

PURPLE THE BEYOND-THE-BODY COLOR

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"In this town,
murder's a
form of
entertainment."

—Matron
"Mama" Morton



here have been times, particularly in romantic tales and poetry, when purple has been associated with sensuality. I suspect that may be because of the color's association with imbibing the grape. However, during our more than twenty years of research into the effects of color on behavior, purple was not once associated with sensuality. In fact, there seemed to be no real evidence of purple's having an effect in the physical realm at all. The color did, however, hold a powerful sway in the realm of the noncorporeal, the mystical, and even the paranormal.

A complete description of our color experiments appears in the Back-story on page xxiii. But to review our project briefly, during a period of twenty-plus years, roughly two-thousand students were involved with designing "environments" that explored color, its associations with the senses, and its effect on behavior. Every semester, at least one class chose purple and the color resonated with the students in ways that were consistent. The designs for their environments often dealt with ritual, magic, and the spiritual. Each year at least one group built an altar.

I had expected interpretations of "royal" and was ready to talk about why that was an intellectual and not a visceral response to a color. I was surprised, however, by the lack of royal references to purple. Actually, royal interpretations of the color were outpaced roughly ten-to-one by its associations with the spiritual and mystical. Occasionally there were thrones in the environments, but the association with the royal and regal comes from the fact that violet is the most difficult color to come by in nature. Its very scarcity associates it with the rare trappings of emperors, kings, and queens.

But altars are in a different genre altogether. Altars are in the province of something beyond the material. The altars the students designed often used religious associations as a springboard. There were altars to chocolate (a taste often associated with the color) and to the smells of lavender. There were psychics, fortune-tellers, and *bruja*s. Often, there were vigils, wakes, and funerals. One funeral was complete with a tombstone for each member of the class.

What is significant is there was absolutely no discussion about purple or the signals it sends before the students designed their environments. In fact, they were forbidden to tell anyone outside of their group what

they were doing for the project. The students simply were responding intuitively to the color. And for more than twenty years, the results were virtually without deviation.

We found purple is a color that inspires associations with the non-physical. It sends a signal that someone or something is going to be transformed. For example, in **West Side Story**, Bernardo, his purple shirt as intense as his attitude, mambos with Anita, not knowing that in twenty-four hours he will be dead. In **The Sixth Sense**, dressed in elegant iridescent violet, Anna goes to the wine cellar only to return and within minutes see her husband murdered. In **Gladiator**, Marcus Aurelius, his silver hair shrouded by a violet hood, watches his legions demolish the barbarians. Visually, he is the regal grim reaper incarnate. Within the next half-hour of movie time, he, too, will die.

The death may not always be literal. It may not always be *someone* but *something* that will die or be lost when purple appears onscreen. It might be love or youth or dream or illusion. Max Fisher, the adolescent rogue in **Rushmore**, climbs a ladder to the purple bedroom of his teacher, only to lose his delusion that he will sleep with her. In **Eyes Wide Shut**, the young prostitute wears purple. Not only doesn't she sleep with Tom Cruise, she is also HIV-positive.

And in **Chicago**, where purple light is a consistent presence, murder itself becomes a satirical song-and-dance act.

Think About This:

**If it's purple, someone's (or something's) going to die
(or be transformed).**

