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## The Adjective Green

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## The Adjective Green

### Abstract

"What a gift it is that we may not only lie down in pastures but that they may be *green* pastures."

Posting about the beauty of language from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-adjective-green/>

### Keywords

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### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

# The Adjective Green

Dave Schelhaas

September 15, 2021

*In All Things* readers might like to know the story of this little essay's origin. Early in my years at Dordt, John Kok became the Dean of the Humanities Division. At our first meeting under his leadership, Kok asked three of us in the division to write a short paper on a single word and he assigned the word *green* to me. This essay is slightly different from that first *green* paper.

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We know that green is the preeminent color of growing things and was formed from the same Germanic base as *gro*, which produced the word *grow*. Although green is usually a positive color, it can be used to denote jealousy as Shakespeare does in *Othello*: "Beware the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on." It also indicates immaturity: "He was a green and callow fellow." But for most of us most of the time, *green* is laden with positive connotations.

The King James version of the Bible uses the word green forty-four times—all positive usages and all but five in the Old Testament. One of my favorites is Song of Solomon 1:16: "Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea pleasant: also our bed is green." What fruitfulness that one little word suggests.

The last reference to *green* in the King James is Revelation 9:4: "And it was commanded them they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree, but only those men which have not the seal of God on their foreheads." Perhaps this text ought to be read at every construction site before the bulldozers begin their work.

J. R. R. Tolkien writes in his well-known essay, "On Fairy Stories":

"The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalization and abstraction, sees not only *green grass*, discriminating it from other things (and finding it fair to look upon), but sees that it is *green* as well as being *grass*. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faerie is more potent."

From here, Tolkien goes on to suggest that incantations in faerie land are not that much different from adjectives in the real world. "The mind that thought of *light*, *heavy*, *gray*,

*yellow, still, swift*, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light.” That could take the green from the grass and make it a deadly green upon a man’s face. Tolkien then goes on to talk of man the myth maker, the writer of fantasies, as a sub-creator. And it is quite possible that he is drawing on Andrew Marvell who, in his poem “The Garden,” writes:

“The mind, that ocean where each kind

Does straight its own resemblance find;

Yet it creates, transcending these,

Far other worlds and other seas,

Annihilating all that’s made

To a green thought in a green shade.”

Rather than moving into Marvell’s green world of the imagination, I want to stay a little longer with the lowly, or perhaps, the holy, adjective. How barren would be our language and our lives without adjectives. What a gift it is that we may not only lie down in pastures but that they may be *green* pastures. How trivial and limiting to say that an adjective is merely a modifier, something that changes a noun slightly. Call it rather a transformer. That pasture is not merely pasture, it is fresh, lively, lovely, luxuriant, verdant, rich, nourishing, fruitful, fragrant, pleasant, wholesome. In short, green.

Does a sheep see a “green” pasture? I doubt it. I don’t mean that he is color blind, though he may be. What I mean is that I do not think he is able to separate green from pasture. For, as far as we know, a sheep does not have the human capacity for generalization and abstraction and consequently does not have a language that is at all like human language.

We don’t know how the human mind comes to have innate properties for the acquisition and use of language. Noam Chomsky says we may attribute it to evolution so long as we realize that there is no substance for this assertion—it is simply a belief. “When we study human language,” says Chomsky, “we are approaching what some might call the ‘human essence,’ the distinguishing qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man.” Now, Chomsky is a rationalist who wants to hold up the autonomous dignity of man against the behaviorists. But what he says suggests to me that the human ability to acquire and use language, including adjectives, to separate green from grass, blue from sky, red from blood, is a deeply embedded creational structure, God ordained. Seen in that light, the adjective and our ability to use it is something that is set apart for humans, holy. Take off your shoes; the *green* pasture you are standing in is holy ground.

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*This essay is part of the Fall 2021 Dordt campus exploration of "Making Meaning." We reached out to writers in our community to explore and interact with how they create meaning through words. In a culture where words can be quickly weaponized, how do we explore the beauty, truth, and gift of words? This will be part of an ongoing series where writers interact with words and with one another and delve into Making Meaning through their written voice. \*Today, may you take an even greater delight in the colorful world surrounding us!*