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# Mental Pictures: Shapes and Colors in the Thought of G.K. Chesterton

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VII**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Seventh  
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## **Mental Pictures** *Shapes and Colors in the Thought of G. K. Chesterton*

**William L. Isley, Jr.**

Although Chesterton is not what would normally be considered a systematic thinker, his writings exhibit a marked consistency of thought by means of a series of recurrent images. In order to understand how Chesterton thinks; therefore, it is best to follow these series of images. An examination of the contrasting images he uses to critique as modes of madness both Impressionism in *The Man Who Was Thursday* and rationalism in *The Flying Inn* will demonstrate the validity of this approach to Chesterton. A brief conclusion will argue that epistemological sanity for Chesterton entails three crucial elements: externality, commonality and Christian orthodoxy.

## **MENTAL PICTURES: SHAPES AND COLORS IN THE THOUGHT OF G. K. CHESTERTON**

Dr. William Isley, Lighthouse Community Fellowship

If a modern-day time traveler were to set his machine back to, say, 1893, he could have visited London's Slade School of Art. There, amidst the busy efforts of the students attempting to draw masterpieces to please their master, he would have found a large, dull-looking boy in his late teens, idly staring into space. The absent-minded, empty-eyed stare might have prompted our time traveler to exclaim, "Why there is nothing on his mind!"

That boy would have been G. K. Chesterton, and our traveler would have been both right and wrong in his assessment of Chesterton's mental activity. He would have been wrong, because the boy was not idly wasting his time by daydreaming instead of doing his work. In a much deeper sense he would have been frightfully right that nothing was on the boy's mind. Chesterton's mind was filled with fears about nothing. He was desperately trying to believe that world was not nothing and that his mind was not all. He was, like Bunyan's Christian, doing battle with Apollyon on the road to the Celestial City; and for Chesterton the beast's other name was solipsism, the terrifying final deadly fruit of radical subjectivism.

In the fourth chapter of his Autobiography, which bears the significant title, "How to Be a Lunatic," Chesterton describes his youthful struggle against solipsism. It was for him a period in which his "eyes were turned inwards rather than outwards" (97). He claims that he could have, if he had so chosen, "... cut myself off from the whole life of the universe" (100). Significantly too, Chesterton writes of this period, "... the whole mood was overpowered and oppressed with a sort of congestion of the imagination. ... I had an overpowering impulse to record or draw ideas and images; plunging deeper and deeper as in a blind spiritual suicide" (89). This allusion to drawing ideas and images directs us to an important entry point into Chesterton's way of thinking. Although he is not what would normally be considered a systematic thinker, his writings exhibit a marked consistency of thought by means of a series of recurrent images. In order to understand how Chesterton thinks; therefore, it is best to follow these series of images.

Chesterton's epistemology was forged in the crucible of his struggle to maintain sanity against the twin errors of Impressionism and rationalism, both of which represented subjectivism for him because in them the human mind created its own reality rather than entering into reality. His own theory of knowledge cannot be fully appreciated without understanding how he perceived these two philosophies and the dangers inherent in them, because his epistemology was a balance of the two, which ultimately transcended both of them.

The previous references to insanity point to the need for epistemological sanity. For Chesterton that sanity entails three crucial elements: externality, commonality and Christian orthodoxy. An examination of the contrasting images he uses to critique as modes of madness both Impressionism in *The Man Who Was Thursday* and rationalism in *The Flying Inn* will simultaneously demonstrate the validity of an approach to Chesterton that follows the lead of his mental pictures and how he viewed the dangers of subjectivism.

## MODES OF MADNESS

### IMPRESSIONISM

In *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Gabriel Syme has a vision of Impressionism that brings together all of Chesterton's major images of that movement. Syme's walk through the forest during a brightly sunlit day is a "plunge into a dim pool" that was "full of shattered sunlight and shaken shadows," and looked like a "shuddering veil." The figures of the other men "swelled into sunlight and then faded into formless night." It was a "bewildering woodland" in which everything was "only a glimpse, the glimpse always unforeseen, and always forgotten." Finally, by an effort of will, Syme is able to "fling off this last and worst of his fancies" and to wake from the "evil dream" (Chap. 10). The combined effect of these images is to paint a picture that has the temporary nature of a passing mood, the shapelessness of chaos, and the confusion of a nightmare—Chesterton's threefold condemnation of Impressionism.

The critical image is that of a temporary mood. For Chesterton, Impressionism is ultimately bondage to a subjective fancy of the human mind that ends in self-destructive solipsistic skepticism. "Impressionism is skepticism. It means believing one's more immediate impressions at the expense of one's more permanent and positive generalizations. It puts what one notices above what one knows" (Blake, 137-138).

Because impressions are temporary—one only has to change one's point of view for them to change—things appear to lose their shape. They appear insubstantial and unreal.

I mean the thing meant something from one standpoint; but its mark was that the smallest change of standpoint made it unmeaning and unthinkable—a foolish joke. ... a nocturne by Whistler of mist on the Thames is either a masterpiece or it is nothing; it is either a nocturne or a nightmare of childish nonsense. Made in a certain mood, viewed through a certain temperament, conceived under certain conventions, it may be, it often is, an unreplaceable poem, a vision that may never be seen again. But the moment it ceases to be a splendid picture it ceases to be a picture at all (Victorian Age, 219-220).

Chesterton regularly uses the word "delicate" to describe this effect of Impressionism and its companion Aestheticism.<sup>1</sup> Their paintings and writings make sense only from one point of view. Abandon that standpoint, and the whole thing crumbles. Its reality is fragile or delicate.

Impressionism's bondage to the whims of human fancy results in a loss of color as well. Syme plunges into a dim pool and a world of shadows. It is a "mere chaos of chiaroscuro," in contrast to the clear daylight outside the wood (Thursday, Chap. 10). Even those aspects of Impressionism that are colorful are portrayed by Chesterton as temporary and, hence, insubstantial. Whistler only "drops a spark of perfect yellow or violet into some glooming pool of the nocturnal Thames" (Watts, 122). The *fin de siècle* had only a few "flickers" of light (Victorian Age, 218). Their colors are merely

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<sup>1</sup> G.F. Watts "has seen the mists of Impressionism settle down over the world, making it weird and delicate..." Chesterton, *Watts*, p. 40. Walter Pater preached the new paganism "delicately." Chesterton, "The Paganism of Mr. Lowes Dickinson," *Heretics*, p. 151. Chesterton uses the terms Impressionism, Aestheticism and Decadence almost interchangeably when speaking of their epistemological effects.

“brilliant,” “splashed” on, or “sparkling.” They sacrifice “form to tint, the cloudland of the mere colorist” (Blake, 17-18). These images show a lack of depth to Impressionistic color. It is only painted on; it does not appear to be a part of things; it is dissociated from reality.

In Chesterton’s mind there are three disastrous consequences of the epistemology of Impressionism. First, because reality is only as each individual perceives it, there can be no common vision. The lack of a common vision means the end of a society based upon shared characteristics and concerns. Secondly, because reality is in a constant state of flux due to its total dependence on our impressions, which are continuously changing because of our shifting standpoints, the need for romance, that mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar, will be either unfulfilled or perverted. Divorced from the common and permanent; that is, divorced from reality in Chesterton’s view, the pleasures of romance become fleeting and seek the exotic and not the ordinary. The third consequence of Impressionistic epistemology, according to Chesterton, is madness.

Particularly crucial for Chesterton’s critique of Impressionism is the relationship between the loss of a common vision and madness.<sup>2</sup> The Impressionist poets, in contrast to the romancers, who seek to give voice to the shared desires and daydreams of the common man, profess to stand “as solitary artistic souls apart from the public (Handful, 144). The poet does not seek to serve and understand his fellow man; rather, he bids all others to take his peculiar standpoint and to sympathize with his unique personality.

The Impressionist’s desire to be isolated from his fellow man leads him to seek an escape from the external world at large.

Mr. Moore ... does fundamentally dislike being asked to believe in the actual existence of other people. Like his master Pater and all the aesthetes, his real quarrel with life is that it is not a dream that can be moulded by the dreamer. It is not the dogma of the reality of the other world that troubles him, but the dogma of the reality of this world (Heretics, 125).

Unfortunately, the aesthete’s dream world often turns into a nightmare. Aubrey Beardsley can render “a certain brief mood,” which we all have felt under the “white deathly lights of Piccadilly with the black hollow of heaven behind shiny hats or painted faces: a horrible impression that all mankind are masks” (Victorian Age, 225-226). The common sane man, with his strong convictions of the reality of this world, shakes off the nightmare, but the Impressionist, who glories in the temporary mood and has only the reality of his impressions, goes mad.

As we have seen, Chesterton describes his brush with madness as the feeling that “I had projected the universe from within” (Autobiography, 88). The error of Impressionism, then, lay in a kind of belief in an absolute power of creativity in the human imagination that cuts itself off from the reality of the external world.

This deification of the human imagination not only cuts the Impressionist off from the real world outside, but, in Chesterton’s opinion, it cuts him off from the reality of

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<sup>2</sup> For a solid exposition of the theme of madness in Chesterton’s writings, see Russell Kirk, “Chesterton, Madmen, and Madhouses,” in *Myth, Allegory and Gospel: An Interpretation of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton and Charles Williams*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), pp. 33-51.

how the human brain works as a whole. “Impressionism means shutting up all of one’s nine million organs and avenues of appreciation except one. Impressionism means that, whereas Nature has made our senses and impressions support each other, we desire to suppress one part of perception and employ the other” (Lunacy, 114). Impressionism ends in madness because it only uses one lobe of the brain—the imagination. Chesterton’s judgment on Oscar Wilde can stand for his judgment on Impressionist epistemology as a whole. “His frightful fallacy was that he would not see that there is reason in everything, even in religion and morality” (Handful, 146).

### *RATIONALISM*

At first glance, Chesterton’s contention that rationalism has the same self-destructive tendencies as Impressionism seems highly unlikely. The two movements possessed markedly distinct characteristics. Impressionism exalted the imagination; rationalism, reason and logic. The aesthetes often spoke as if they were amoral. The rationalists, on the other hand, were generally very moralistic social reformers. The Impressionists lived a Bohemian lifestyle; whereas, the rationalists were often highly respectable, almost stodgy, members of middle class society. In short, what fellowship had Oscar Wilde with Robert Blatchford?

Lord Ivywood in *The Flying Inn* is Chesterton’s prime example of rationalism and its descent into madness. Ivywood is a sponsor of the rather absurd Misysra Ammon. He is attracted to Misysra for two reasons. “One was that there was no subject on which the little Turk could not instantly produce a theory. The other was that though the theories were crowded, they were consistent (Flying Inn, Chap. 22.). The fictional character of Misysra is, then, an example of the Chestertonian rationalist madman. According to Chesterton, “the strongest and most unmistakable mark of madness is this combination between a logical completeness and a spiritual contraction” (Orthodoxy, 31-32).

Ivywood, perhaps because he, unlike Misysra, is attached to no religious tradition, shows the thoroughly destructive tendencies of pure rationalism. He is regularly described as a “pure intellect” and a “lucid dogmatist” whose “brain is clear” (Flying Inn, Chaps, 11, 16, 12). Patrick Dalroy says of Ivywood to Joan Brett, “You will never understand a man like that till you understand that he can have a devotion to a definition—even a new definition” (Chap. 12). One of the chief functions of logic is, of course, to provide proper definitions. Ivywood’s rationalism, which seeks an internal logical consistency at any cost, produces a love for geometrical images, which Chesterton associates with rationalism. When he remodels a wing of his mansion, it is “featureless and stiff” (Chap. 12) and is decorated with “patterns” in which “Ivywood had preserved and repeated the principle that no animal shape must appear” (Chap. 16).

The world that Ivywood prefers is a world shaped by principle and logic with “no trace of ze Man form. No trace of ze Animal form” (Chap. 20). It is the artificially perfected and dehumanized world of geometry. Ivywood himself bears the same characteristics. He cared most “for his own intellectual self-respect and consistency” (Chap. 10). He is one whose “elemental communications” are cut. His “faint-coloured hair and frigid face looked like the hair and face of a corpse walking” (Chap. 10). His face is a “long and perfect oval” (Chap. 13). He nodded “as if he were part of the electrical machinery” (Chap. 17). He also “stood with the white face of a statue” (Chap. 20).

In these pictures Chesterton is depicting the dehumanizing results of pure rationalism. Ivywood no longer desires to be human. In reply to his cousin Dorian's claim that "the prime fact of identity is the limit set on all living things," Ivywood says,

I deny that any limit is set upon living things. . . . I have no sense of human limitations. . . . I would walk where no man has walked; and find something beyond tears and laughter. My road shall be my road indeed; for I will make it, like the Romans. And my adventures shall not be in the hedges and the gutters; but in the borders of the ever-advancing brain. I will love what never lived until I loved it—I will be as lonely as the first man (Chap. 20).

Ivywood's desire to be unbounded by any human limitations, to cease being human, leads to his isolation and his attempt to be greater than God. Dalroy states this to be true of Ivywood's reform program. "What he gives up must be some simple and universal thing. He will give up beef or beer or sleep—because these pleasures remind him that he is only a man" (Chap. 15). Ivywood's reform program is not rooted in the common nature of mankind. It is wholly a product of his own mind and is unchecked by the limitations of external reality. Indeed, Ivywood wishes to alter and improve God's botched up creation according to his own ideas. "'The world was made badly,' said Philip, with a terrible note in his voice, 'and I will make it over again'" (Chap. 22).

Ivywood's chief sin, according to Chesterton, "was a pride in the faultlessness of his own mental and moral strength" (Chap. 24). His solitary pursuit of his own reason's inventions cuts him off from his fellow man, makes him unaware of the reality of the external world,<sup>3</sup> and leads him to put himself above God.

With this blasphemous claim to divinity, the revelation of the evil of Ivywood's rationalism reaches a climax. It is only necessary now for Chesterton to show its self-destructive results. The remodeling of Ivywood's house once again shows the direction his rationalism is leading. The pride is revealed by "that long perspective of large rooms, in which men like Ivywood forget that they are only men" (Chap. 10). Ivywood's desire to create his own world is displayed by his decoration of this suite of rooms with a mock universe complete with sun, moon, the Milky Way and comets (Chap. 16). Significantly, however, "all the windows of the turret were closed" (Chap. 16). The infinity, the escape from limitation, that Ivywood seeks is an internal one. "All the chambers had that air of perpetually opening inwards, which is the soul of the 'Arabian Nights'" (Chap. 12). In the end Ivywood becomes the superman he desires to be.

"I have gone where God has never dared to go. I am above the silly supermen as they are above mere men. Where I walk in the heavens, no man has walked before me; and I am alone in the garden. All this passing about me is like the lonely plucking of garden flowers. I will have this blossom; I will have that . . ." (Chap. 25).

The book concludes with Joan Brett and Patrick Dalroy visiting Ivywood in an asylum, "the house of the Superman" (Chap. 25). "He sat playing, with a purposeful face, with scraps of stick and weed put before him on a wooden table. He did not notice them, nor

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Ivywood, after a passionate statement of his exotic romanticism, completely fails to notice the presence of the dog Quoodle, chap. 10.

anything else around him; ..." (Chap. 25). The end of rationalism's quest for its own deification is the madness of solipsism.

The interesting point for the question of how Impressionism and rationalism both end up in solipsistic madness is that Chesterton calls Ivywood an aesthete, the "opposite" of a poet (Chap. 13). Jane Brett reflects that Ivywood "could thirst for beauty: and "certainly had a poetry of his own, after all; a poetry that never touched the earth" (Chap. 11). Ivywood, a great orator, "could make anything he had to mention blossom into verbal beauty" (Chap. 2). Ivywood's aestheticism is a love of words, of his own verbal and mental creations. It is the beauty of his own mind, which becomes frozen and hardened by isolation from the external world.

The connection between rationalism and Impressionism for Chesterton becomes clear in some comments he makes on Walter Pater. Criticizing Pater's call for us to burn with a hard, gem-like flame, Chesterton writes, "Flames are never hard and never gem-like; they are always dangerous, like flames, to touch or even examine." Passions become as hard as gems only by "becoming as cold as gems" (Heretics, 104).

In this criticism Chesterton uses the same images for Impressionism as he does elsewhere for rationalism. The hard and gem-like quality corresponds to the geometric images of rationalism. The coldness of the gems corresponds to the coldness and lack of life in the statue-like Ivywood. The reason for this correspondence is that Impressionist philosophy, which, according to Chesterton, bids us to seize the pleasure of the moment for the moment's sake since we are all under the threat of death, makes us "rationalize the happiness, and therefore to destroy it" (103). In Chesterton's mind Impressionism, like rationalism, seeks to abstract a thing—here a moment of pleasure—out of its context and to isolate it. What we are left with is not the reality but merely our idea or impression of it. The moment is taken out of reality and into the processes of the human mind; hence, it is rationalized and takes on the hard, gem-like or geometrical images of rationalism.

The reason, therefore, that Chesterton sees both Impressionism and rationalism as two different modes of the same solipsistic madness is that both philosophies sought to restrict reality to the limitations of the finite human mind. "It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is the head that splits" (Orthodoxy, 27). Both Impressionism and rationalism begin to prefer their own internal mental "reality" to that of the external world. Thus, they finally cut themselves off from that external world and live with their thoughts alone, like madmen.

### **SANITY: THE SHAPE OF ORTHODOXY**

In contrast to the ephemeral shapes and dim colors of Impressionism and the geometric shapes of rationalism, Chesterton delighted using sharp jagged edges and brilliant "pure" colors to describe the world. He preferred the pointed spires and wildly grotesque gargoyles of the Gothic cathedrals to the smooth columns of Greek architecture. "Paganism had been like a pillar of marble, upright because proportioned with symmetry. Christianity was like a huge and ragged and romantic rock" (180). His preferences in sketching were for "saints in robes of angry crimson, and seas of strange green, and all the sacred or monstrous symbols that look so well in bright colours on brown paper" (Trifles, 11).

Why this preference? One reason is that the world "is nearly reasonable, but not quite" (Orthodoxy, 146). Bright colors and jagged edges confront us with their reality

and refuse to be conformed to the unaided workings of the human mind. This oddity of the world is the foundation of Chesterton's use of paradox because "an element of paradox runs through the whole of existence" (Types, 146). Sanity is found and maintained, not in denying or qualifying one side of the world's paradoxical realities. Christianity brings sanity because it fits the world by respecting its paradoxical realities. "...Christianity sought in most of these cases to keep two colours co-existent, but pure. It is not a mixture like russet or purple; it is rather like a shot silk, for a shot silk is always at right angles, and in the pattern of the cross" (Orthodoxy, 177).

The shape of the cross reveals the truth that Christianity helps the human mind to escape from its own solipsistic proclivities. The mind of Asia is represented by the wheel of Buddha, an O. "It really is a curve that in one sense includes everything, and in another sense comes to nothing" (Everlasting, 137). On the other hand, "the cross, in fact as well as figure, does really stand for the idea of breaking out of the circle that is everything and nothing. It does escape from the circular argument by which everything begins and ends in the mind" (138).

Another, perhaps even deeper, reason is exhibited in Chesterton's portrait of St. Francis's view of the world. "He saw everything as dramatic, distinct from its setting, not all of a piece like a picture but in action like a play. ...Everything would have been in the foreground; and in that sense in the footlights. Everything would be in every sense a character" (Francis, 87). Yet the distinct almost personal character of particular things is not self-explanatory. "Every stone or flower is a hieroglyphic of which we have lost the key; with every step of our lives we enter into the mystery of some story which we are certain to misunderstand" (Blake, 131).

The key to the world's hieroglyph is the Church's creed or even the Church itself. This key can "unlock the prison of the whole world and let in the white light of liberty" (Everlasting, 218-219). But the only way to prove that a key works is to try it. "A key is not a matter of abstractions, in that sense a key is not a matter of argument. It either fits the lock or it does not. It useless for men to stand disputing over it, considered by itself; or reconstructing it on pure principles of geometry or decorative art" (219).

For Chesterton, only Christianity fully preserves truth and sanity and has an epistemology that is firmly rooted in the common and in the external. "Christianity does appeal to a solid truth outside itself; to something which is in that sense external as well as eternal. It does declare that things are really there; or in other words that things are really things. In this Christianity is at one with common sense; but all religious history shows that this common sense perishes except where there is Christianity to preserve it" (138). An individual or a civilization can obtain and maintain sanity only by accepting in humility the truth of the Christian faith.

Chesterton was both a visual and verbal artist; therefore, he often reasoned with shapes and colors. His writings can be most fruitfully understood by paying close attention to the verbal images that he used, as I hope that his paper has demonstrated. Even more crucial than the fact that shapes and colors offer an important interpretive key to Chesterton's writings is to recognize that shapes and colors are not merely illustrative tools but actually are truths of reality. This fact should make us more aware not only of the importance of using visual symbols in the church but also of the necessity to ensure that those symbols actually reflect the reality of the faith we profess.

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