to other topics because it is so expressive of the concepts of unity and harmony; because these things are in turn linked with our idea of the divine...when physicians and psychologists of the nineteenth century began to describe cases of chromosthetes...poets understood these individuals as gifted visionaries, like themselves.

(Dann 1998, 42)

Like others of his circle, Rimbaud believed the way for the “poet-voyant” (“seer-poet”) to attain such vision was by experimenting with sensory experience, or by imagining new combinations of sensory possibilities, even if the latter took a form considered “unnatural” and led to psychological torment. As Rimbaud wrote in his 1871 “Letter to Paul Demeny,” better known as “La Lettre du Voyant” (“Letter of a Seer”):

I say one must be a seer, make oneself a seer.

The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational *derangement of all the senses*. All forms of love, suffering and madness...He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences. Unspeakable torture where he needs all his faith, all his superhuman strength, where he becomes among all men the one accursed and the supreme Scholar! Because he reaches the *unknown!*

(Rimbaud in Fowle (translator), 2005, 377)

The result of exploring such visions would lead to a future universal poetic language:

The time of universal language will come...This language will be for the soul, containing everything, smells, sounds, colors, thought holding on to thought and pulling...These poets will exist.

(Rimbaud in Fowle (translator), 2005, 379)

Not only poets, but also scientists became intrigued by perceptions of “smells, colors, and sounds” corresponding, and by the late nineteenth century, the time was ripe for a reinvigorated study of synesthesia. “Voyelles” had an impact not only on the circle of 1880’s Symbolist poets and their admirers, but also on scientists of the day. In fact, in a reflection between art and science, the year after “Voyelles” was published, 16 scientific papers on audition colorée were also published (prior to “Voyelles,” the average was about three per year). At the 1889 International Conference on Physiological Psychology in Paris, the talks on audition colorée drew the most attention. As Kevin Dann writes:

In the mid-1880’s, the two topics talked about in nearly every Paris and Berlin salon were Wagner and the unconscious; audition colorée, especially Rimbaud’s poetic treatment of the subject.

(Dann 1998, 25)

The discussion was furthered by poet and arts essayist, René Ghil’s book, *Traité du Verbe*. In his book, Ghil, also at the forefront of the Symbolist movement, wrote of “audition colorée” as pointing to an evolving higher consciousness marked by a sensory and artistic fusion:

Indéniablement maintenant, voire de la Science autopsié, peint ses gammes le fait de l’Audition Colorée miraculeusement montée qu’avec humilité nous souhaitons, ou tous les Arts, inconsciemment impiés reviendront se perdre en la totale Communion: la Musique l’épouvante qui intronise la Divinité seule, Poésie ... A moi, de m’enquérir de la cause: une phase, sans doute, d’une évolution progressive de nos sens élevés. (Ghil, 1886, 25) [translation: Now, undeniably, scientific review gives validity to the miraculous fact of colored hearing, which points to that distant time we humbly await, where all the Arts, in their unconscious irreverence, will return and lose themselves in a total Communion: that terrifying Music that will enthrone the only Divinity, Poetry... In my estimation, this is most certainly a phase in the evolution of our higher senses.]

While the circle of Symbolist poets and their followers represented synesthesia as a glimpse into the Sublime (i.e., a glimpse into more refined and mystical realms of reality; a step forward in human evolution) others took a far dimmer view of the phenomenon. A debate ensued. Literary critics such as Max Nordau asserted that views expressed by Symbolists Baudelaire and Rimbaud were decadent, “exert[ing] a disturbing and corrupting influence on a whole generation” (Nordau, 1895, preface, viii). Nordau viewed the blended perceptions of synesthetes as a degenerate, “diseased state of mind.” For Nordau, the idea of even accepting, let alone celebrating synesthetes’ “confused” perceptions (as he termed them) was dangerous to human advancement. In his 1895 book, *Degeneration* (originally published in German, 1892 as *Ertartung*), Nordau described the blended perceptions of synesthesia as “a descent from the height of human perfection to the low level of the mollusk” (Nordau 1895, 142).

Other critics and scientists of a more rational and less Romantic turn of mind supported Nordau’s view, but not all. Romanian scientist Eduard Gruber exalted, in fact, the sound-color perceptions of the synesthetes he studied as “an echo of the mathematical structure of the Cosmos” (Dann 1998, 32). By the 1890s, it became clear that those interested in synesthesia fell into two camps—those who glorified the perception and those who denigrated it. Swiss psychologist Théodore Flournoy tried to mediate between the two extreme views, calling for a more objective view of colored hearing. As Flournoy said, synesthesia deserved “Ni cet excès d’honneur, ni cette indignité” (Flournoy 1893, 250), or “Neither excess of honor nor indignity.” Such a moderate view, he felt, would be the best way to further research in the field. Until the trait of synesthesia was better understood, no conclusion about its value (or lack thereof) could be reached.

In looking at later fictional representations of synesthetes and their experiences, it is not Flournoy’s more objective view that is expressed, but rather the extreme views, even in the fictional portrayals of today. In literary portrayals of synesthetes that have appeared over the decades, we find examples of synesthetic perceptions either lifting their hosts to transcendent realms (e.g., extolling the primacy of individual imagination) or plunging them into pathological symptoms of sensory overload, such as headaches, seizures, isolation, or an unwholesome “unraveling” and distorting of the senses. An example of the former is the Romantic view we find in Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *The Gift* (1963/1991) and an example of the latter is the pathological Colonel Kachwah in Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* (both discussed later in this chapter). In some cases, we see a combination of these extremes: though the synesthetic perceptions may overwhelm their synesthete-hosts with various forms of suffering, they are also a source of artistic and mystical vision, allowing them to experience life on a “higher” or “deeper” plane. Such a view is expressed in the portrayal of the composer, Milan, in Holly Payne’s *The Sound of Blue*, and of the nun, Sister John, in Mark Salzman’s *Lying Awake* (discussed later).

Only in a few very recent works of fiction do we find synesthetes possessing an anomalous trait deserving “neither excess of honor nor indignity,” but which is simply a feature of the way they perceive the world. We find such views in portrayals, discussed below, of the character Darlene Sable in T.J. Parker’s detective novel, *The Fallen*, in Jane Yardley’s *Painting Ruby Tuesday*, and in Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth*. However, even these more objective portrayals contain hints of the extreme parallel views, so strong is the nineteenth-century influence represented by Nordau, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire. In the following sections I classify five different functions of synesthesia within fiction, primarily from twentieth- and twenty-first-century sources.

Synesthesia as Romantic Ideal

As noted earlier, the Romantic ideal extols the primacy and beauty of individual imagination and presents an expanded vision of reality. This ideal is found to a great extent in synesthete characters penned by Nabokov, such as the character Fyodor in Nabokov’s work, *The Gift*. Fyodor is a young, gifted émigré poet living in Berlin, who experiences words as having vivid colors. The portrayal of Fyodor’s synesthetic perceptions evokes a vision of transcendent beauty, and as such, synesthetic perception gets a Romantic treatment (minus any decadent edge) in this character. At the start of *The Gift*, Fyodor says,

The various numerous “a”s of the four languages which I speak differ for me in tinge, going from lacquered-black to splintery-gray like different

sorts of wood. I recommend to you my pink flannel "m" ...If I had some paints handy I would mix burnt sienna and sepia for you as to match the color of a..."ch" sound...and you would appreciate my radiant "s" if I could pour into your cupped hands some of those luminous sapphires that I touched as a child.

(Nabokov 1963/1991, 75)

For the character Fyodor, the perception of language as a landscape of shimmering, luminous colors and textures is a gift which allows the poet to express the transcendent beauty of words. It also harkens back to a romanticized view of the "pure perceptions" of childhood, which we also find in nineteenth-century early Romantic poets like Wordsworth (e.g., in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"; 1804). From the Romantic view, it is the poet's task to restore the glory of childhood perceptions, and to let others see the beauty of the Sublime

The author Nabokov was himself a literary artist and a synesthete, very much like his main character Fyodor. Given this, one wonders if Nabokov is putting some of his own feelings about his synesthesia into the mouth of his protagonist. In his 1951 autobiography, *Speak Memory*, author Nabokov tells us he, himself "presents a fine case of colored hearing." An excerpt follows from the author's now famous description of his colored (and textured) alphabet:

A French a evokes polished ebony. The black group [of letters] also includes hard g (vulcanized rubber) and y (a sooty rag being ripped). Oatmeal n, noodle-limp l, and the ivory-backed hand mirror of o take care of the whites...Passing on to the blue group, there is steely x, thundercloud z, and huckleberry k...I hasten to complete my list before I am interrupted. In the green group, there are alder-leaf f, the unique apple of p, and pistachio r. Dull green somehow combined with violet, is the best I can do for w...Finally, among the reds, b has the tone called burnt sienna by painters, m is a fold of pink flannel, and today I have at last perfectly matched v with "Rose Quartz" in Maerz and Paul's Dictionary of Color.

(Nabokov 1989b, 34–35)

Nabokov also portrays a synesthete-character, Cincinnatus in his 1959 experimental novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*. Cincinnatus is a prisoner, jailed for an incomprehensible crime called "gnostical turpitude." His crime appears to be insisting on the validity of his own personal heightened synesthetic perception in a society where citizens dare not go against the "officially sanctioned" version of reality. Even his name, Cincinnatus suggests a kind of double "sinning at us." Cincinnatus takes a defiant pride in his unique form of perception, which he feels results from senses more acute and more alive than most. Reminiscent of Rimbaud's view of the poet and his special gift of perception, the character says,

I am not an ordinary—I am the one among you who is alive—not only are my eyes different and my hearing and my sense of taste—not only is my sense of smell like a deer's, my sense of touch like a bat's—but most important, I have the capacity to conjoin all of this in one point.

(Nabokov 1951/1989b, 52)

Interestingly, in a novel by Brent Kernan called *The Synaesthete* (written nearly half a century later, in 2002), the main character, Carly Jackson, recalls the character Cincinnatus. Like Cincinnatus, Carly is a synesthete who hears colors and sees flavors. As Cincinnatus is accused of "gnostical turpitude," Carly is accused of a similarly mysterious crime of "moral turpitude," also a crime of differing perception stemming from her synesthesia. Like Cincinnatus, Carly is society's prisoner: in her case, a prisoner of the military, who wants to use her synesthesia for its own purposes. (Carly's character will be further explored in this chapter's next section, "Synesthesia as Romantic pathology.")

If the characters Cincinnatus and Carly Jackson show us individual perception suppressed, then the character Synaesthesia Jackson in the 2000 *Top Ten* graphic-novel/comic book series, shows synesthetic perception unchained and liberated. Synaesthesia Jackson is a detective on the "Top Ten Police Force" in Neopolous, a city populated exclusively by super-heroes, each with a different superpower. Detective Synaesthesia Jackson's superpower lies in her synesthesia. Here liberated, synesthetic perception (suppressed or controlled in characters Cincinnatus and Carly) has the power to fuse disparate clues into a single solution to a crime. For example, this super-hero describes how her synesthesia led to her certainty of a suspect's guilt:

It was her perfume I smelled on Graczik's body, but I translated it into music. She was Graczik's off-world drug customer.

(Ha and Moore 2002, n.p.)

While Synaesthesia Jackson's experiences may not guide her to Rimbaud's realm of mystical truth, her unusual lens brings her to a "place" where disparate perceptions converge to show another kind of "truth"—that of a person's guilt or innocence. The depiction of the character's synesthetic perception descends from the romantic notion of synesthesia as heightened perception—and in this work, it is a superpower, no less!

Detective Jackson's language of synesthesia enables her to synthesize information and solve crimes; it does not, however, escape the skepticism of the other super-heroes on the Top Ten force who are not synesthetes. Her fellow super-heroes wonder if Detective Synaesthesia could have solved the mysteries even without the synesthetic perceptions, which make no sense to them. Was it really necessary to translate the perfume into music to know it was a valid clue? Was the synesthetic response superfluous? Would just smelling the perfume on the victim's body have been enough? Despite the poking of fun, the *Top Ten* series nevertheless represents Synaesthesia Jackson's "language of synesthetic clues" as a superpower (whose only "down side" is the doubt of others), and so we place her story in the category of "synesthesia as Romantic ideal," albeit with a modern whiff of skepticism.

Synesthesia as Romantic Pathology

Synesthesia in Literature

In the nineteenth century, the advent of the industrial revolution and the rise of science made many question the tenets of long-held conventional religious belief and traditional values about what constituted the “proper place” of things. Further, artists felt that the increasing acceptance of an objective, scientific world view put the validity of individual imagination and spiritual vision under attack. Artists felt the need to break through to a new vision by rejecting received truths and experimenting with the unknown, even if that meant cultivating experiences deemed forbidden. For example, Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondences” expresses the idea of finding the soul through the pursuit of heightened sensory experience, even those experiences that might “corrupt.” It is this element of corruption that we might consider a Romantic pathology.

The ambiance of Baudelaire’s poem also pervades J.-K. Huysmans’ 1884 novel, *Against Nature* (original French title: *A Rebours*). The novel’s very title suggests a kind of corruption, a going against the natural order of things. The portrayal of the main character, Des Esseintes, is emblematic of modern sensibility at that time, as he can believe in neither received truths about God nor the goodness of nature. Instead, Des Esseintes looks within himself, to the landscape of his own idiosyncrasies, and pursues personal obsessions and exotic sensations. Synesthetic blendings become emblematic of the decadent delights in which the character revels. In the following passage, probably the most-oft quoted one from *Against Nature*, the character perceives the taste of a given liquor as corresponding to the sound of a particular musical instrument—so that he succeeds in “transferring different pieces of music to his palate”:

Indeed, each and every liquor, in his opinion, corresponded in taste with the sound of a particular instrument. Dry curucao, for instance, was like the clarinet with its piercing, velvety note; kummel like the oboe with its sonorous, nasal timbre; crème de menthe and anisette like the flute, at once sweet and tart, soft and shrill...He even succeeded in transferring specific pieces of music to his palate...by mixing or contrasting related liquors.

(Huysmans in Baldick (translator), 1959, 58–59)

This notion of transferring music to one’s palate and playing symphonies in one’s mouth was a shocking one; to many, it crossed forbidden boundaries and degraded the ethereal beauty of music. Huysmans’ novel was condemned as hostile to religion by Catholic reviewers of his time, and even the great novelist Emile Zola, who, as leader of the school of Naturalism (the faithful rendering in fiction of “things as they are” without prettifying or romanticizing them) felt *Against Nature* went “too far,” saying Huysmans’ work dealt a “terrible blow” to the movement.

Others like George Moore and Oscar Wilde greatly admired the novel’s “naturalist” depiction of sensations previously unexplored in literature. As Wilde described *Against Nature*, “the heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain” (Baldick 1959, 11). The view of synesthesia as Romantic pathology also carried over into twentieth- and even twenty-first-century novels, as we shall see later in this chapter. Even in the 1964 book, *Shelley and Synaesthesia*, author Glenn O’Malley describes the dim view of synesthetic imagery taken by earlier critics and even many of his own contemporaries,

Such transfers among vocabularies (e.g., “strident color”) are still regarded as eccentric or even abnormal in origin so that a writer’s frequent or otherwise extraordinary use of them may invite special notice along psychological lines.

(O’Malley 1964, 3)

Synesthesia can also be viewed as Romantic pathology in later fictional works. If the 2000 *Top Ten* character, Synaesthesia Jackson shows synesthetic vision liberated, the 2002 novel *The Synaesthete*, shows main character Carly Jackson’s synesthetic vision held hostage (by military, cyber, and social forces). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, synesthete Carly is accused of the crime of “moral turpitude”—a crime of differing perception which apparently threatens the status quo. As Kernan’s novel is written in a higher-tech age than was, say, Nabokov’s, the imaginative possibilities of a character’s synesthesia have expanded. In the futuristic world in which Carly moves, the military view her synesthesia as a pathology, although they also see synesthetic perception’s vast potential if properly controlled and exploited for their purposes (which is to create a new computer source code). As her former commanding officer says of Carly:

The specialist came to us with a disease of the mind. It’s called synaesthesia...but it becomes useful because her mind reduces sensory perception down to mathematics, to symbolic representations of what she perceives. I’ll give you a simple example. Mathematics and music are integrally related. A pitch can be heard, but it can also be represented by the rate of vibrations traveling through a medium...all mathematical relationships can be reduced to music...any computer program can be played on a piano...Source code which is written out as language is infinitely inferior to source code that can be expressed or understood through the senses because only then can the true simultaneity of events be expressed.

(Kernan 2002, 79–80)

Carly is compelled to put her synesthesia in the service of the military. Later in the novel, she uses her synesthetic abilities to escape from military control and becomes a “cyber-outlaw.” However, her synesthetic gifts and the expanded potential they bring, come with a price: if not properly channeled, her synesthesia can cause Carly to suffer overwhelming headaches and hallucinations that she is unable to distinguish from reality. In this way, the portrayal of Carly’s synesthesia fits neatly under “synesthesia as Romantic pathology.” Her outlaw activities in the cyber-world give her an almost super-hero status, but this is tempered by the sensory confusion she must contend with.

Similarly, in T.J. Parker’s 2007 novel *The Fallen* (which reached *The New York Times*’ best-seller list), the synesthetic abilities of the main character, Detective Robbie Brownlaw help him to solve crimes for the city of San Diego. Detective Brownlaw is not a congenital synesthete, but rather gains synesthetic abilities after a fall from a ten-story building causes a neural abnormality. Following his fall and the onset of his acquired synesthesia, Detective Brownlaw begins to perceive people’s words as colors and shapes coming from their mouths. The particular colors and shapes let him know the emotional state of the person—and most importantly, whether s/he is telling the truth. The character describes his newly-acquired experience of synesthesia as follows:

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My life was ordinary until three years ago when I was thrown out of a downtown hotel window. No one knows it except my wife, but I now have synaesthesia, a neurological condition where your senses get mixed up. Sometimes when people talk to me, I see their voices as colored shapes. It happens when they get emotional...[The shapes] linger in mid-air between the speaker and me.

(Parker 2007, 5)

Detective Brownlaw's synesthetic signals help him when he investigates a murder, uncovering related corruption, and a prostitution ring called "Squeaky Cleans":

"You can tell us what you know about Squeaky Cleans," I said.

"Squeaky Cleans?" he asked. "I'm not sure what you mean."

The red squares of the lie spilled from his mouth.

(Parker 2007, 173)

Although the Detective's synesthesia offers an advantage for his job, it also creates a problem in his personal life:

The condition is hard for me to talk about, even with [my wife] Gina...it annoys her that even her white lies announce themselves to me as bright red squares.

(Parker 2007, 6)

After his marriage breaks up, Brownlaw explores synesthesia research and associations on the web and discovers a department at the University of California, San Diego dedicated to the study of synesthesia (a fact). He then attends a meeting of the San Diego "Synesthesia Society." The evening's speaker was Darlene Sable, (fictional) author of *Red Sax and Lemon Cymbals*,³ which gives a description of her growing up synesthetic. After the meeting, some members go out for coffee, and Detective Brownlaw is asked to describe his synesthesia to the group:

"I see blue triangles from a happy speaker. Red squares come from liars. Envy comes out in green trapezoids, so "green with envy" is literally true for me. Aggression shows up as small black ovals."

"That's not synaesthesia," said Bart. "I've read every word ever written about the subject, and no one has ever established that a speaker's emotions can be visualized...What do you see coming from my mouth right now?"

"Little black ovals. Quite a few of them." [answered the detective.]

(Parker 2007, 279–280)

This exchange gives us a bit of satire on disputes among synesthetes, which sometimes occur, while at the same time showing us how Detective Brownlaw's synesthesia functions.

As news of scientific research has filtered into mainstream society, a number of authors have been inspired to create detective-characters with synesthesia, almost leading to a whole genre of synesthete-detective novels (mentioned in a list of "Further reading" at the end of this chapter). In *The Fallen* and others, the detective-character acquires the synesthetic perception as a result of a near-fatal accident. The resulting synesthesia is depicted as giving the character an extra-sensory advantage, i.e., an ability to view a normally hidden layer of reality, thus putting this type of portrayal in the category of synesthesia as Romantic pathology.

Synesthetic colors are put to a very different use—and in a very different setting—in Holly Payne's 2005 novel, *The Sound of Blue*, which is mostly set in a refugee camp during the Balkan War. The character, Milan is a Serbian composer who experiences music as having color. His synesthetic experiences, though beautiful, trigger epileptic episodes. The luminous colors of music the composer experiences share more with the transcendent beauty experienced by Nabokov's Fyodor, but with an added Romantic pathology. As the novel tells us of Milan, the composer,

Color had ordered the composer's hand. Without color, he heard

nothing. He filled notebooks with the sound of yellow and red. Purple.

Green. Pink...Like Liszt and Stravinsky, Kandinsky and Rimbaud, Milan shared the multisensory perception of synaesthetes, and unfortunately the seizures that about 4 per cent of them endured...Milan's epilepsy resulted from his multi-sensory experiences...The hallucinations, when triggered repeated themselves involuntarily and could drive him to the brink of madness with their vividness.

(Payne 2005, 90–91)

Milan suffers for his musical visions with headaches and seizures, which reaches back to Rimbaud's notion of artists as a "seers" who must suffer for their sublime visions. For Milan, the product of these visions is a refuge—and a source of meaning in his life:

He felt secure in the music and sheltered from the torment of seizures

within the shades and shadows of blue.

(Payne 2005, 91)

Here the character's synesthesia is presented as a "blessed" pathology: one that, despite the pain it produces allows a peak into a sublime realm. The

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vision taken from this realm is incorporated into works of art, which have a stirring, and also a healing effect on others as well. Milan's compositions have a deeply moving and soothing effect on fellow-residents of the Balkans refugee camp:

Sara, too, turned toward the sound...the coupling of notes was unlike any she had ever heard...The sounds pierced and jabbed her heart...the notes gathered in circles, releasing halos of sound that floated up for each of them to hold.

(Payne 2005, 48)

The idea that synesthetic perception can take one beyond the boundaries of ordinary consciousness, leading to the creation of works of art that give others a taste of sublime realms is also expressed in Mark Salzman's 2000 novel, *Lying Awake*. Here, too, the novel's main character, Sister John, is able to inspire others with the beauty of her synesthesia-inspired art and visions. Sister John is both a poet and nun, and her synesthetic perceptions of colored and textured hearing are components of the exquisite poetry she writes and the mystical states she experiences.

When he [the priest] began chanting Mass...his voice was a rich sienna, the color of reassurance...Sister John heard each of her sister's voices as if they were chanting alone: Sister Christine sounded as if her throat were lined with mother-of-pearl, while Sister Anne's voice had more texture, like a bowed instrument...Mother Mary Joseph's voice was mostly breath, forming a kind of white sound that helped blend the others.

(Salzman 2000, 134)

However, as in *The Sound of Blue* and other works in this category, suffering is concomitant to the synesthetic experience. Sister John's ecstatic experiences are preceded by debilitating migraine headaches and followed by seizures that cause her to need medical treatment

Hearing the voices together, she perceived them as all woven together to form a tapestry...

The tapestry lit up.

Fractures and other imperfections—including her epilepsy—became irrelevant; a much deeper beauty revealed itself now.

(Salzman 2000, 135)

The view of synesthesia expressed here is also in the category of Romantic pathology—however with a modern edge. When a CT scan reveals that the nun's non-ordinary states of consciousness are caused by a form of epilepsy, Sister John must face the question: are her experiences genuine encounters with the Divine—or mere symptoms of a neural pathology?

Synesthesia as Indicative of Pathology

Yet another group of novels present synesthetic perception as pathology, but minus the bonus of contact with the mystical, the Sublime, or the super-human. For example, in Salman Rushdie's 2005 novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, the character's synesthesia has no redeeming power and is shown as symptomatic of a dark psychological pathology caused by repression of his own humanity. The synesthete-character is Colonel (later General) Kachhwah, a commanding officer in the Indian army, stationed in 1959 Kashmir. His synesthesia is a complex multifaceted type, at times causing an unbearable feeling of sensory overload. As the novel describes Colonel Kachhwah's condition:

He barely had words to describe...these blurrings. He saw sounds nowadays. He heard colors. He tasted feelings. He had to control himself in conversation, lest he ask, "What is that red noise?"

(Rushdie 2005, 100)

We see Colonel Kachhwah's synesthesia results from his suppressing an impulse toward beauty and poetry:

His senses were changing into one another...What was hearing? What was taste? He hardly knew. He was in command of twenty thousand men and he thought the color gold sounded like a bass trombone. He needed poetry. A poet could explain him to himself, but he was a soldier...If he spoke of his need for poetry, his men would think him weak.

(Rushdie 2005, 100)

In his inner world, Colonel Kachhwah's synesthetic perceptions also serve to distort and disguise the horror of his actions

The confusion of his senses grew ever more extreme. The idea of violence had a velvet softness now...Bullets entered flesh like music, the pounding of clubs was the rhythm of life, and then there was...the demoralization of the population through the violation of its women. In that dimension every color was bright and tasted good.

(Rushdie 2005, 291)

Here synesthesia is symptomatic of a kind of decadence (in this case a "decaying" of the Colonel's humanity). But it is a decadence unredeemed by spiritual longing or the pursuit of poetical vision of ultimate truth or beauty.

While Colonel Kachhwah's synesthesia manifests as a psychological pathology, in Julia Glass' 2006 novel, *The Whole World Over*, the character Saga's synesthesia manifests as a physical one. Saga is a 34-year-old woman whose colored-word synesthesia results from a head injury. She suffers memory loss. Since her injury, words have taken on colors for her. Saga's synesthesia is portrayed as symptomatic of her injury and also her

resulting isolation from the flow of life around her:

The word would fill her mind for a few minutes with a single color: not an unpleasant sensation but still an intrusion.

(Glass 2006, 116)

At the same time, Saga's experience of colored words strikes the reader as poetic. It is typical of synesthetic descriptions, in its attempt to evoke the perception's colors with great precision:

There was the house. House: a word as big and gray as a summer storm cloud, but flat, solid, quiet. House. Ramekin. Boyfriend (china blue, Yale blue). Baby (white as the innards of a milkweed pod): Four delicious words.

(Glass 2006, 256)

The story, which is set mainly in Manhattan, New York—ends with the tragedy of 9/11. Saga's colored words also becomes emblematic of a larger social pathology

She avoided the paper along with radio and TV. Too much busy noise. Sometimes a swath of current events...dropped into her consciousness like a comet—that's how she knew that she'd once known about Bosnia and Romanian orphans. *Herzogovina*...The word a deep blue lavender, the color of Uncle Marsden's favorite hyacinths.

(Glass 2006, 444)

If Saga's synesthesia is symptomatic of pathology, her colorful words also hold the components of the life story she has lost along with her memory. The vivid words she now experiences are the building blocks of the story she will eventually recover, bit by bit. In this way, Saga's synesthesia is not just a symptom of her pathology but also a key to healing it. I further examine this healing quality of synesthesia in the next section.

Synesthesia as Emotional Completeness

The notion of synesthetic colors as having healing power is expressed in the acclaimed 1994 magic-realist novel, *Saudade*. One can imagine the possibilities of presenting synesthetic perception in a magic-realist context, and the author, Katherine Vaz, realizes them beautifully here. In *Saudade*, the main character, Clara, is born deaf to a family in a fishing community in the Azores Islands of Portugal. Clara's synesthesia is not depicted as pathological, but rather, as a quirkily beautiful compensation or coping-mechanism for her congenital deafness. She develops a visual language of words as colored shapes, which helps her learn to read. In the course of the novel, a tragedy occurs: Clara's child dies; this emotional trauma causes her to lose her relationship to language and her ability to read (an ability she very much prizes). It is during this painful period of her life that Clara meets Helio, who becomes her lover. Helio is intrigued by Clara's secret world of color and wants to share it, while also wanting to help Clara overcome her trauma. He re-teaches her to read, realizing the key is employing her personal, synesthetic colors:

To recapture her lost ability of reading, he chose 26 tints for each letter of the alphabet and set about copying books for her. "Clara, what do you think?" he asked.

"Well, fine," said Clara. "But why don't you make words into their own color-shapes instead of spelling them out?"

(Vaz 1994, 217)

Helio encourages Clara to explore her perceptions more deeply. In doing so, she discovers that the colors of words can be transposed to form the colors of music

Colors could guide her not only to producing sounds on an instrument, they had sound themselves! It meant that words could be reborn as colors but also as actual music..."I can play books directly on the piano!" Clara tells Helio excitedly.

(Vaz 1994, 228)

Clara and Helio collaborate on synesthetic art—the rest of the town rejoices and is exhilarated, even liberated by it:

When he wrote a painting in tribute...and Clara converted it to music, the caged birds throughout town chewed their iron bars, desperate to fly toward the rejoicing, and the people of Lodi begged Clara for a concert.

(Vaz 1994, 229)

In this way, in *Saudade*, the synesthetic vision comes to represent wholeness, health, and a healing that can be shared with others through art.

Synesthetic colors can therefore represent health and wholeness for the character who possesses them. This view of synesthesia reaches back to Rimbaud and Baudelaire's belief in the transformative power of personal perception and its promise of taking those who pursue it to a place of truth and greater vision. In *Saudade*, that vision includes physical and psychological health and wholeness.

Similarly, in the 2003 pre-teen book, *A Mango-Shaped Space*, the 13-year-old Mia loses her synesthesia when her beloved cat, Mango dies. Mia regains the perception only after resolving the trauma of her loss.⁴ The following is an exchange between Mia and her psychologist:

"If I'm so strong, then why are my colors gone?"

He doesn't answer right away. "When did this happen?"

"Right after Mango...after he...after he died."

"How do you feel about it?"

"Empty," I tell him honestly. "Flat."

..."Your colors will return, Mia. I promise. And you'll feel three-dimensional again."

(Mass 2005 255)

Equating the presence of synesthetic perception with well-being, wholeness and completeness is also represented in Jane Yardley's novel, *Painting Ruby Tuesday*. The main character, Annie is a songwriter who perceives music and language in color. The novel shows flashbacks to her childhood, where she copes with the death of a synesthete-friend. We see how her synesthetic experience provides an aid in solving the mystery of her friend's death. Here we have the idea of synesthesia as a special way of seeing/thinking that may offer advantages—but the perception is not viewed as "mystical" or "super-human." Rather it is identified more with the idea of completeness, originality, and artistic vision possessed by a unique few. In one of the novel's scenes, Annie and another synesthete-musician explore their musical perceptions to a piece of Boogie-Woogie. They are both exhilarated by the synesthetic landscape they share:

"What colors do you hear there?"

"It sounds green to me" I said...

"Ok, let's see if I can modulate it to bring you some others."

Her Broadway boogie-woogie slid bluey into the relative minor key. "Now?" she asked.

"Bluer!" I laughed back at her. "It's going blue!"

"Magic!" cried Mrs. Clitheroe, her hands dancing on the keyboard.

"Knock knock," said a man's voice. "Are we interrupting something?"

It was Horace and Doris Frobisher from Sunday School.

I wanted to holler at them. I wanted to scream, "Get out! Leave us alone!"

(Yardley 2003, 79–80)

Here, a hole of sorts is punctured in the soaring spirits and synesthetic visions of the two friends by the presence of the uncomprehending Sunday school couple, whose more conventional, prosaic vision deflates the synesthetes' expanding one.

Synesthesia as Accepted Anomaly

In this final section we might consider how synesthesia can be represented in fiction as an accepted anomaly: it is taken as an everyday facet of life for the synesthete. An example is found in Parker's *The Fallen*. The synesthetic perceptions of the novel's protagonists are ultimately viewed as an ordinary fact about the character's way of perceiving the world. They might yet bring their host a layer of aesthetic delight and a sense of well-being, but only so long as they are simply accepted as a unique way of perceiving. The character, Darlene Sable writes a book to explain her journey as a synesthete:

From early childhood she remembered "seeing music"...the saxophone was of course, red, and cymbals lemon yellow; violins were lime green, guitars magenta, and so on. By the time she was five, she knew that not everyone saw music like she did...though it never interfered with her life in any way.

(Parker 2007, 278)

Here, synesthesia is not represented as a debilitating, painful pathology, but simply as a way the character happens to perceive the world. Her synesthesia still offers an aesthetic advantage, allowing her to appreciate a beautiful visual dimension to the music:

As an adult, she had become a piano instructor and nothing pleased her as much as sitting next to a young student and seeing the swells of crimson music flowing out of the instrument.

(Parker 2007, 279)

I described earlier a tone of satire found in *The Fallen*, which again shows how hard it is for most to fathom the synesthete's experience or the seriousness synesthetes can attach to it. Despite the satire, however, the view of congenital synesthesia in *The Fallen* comes close to Flournoy's idea of synesthesia as deserving "neither excess of honor nor indignity." Darlene's only real problem vis-à-vis her synesthetic perception is feeling it misunderstood by the majority who does not share it. When Darlene learns to accept her synesthesia, she gives herself over to the enjoyment of this fact of her inner life.

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Similarly, in the 2007 short piece, *Phone Home*, author Natasha Lvovich, herself a synesthete, presents her Russian-émigré's character's synesthesia merely as a fact of her inner life. The character is conscious of the visual quality, the "look" of her inner panic; its synesthetic elements form the building blocks of her awareness. In the following excerpt, we find a striking description of feeling taking form, as the character experiences the tragedy of 9/11:

First, in complete silence, the yellow wall in my room cracks, spreading its spider web threads as fast and as slowly as is only possible in a dream. Chill is crawling down my spine; hot puffs throb into my head. This is panic, fear, terror—a preverbal pre-Russian sensation that has yet no name. I am regressing into pre-consciousness, into pure physiology: the adrenaline, the serotonin, the chemical reactions in my brain, until I start to discern first colors then words: thin scarlet and gluey yellow—*koshmar* (horror, literally meaning nightmare), then chestnut brown *remont*.

(Lvovich 2010)

In the category of "synesthesia as accepted anomaly," we also have a strong sense of a character's "meta-perception," i.e., his or her ability to observe herself perceiving. Similarly, in Monique Truong's (2010) *Bitter in the Mouth*, both the main character's synesthetic word-taste perceptions—as well as her own hyper-awareness of them—are presented. The main character's word-taste synesthesia is shown as a fact of her inner life—one that comes with distracting discomforts, but also pleasures. This character, Linda/Linh-Dao, is of Vietnamese origin, adopted as a baby by well-to-do white parents in the southern town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina. Linda/Linh-Dao must contend with both the inner and outer anomalies of her identity—the aspect that is visible and obvious to others (the fact of her Asian heritage and the discrimination she faces in her all-white, small, southern town) and the one that is known only to herself (her experience of flavored words):

When my teacher asked, "Linda, where did the English first settle in North Carolina?" the question would come to me as, "Lindamint, where did the English *maraschino* cherry first *Pepto-Bismol* settle in North Carolina *canned peas*?"

Many of the words that I heard or had to say aloud brought with them a taste—unique, consistent, and most often unrelated to the meaning of the word that had sent the taste rolling into my mouth.

(Truong 2010, 21)

Linda shares her secret "word-tastes" only with her best friend, Kelly. The two friends communicate in letters to minimize the overwhelming barrage of tastes brought on by spoken words in a conversation (reading written words does not bring the character the "taste-reaction"):

I had shared my secret sense with Kelly in letter #26. After she read that her name tasted of canned peaches, she wrote back and asked "Packed in heavy syrup or in its own juice?"

(Truong 2010, 21)

In response, Kelly helps Linda devise ways to overcome the distraction of incoming flavored words, by offering her different foods (chewing gum, mints, and even dipping tobacco) to overwhelm the synesthetic tastes. With the help and acceptance of her friend Kelly, Linda/Linh-Dao finds effective coping mechanisms for her stream of incoming word-flavors. She becomes an "A" student, and follows in the family tradition of going to Yale University and becoming a lawyer. While her synesthetic sensory load must be managed, she never wishes to be rid of it. Her flavored words can bring her pleasure too. She describes her happy experience hearing the name of her beloved uncle, also known as "Baby Harper":

Babyhoney Harpercelery.

The honey, a percolating bubble full of flowers and citrus, bursts wide open when the sea of celery—the only vegetable I know that comes pre-salted—washes in. An unexpectedly pleasurable combination of flavors that made me wobbly in the knees.

(Truong 2010, 43)

Toward the end of the book, Linda/Linh-Dao learns that her "condition" is part of a known phenomenon. After watching and reading the transcript of a PBS television program on synesthesia, Linda is relieved to find others with similarly anomalous perceptions. She develops a strong desire to understand and connect with the community of synesthetes, but is disappointed when the program's producer is hesitant to give her their contact details. She feels an immediate link with them as they tell their stories. Her research continues into the lives of famous and deceased synesthetes, such as Nabokov, Kandinsky, Messiaen, and Scriabin.

The book also makes a plea for all those non-artists—the baker, the lawyer—who are part of the community of synesthetes. It is interesting to note that despite the distracting element of her synesthesia, Linda/Linh-dao never expresses a desire to be rid of it. Nor does it prevent her from becoming a top student and excelling academically. Instead, the character accepts her own synesthesia as the anomaly that it is, enjoying its pleasures and coping with its down-sides. Synesthesia is portrayed, not as pathology, but rather as a unique form of perception linking its host to a vivid history and community. Linda/Linh-Dao comes to understand, accept, and even respect her synesthesia without glorifying or romanticizing it. As such, the portrayal of synesthesia is in line with Flournoy's recommendation to bestow "neither excess of honor nor indignity."

Conclusion

Synesthesia, that quirky perception, difficult to fathom, mysterious to most, ruffles long-held notions about what perception is and how it works. It shakes up the usual belief systems about what is "real" and gives birth to a range of interpretations. Synesthetes will continue to intrigue, to frustrate, to infuriate, and to find their way into literature. And these days, more of them are making it to the center of the story.

It has long been a task of literature to bring once marginal characters to the story's center, where their voices become louder. Modern fiction has brought us a diversity of world views, as once minor or unrepresented characters move to center stage. And now, more and more, such emerging characters are those with neurological anomalies like synesthesia. New worlds are opened by synesthete characters, who allow readers to see life through their eyes, ears, and taste buds. New understandings are also provided by the various interpretations of them viewed through lenses of different philosophical and literary traditions. Whether Romantic, Naturalist, or Positivist, such lenses can be sign-posts that guide us on the road of our developing understanding of the diversity of worlds within the "one world" we share.

It is hoped that research into the vast, wide-open area of synesthesia and literature will continue beyond the particular territory of this chapter. As an early reviewer of this chapter pointed out, a much-needed area of study is how synesthesia is represented by authors in different literary genres, in different decades, and in different languages.

As both mirror and window, creative literature can reflect the state of our evolving knowledge, while also pointing it in new directions. The literary portrayals of synesthetes (discussed earlier in the context of the five categories of literary portrayals), whether descending from Rimbaud, Nordau, or Flournoy, show our developing understanding of synesthetes, their ways of apprehending the world, and the implications these may have for the human need to reach beyond the accepted "known." What connects all the diverse views of synesthesia and synesthetes in these various fictional works is well-expressed by Kevin Dann in *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*:

Synaesthetic perception, which is forever inventing the world anew, militates against conventionalism.

(Dann 1998, 122)

Whether in real or symbolic ways, synesthesia has come to represent wider possibilities of the nature of perception and of the reality we perceive—which, perhaps touches on the human desire to break beyond what is familiar to a vision of the new.

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Other recommended works with characters who describe synaesthetic experiences: *Timbuktu* by Paul Auster (main character—a dog—experiences of "symphony of smells").

Miracle Myx by Dave Diotalevi (main character is a synaesthete-detective).

Still Waters by Nigel McCreery (main character is a synaesthete-detective).

Astonishing Splashes of Colour by Clare Morall (main character is a young woman who experiences coloured auras around people).

Ada, by Vladimir Nabokov (character Van remembers in terms of color).

In Search of Lost Time, by Marcel Proust (character, Marcel describes music and words in terms of colour).

Christopher by Richard Pryce (an early 1911 novel with a synaesthete-character).

Foam of the Daze, by Boris Vian (character makes a "pianococktail" in which he matches a food taste of texture to each musical note).

Notes:

(1) As described further later in the chapter, my particular focus on recent English-language fiction is dictated by the disproportionately larger number of works written within this category. Public awareness of synesthesia has risen dramatically within the last 50 years, and along with this, the number of synesthetes appearing as characters in fiction has risen accordingly, compared to earlier times. Moreover, most of these recent sources appear to be written in English, perhaps reflecting the relative abundance of science writings in this language. Prior to this, another era of heightened interest in synesthesia was the nineteenth century, and particularly dominant in the French Symbolist movement. The two époques (nineteenth century, and late twentieth/early twenty-first century) are the central focus of this chapter. This is not to say that interesting sources do not exist in other eras and other languages—they do—although they fall outside the focus of the current work.

(2) Dann suggests Emile Littré's single-volume *Dictionnaire de médecine, de chirurgie, de pharmacie, des sciences, accessoires et de l'art vétérinaire* as one likely source consulted by Rimbaud.

(3) Author T.J. Parker confirms that the book on synaesthesia, *Blue Cats and Chartreuse Kittens* (Duffy 2001) inspired the parody-title *Red Sax and Lemon Cymbals* in his book, *The Fallen*.

(4) A non-fictional first-hand account of the loss of synesthesia following trauma is given by Day, Chapter 44, this volume.

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