

Coursework. Tyler Thorpe. 1802

The *Taste of Blue Light* should be included in the literary canon as the language included has “specific aesthetic qualities” and “the subject matter is serious, dealing with moral and philosophical questions of moral importance”. Using ideas from the critical anthology to what extent do you agree?

The Literary Canon represents a group of authors or works that “a consensus of academics, historians and teachers recognise as worthy of study” as defined by the critical anthology. It is populated with older novels written mostly by white males and could be seen as an outdated representation of the literature which should be held in high regard. Postmodern novels that are targeted to more progressive audiences and are written by a variety of authors from differing backgrounds should be included. Published in 2017, the *Taste of Blue light* is the debut novel of female author Lydia Ruffles. The novel follows the story of young adult art student Lux’s recovery from a traumatic incident that remains unidentified until the end of the narrative. Throughout the narrative, Lux tries to find her way back to herself and to the truth of what happened to her. Through this difficult period, our protagonist experiences many of the challenges of her youth, such as romantic relationships, maintaining friendships and making decisions regarding her future. “I will find the old Lux and when I do I will climb back inside her and sew myself into her skin so I never get lost again.” Ruffles openly discusses the psychological effects of traumatic incidents such as the terrorist attack that Lux is victim to and creates a powerful insight into the mental state of her protagonist as a victim while using sublime and beautiful language to deliver an ugly truth. This novel should be held in high regard by academics due to the skill of the author and the importance of the themes discussed and therefore is deserving of a place within the Literary Canon.

The aesthetic quality of the novel arguably stems from its close link with visual art due to the protagonist’s artistic nature and studies at Richdeane School. In addition to this, Lux suffers from synaesthesia which allows readers to explore the links between many sensory experiences by confusing colour, sound, smell and taste. “The colours of the field and the sky force themselves into my brain, flooding it”. Readers are able to explore Lux’s mental state through an eclectic confusion of the senses. Some academics describe aesthetics in literature to be “the inclusion of references to artistic elements or expressions within a textual work. It’s a method used to promote or educate readers about important artistic expression in society.” The *Taste of Blue light*’s exploration of art through original phrasing: “Dancers aren’t supposed to show their pain or effort, they must silently turn their agony into art”, demonstrates this idea. The entire novel features a heavy concentration on art and its impact on people’s lives as well as its power to create emotional responses within the artists and audiences. Ruffles also touches on the healing nature of art with the Richdeane pledge “to art and we let go” which perfectly captures how artists use their profession (or hobby) in order to promote emotional growth and healing. According to American philosopher Monroe Beardsley, aesthetic experiences share four common features. Focus, intensity, coherence and completeness. Beardsley states that “The impulses and expectations aroused by elements within the experience are felt to be

counterbalanced or resolved by other elements within the experience, so that some degree of equilibrium or finality is achieved and enjoyed. The experience detaches itself, and even insulates itself, from the intrusion of alien elements.” This can be seen frequently throughout the novel with the author crafting sentences with unusual content that deliver information and messages in an original manner. Phrases like: “The red cells are like spiked stars carrying death around my body instead of oxygen” “I will be able to feel their love on my skin like sunburn” create intense feelings within the readers. The construction and constitution of the phrases themselves are unusual and confusing but once read together make perfect sense. Due to this skilful crafting, strong emotional reactions are created within the reader as the author has targeted feelings and sentiments that are usually indescribable and has managed to pinpoint these ideas and lay them down on paper. Moments such as these in the novel demonstrate focus as they are crafted to address a certain feeling or idea, they are intense due to the direct and sometimes painful words that are used; they are coherent as without knowing how these phrases make sense, the reader understands what they convey. Finally, they are complete as they contain elements that counterbalance (Love and sunburn – pleasure and pain). Aesthetic is “loosely synonymous with art” and Art is said to mean “skill, technique or craft” as stated by R. Pope in the critical anthology. The culmination of deeper philosophical thinking and aesthetic, artfully crafted phrases without doubt prove the skill of the author and the pleasure created in reading the novel which clearly shows its aesthetical value. Due to this demonstration of superior skill, Lydia Ruffles’ “The taste of blue light” deserves a place within the Canon.

Arguably, a novel of value is one that provides a lasting effect of its readers and leaves them changed following this reading. Authors and papers reviewing the novel have described it as “Dark and affecting, truly unforgettable” – Heat, “Beautiful. Visceral. Gripping.” Reviews such as these, accurately capture the valuable nature of the text. The universal themes addressed such as Love, Drugs, Sex, and most surprisingly, Terrorism, allow the reader to engage with ideas relating to them. This is key as according to M. Montgomery in his “Ways of reading”, “Valued texts are supposed to give the reader an insight into fundamental questions which are of universal concern”. The publication of *The Taste of Blue Light* on the seventh of September in 2017 is unsurprising considering it coincides with a universal rise in terrorist attacks. Lydia Ruffles here presents one of the first opportunities in literature to openly discuss terrorism and its effects. The structural delivery of the thematic content enhances the effect of the climactic denouement within the novel itself. By dealing with all of the effects of the terrorist attack in the novel before revealing their cause, Ruffles looks to captivate readers that would not typically engage with a novel tackling a subject such as this. Her method here is highly effective as her novel delivers ideas and themes of severe importance to those who need to hear it. At the same time, allowing readers to form their own opinions and ideas about characters without the predispositions that would be created by identifying the theme in the beginning of the novel. By writing in a closed third person narration, we follow the thoughts of our protagonist Lux and due to the narration being covert and restricted, we are more closely put into Lux’s position as our information to her situation is severely limited. This is fitting considering her amnesia at this time. The protagonist’s amnesia provides an unbiased and pure view into the psychological

effects and the consequences of the terrorist attack within her life. As stated by D. Lodge in "The art of fiction", "The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality.", by only experiencing the narrative through Lux's eyes we are able to see the gap between what she knows and what actually happened. Only at the end of the narrative do we have the final piece filled in and are able to understand the story fully. The author demonstrates skill in this area due to her ability to write intensely about the psychological effects of a traumatic event without accidentally revealing or purposely identifying the event in question. Skill is further demonstrated in that despite this confusion to the cause of the trauma, the narrative retains logic and remains pleasurable to read. The universal themes make the novel important and deserving of a place within the Canon as it will change or challenge the reader's views on these ideas and will therefore promote individual growth, leaving the readers changed.

The writing within Ruffles' novel is a combination of a readerly and writerly approach. While many theorists such as Barthes have a tendency to award higher status and value to those texts that demonstrate a more writerly approach, arguably, a balance between the two is much more desirable. For this reason, Lydia Ruffles' *The Taste of Blue Light* is an ideal candidate for a place within the literary canon. For modern readers, writerly texts are not as pleasurable as readerly style novels this therefore risks reducing the readership. Barthes also claims that writerly texts force the reader to work more in order to make sense of them, despite his obvious preference, Barthes' writings do still question the traditional notion of canonical texts and suggests that the reader plays an important role in attributing value. In addition, Marxist critic Terry Eagleton attacks the concept of the canon by arguing that "texts become canonical because they serve to support the ruling ideology". He adds that literary texts which "question or escape the ideology and so force the reader to consider their position and perhaps lead to a form of consciousness-raising" are also valuable. In relation to *The Taste of Blue Light*, the delivery of the main theme of the novel (Terrorism) supports this idea as it is only revealed towards the end when Lux's memories of the attack return. This allows the reader to become invested in the narrative and characters and read it as any other light-hearted novel. Writerly texts are arguably less pleasurable for modern audiences and therefore, fewer readers will be inclined to engage with the text. However, *The Taste of Blue Light* remains writerly enough with its complex language and universal themes to be considered valuable in a classical sense.

Without the readers, a text is reduced to nothing which is supported by Barthes statement that "readers play an important role in attributing value to a text". By targeting her novel towards general audiences as well as younger adults, Ruffles has maximised the effect of her work on readers and should be included within the Canon as it is a piece of literature that will challenge the views and ideas of all readers rather than the select few that are attracted to the usual canonised novels. In addition to the universal themes and beautiful language, this makes Ruffles' novel an ideal candidate for the canon and should therefore be included.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetic-concept/#AesExp>

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/aesthetic-concepts-in-literature.html>

The English studies book by R. Pope

The art of fiction by D. Lodge.

Ways of reading by M. Montgomery.