SOFTWARE & TECH

William Gass On Being Blue

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Introduction: Entering the Blue World of William Gass

In the vast landscape of American letters, few works stand as singularly provocative and stylistically audacious as William Gass's extended philosophical essay, **On Being Blue**. Published in 1976, this remarkable book is far more than a simple meditation on a color. It is a dazzling, often dizzying, exploration of language, desire, pornography, and the very nature of literary creation. For anyone interested in the intersection of philosophy and literature, understanding **William Gass On Being Blue**is essential. The book does not merely talk about blueness; it performs blueness, wrapping the reader in a linguistic haze that is as intellectually challenging as it is emotionally resonant. Gass, a philosopher by training and a novelist by vocation, uses the concept of "blue" as a kind of metaphysical prism, breaking down the white light of ordinary perception into a spectrum of meaning that includes sadness, sexuality, the sky, and the very ink on the page.

To read this book is to witness a master stylist at the peak of his powers. The prose is dense, alliterative, and musical, demanding a slow and deliberate reading. Gass is not interested in delivering a simple thesis. Instead, he builds a world, a "blue" world, where the subject and the object of inquiry become one. The book's central argument, if it can be reduced to one, is that language is not a transparent medium for conveying thought but a physical, sensual substance in its own right. When Gass writes about the color blue, he is ultimately writing about the blueness of words themselves. This essay will delve deep into the text, exploring its themes, its stylistic innovations, and its enduring legacy in the world of literary criticism and creative writing. We will examine why this slim volume remains a touchstone for writers and readers who believe that form is not separate from content, but is, in fact, the very soul of it.

The Man Behind the Hue: Who Was William Gass?

To fully appreciate **William Gass On Being Blue**, one must first understand the author. William H. Gass (1924-2017) was a formidable figure in postmodern American literature. A professor of philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis, Gass was a rigorous thinker whose work consistently blurred the lines between fiction, criticism, and philosophy. He was a leading proponent of "metafiction," a style of writing that self-consciously draws attention to its own artificiality. Unlike realist writers who strive to create a seamless illusion of reality, Gass wanted his readers to feel the weight and texture of the sentences themselves. For Gass, the purpose of literature was not to reflect the world but to create a new one out of words.

His major works, including the novel *The Tunnel* and the short story collection *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, are renowned for their linguistic complexity and dark, philosophical themes. Gass was a writer's writer, admired for his technical virtuosity but sometimes criticized for the demanding nature of his prose. In this context, **On Being Blue**serves as a kind of manifesto. It is a performative demonstration of his core beliefs about art and language. The book is not a dry academic treatise; it is a passionate, often ribald, defense of the sensuousness of words. It is Gass arguing, in real-time, that the most important thing about writing is not what it says, but how it says it. The color blue, in his hands, becomes the perfect symbol for this artistic philosophy: a color that is both a physical property of the world and a powerful, abstract concept in our minds.

A Treatise in a Minor Key: The Structure of the Essay

On Being Blue is not a long book, but its structure is deceptive in its complexity. It is written as a single, continuous essay, but it can be broken down into a series of interconnected movements. Gass begins by cataloging the many things that are blue: the sky, the sea, veins, bruises, sad songs, and dirty jokes. This opening section is a torrent of imagery, an incantation that seeks to saturate the reader's mind with the color. He is building a vocabulary of blueness, establishing it as a category that encompasses both the sublime and the profane.

The essay then shifts into a more explicit discussion of sexuality and pornography. Gass uses the phrase "blue" as it was used in the phrase "blue movie" or "blue humor." This is where the book becomes most controversial and most challenging. Gass argues that bad pornography is a sin against language, a failure of the imagination that reduces human desire to mechanical, repetitive acts. He contrasts this "prurient trash" with great erotic literature, which uses language to create genuine passion and intimacy. For Gass, the difference lies entirely in the quality of the writing. A great writer can make an erotic scene transcendent, while a bad writer makes it boring and grotesque. This section of **William Gass On Being Blue** is a masterclass in literary judgment, delivered with a mixture of wit, disgust, and profound insight.

Finally, the essay turns inward, becoming a meditation on the act of writing itself. The "blue" becomes the ink on the page, the "blue" of the writer's own mood, the "blue" of the creative struggle. Gass famously writes about the relationship between a writer and his words, describing the act of composition as a kind of love affair or a battle. The structure of the book, therefore, is circular. It starts with the external world of objects, moves through the internal world of human passion, and ends in the liminal space of artistic creation. This is not a linear argument but a spiral, one that plunges the reader deeper into the essence of blueness with every turn.

The Philosophy of Color: More Than a Hue

Why choose the color blue? For Gass, blue holds a unique place in the Western imagination. It is the color of distance and depth, of the infinite sky and the unfathomable ocean. It is also the color of melancholy, of the "blues" music, of a certain kind of lonely longing. At the same time, it is the color of the forbidden, of the "blue" joke, of the risqué and the sensual. This duality is what makes it so powerful for Gass. Blue can be both sacred and profane, both spiritual and physical.

In **On Being Blue**, Gass explores this dual nature with philosophical rigor. He draws on a wide range of sources, from the Bible to Shakespeare to modern poetry and pornography. He is interested in how the color functions as a symbol, but also as a physical sensation. When we hear the word "blue," what do we feel? Gass argues that language has a direct, physiological impact on us. The sounds of words—their consonants and vowels, their rhythm and weight—matter just as much as their meaning. The word "blue," with its long, open vowel and its soft, liquid consonants, is itself a kind of caress. Gass writes about the "blue" of a bruise or a vein, reminding us that the color is inside us, flowing through our bodies. It is a part of our biological reality.

This philosophical approach is what elevates the book above a simple essay on aesthetics. Gass is asking fundamental questions about perception and representation. How does the mind translate the physical world of light and pigment into the abstract world of language? And how can language, in turn, create a new kind of reality, a world of pure imagination that is just as real, if not more so, than the world of our senses? For Gass, the color blue is a test case for this entire philosophical enterprise. If we can understand how a single word like "blue" works, we might come closer to understanding the miracle of language itself.

Blue as a Moral Category

One of the most intriguing aspects of **William Gass On Being Blue**is its implicit moral framework. Gass is not a moralist in the traditional sense; he is not interested in telling people what they should or should not read. However, he is deeply concerned with the morality of art. For Gass, the greatest sin a writer can commit is to be boring, or worse, to be dishonest. Bad writing is not just a technical failure; it is a moral failure. It represents a betrayal of the potential of language.

This is why his critique of pornography is so sharp. He does not object to pornography because it is "dirty." He objects to it because it is lazy. It uses language in a mechanical, repetitive way that deadens the senses rather than awakening them. In contrast, great erotic writing, like that of John Donne or James Joyce, uses language to explore the full complexity of human desire. It is not just "blue" in the sense of being risqué; it is "blue" in the sense of being deep, sad, beautiful, and true. This moral dimension gives the book a surprising emotional weight. It is not just an intellectual exercise; it is a passionate defense of the dignity of art and the sacredness of the written word.

The Stylistic Signature: How Gass Writes Blue

The most remarkable thing about **On Being Blue**is not what it argues, but how it argues. Gass's style is the message. The book is written in a single, breathless, sinuous sentence that stretches for pages. Or rather, it is a series of long, complex sentences that are connected by a rhythmic, almost musical logic. Gass uses alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme to create a hypnotic effect. He piles up clauses and images, circling back on himself, qualifying and expanding his ideas in real-time.

This style is deliberately disorienting. It forces the reader to slow down and pay attention to each word. You cannot skim **William Gass On Being Blue**. You have to swim in it. This is what Gass means by the "sensuousness" of language. He wants you to feel the words in your mouth, to hear their sounds in your ears. He wants the act of reading to be a physical experience, as physical as seeing the color blue or touching a loved one's skin. This is a deeply challenging aesthetic, and it is not for everyone. But for those who are willing to surrender to it, it is a transformative experience. The book becomes a performance, a demonstration of the very thing it is talking about.

There is a famous moment in the book where Gass writes about the blue of a vein on a woman's breast. He describes it in meticulous, loving detail, turning a simple anatomical observation into a piece of lyrical poetry. This moment is a perfect example of his method. He is not just describing the vein; he is creating it with language. The words themselves become the blue. The reader is not looking at the vein through the window of language; they are looking at a vein made of language. This is the central paradox and the central achievement of the book.

Critical Reception and Enduring Influence

Upon its publication, **On Being Blue**was met with a mixture of admiration and bewilderment. Some critics hailed it as a masterpiece of prose style, a breathtaking display of linguistic virtuosity. Others found it obscure, pretentious, and uncomfortable in its frank discussion of sexuality. The book was too philosophical for the general public and too literary for the academic philosophers. It existed in a strange, lonely category of its own.

Over time, however, the book has found its audience. It has become a cult classic, a beloved text for writers, poets, and serious readers of literature. Its influence can be seen in the work of subsequent generations of experimental writers who have embraced Gass's emphasis on the materiality of language. The book is frequently taught in creative writing programs as a model for how to think about prose style. It is also a key text in literary theory, particularly in discussions of postmodernism and the relationship between form and content.

Perhaps the most significant legacy of **William Gass On Being Blue**is the permission it gives writers to be bold. It

suggests that language is not a tool to be used, but a world to be built. It encourages a kind of wild, uninhibited creativity that is rare in contemporary literature. The book remains a radical document, a testament to the power of a single mind grappling with the most fundamental questions about art, language, and the human experience. It is a book that changes how you read and, for some, how you write.

Conclusion: The Enduring Hue of Gass's Masterpiece

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