

---

## From the Instructor

---

Our final paper for WR 150: “Modern and Contemporary American Poetry” builds upon the analytical, argumentative, and research skills introduced in the first two papers. In order to enlarge the scope and complexity of their arguments, students are asked to conduct a more substantial exploration of multiple poems or a longer poem by any poet of their choosing. Similar to Papers 1 and 2, students must find their motivation for writing in the arguments of others; however, this time students are not provided any exhibit or argument sources for their consideration. Paper 3 required students to locate and engage with all source material independently. Beyond this, the paper has to be 2000-3000 words in length and use at least five sources (two of which had to be argument sources).

What is most remarkable about Carly Sitrin’s “Making Sense: Decoding Gertrude Stein” is that Gertrude Stein is routinely left off the syllabus because of her incredible difficulty, not only for a “general education” audience, but also for the most ardent lovers and scholars of modern poetry. In addition, Carly’s essay demonstrates exemplary *command* over source material (clear and nuanced comprehension) and *control* (where and when to deploy sources in service of audience and argument), and, in particular, strong use of theory sources, which in our course are perhaps the most challenging sources to understand and utilize.

— Jason Tandon

WR 150: Modern and Contemporary American Poetry

---

## From the Writer

---

“Making Sense: Decoding Gertrude Stein” was a labor of love. My prewriting process was erratic, to say the least, and I frequently found myself drowning in piles of shorthand, flowcharts, pizza boxes, and highlighted books trying desperately to piece together some semblance of an argument. What ultimately saved me, however, was my genuine interest and immersion in the topic. I read Stein on the train to work, on my walk to class, and before I went to bed at night. Obsessive as it may seem, this act of incorporating my topic into my everyday life was much more beneficial for me than any formal prewriting exercise.

My biggest struggle in dealing with a paper of this magnitude was definitely organization. With the guidance of my professor and peer reviewers, I was able to fit my concepts together in a coherent matter with the use of section headings. This format allowed me to explore topics that I felt were crucial to my argument without worrying about connecting them together with the traditional approach of transitional sentences.

— Carly Sitrin

## MAKING SENSE: DECODING GERTRUDE STEIN

---

On Saturday evenings in number 27 rue de Fleurus on the Left Bank of Paris, Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas played host to a gathering of noteworthy artists and writers. It was here in the early decades of the century that people flocked to view the women's unrivaled display of modern art and share in their conversations as the expatriates waxed poetic about art, science, and philosophy. By surrounding herself with such avant-garde culture and innovative perspectives, Stein created a laboratory of conceptual and intellectual thought which heavily influenced her own writing. Although her opinions were coveted by the great thinkers of her time, Stein's abstract poetic style has had a polarizing effect on those who encounter her work. In his critique entitled "Art by Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein," B. L. Reid finds most of Stein's writing to be "unreadable" and of no intellectual value (93). He claims that her poetry is "not for the normal mind" and asserts that it is not worth the time it takes to read it (93). Similarly, Michael Gold in his article "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot" echoes Reid's claims, and argues that "her works read like the literature of the students of padded cells in Matteawan" further stressing the insanity of Stein's prose.

Reid's and Gold's analyses, however, are far too reductive. I agree that at first glance, and without any background knowledge, Stein's poetry is challenging and seemingly senseless; however, I argue that Stein's writing demands context to be fully appreciated. Since she was a highly educated woman who spent her days with some of the greatest artistic minds of the century, it is not surprising that her technique requires that the reader have a foundation of artistic and scientific comprehension. To

dismiss her work as unintelligible is to refuse to put in the effort to understand it. Her poems and novels demonstrate that her educational background studying psychology under William James, her time spent around artists such as Pablo Picasso, and her years studying the language centers of the brain all played a significant role in how she constructed her writing.

## Jamesian Psychology

As a student at Radcliffe College, Gertrude Stein studied under the influential psychologist William James and, in her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, stated:

The important person in Gertrude Stein's Radcliffe life was William James. She enjoyed her life and herself. She was secretary of the Philosophical club and amused herself with all sorts of people. She liked making sport of question asking and she liked equally answering them. She liked it all. But the really lasting impression of her Radcliffe life came through William James. (73)

Her years spent at Radcliffe saw Stein working closely with James, taking part in several experiments, and publishing her own articles in scientific publications. These experiments focused on “normal and induced motor automatism,” or actions located on the threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness (Weinstein 16). The experiments made use of automatic reading and writing phenomena for the most part, but it was James' *Psychology* (1892) that contained a chapter that would most heavily influence Stein's later poetic career. This chapter entitled “The Stream of Consciousness” combined his fascination with the psychology of consciousness with the psychology of language and use of words. The questions that plagued James—What is consciousness? How does consciousness relate to the whole personality? Is consciousness continuous or discontinuous?—are directly explored in the works of Gertrude Stein.

The concept of stream of consciousness starts with the idea that “consciousness of some kind goes on. ‘States of mind’ succeed each other.” He argues that as “ideas recur, although the ideas may be the same, we see them in different relationships” (Miller 13). More simply stated, the repetition of words and concepts can change their implications, just as the physi-

cal act of repeating a word aloud can alter its meaning. In Gertrude Stein's writing, she utilizes this strategy of repetition to inject a deeper and more expansive significance to her words. For example, her poem "Sacred Emily" recounts in minute detail the everyday actions of a woman in her home. The piece consists of exactly 367 staccato lines repeating phrases such as "push sea" eight times in one line (33). While this statement may at first seem to be nonsense, according to Jamesian psychology, the more often it appears, the more the meaning expands. In this way, the phrase "push sea" transforms from the literal vision of a breaking wave to the kneading motion of the poem's subject as she prepares dinner and, later, the motion of her knitting needles.

Following the Jamesian theory of transformational meaning, the famous line "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" appears for the first time in "Sacred Emily" and is later found in several of her other works as well. This line can be interpreted as epitomizing the infinite forms of a word. The capitalization of the first "Rose" is in reference to a name while the following three refer to the past tense of the verb "to rise," the color rose, and the flower (Ramazani 34). As a result, the constant repetition of the word causes it to alter its significance in the mind of the reader, thus imbuing what appears to be nonsense with more symbolic meaning.

The notion of repetition is further expanded upon in Stein's use of Jamesian characterology. Along with his concept of "stream of consciousness," James pioneered the assumption of a pluralistic universe, saying the "world is teeming with possibilities that can be actualized by man," basically signifying that the personality is the product of what a person most emphasizes in his field of consciousness (Weinstein 17). He purports that habit plays a large role in defining a person. When utilized as a lens to analyze Gertrude Stein's poetry, the seemingly tedious repeating phrases become the defining forces in a character's existence. The most glaring example of this use of habit to define a person comes in Stein's piece *Melanctha*, a portion of her larger work *Three Lives*. Taken at face value, not much is actually accomplished throughout the plot. Melanctha, an African American servant girl, tends to her ill mother, pursues three men, and falls in love with one of them. She then falls out of love, contracts tuberculosis, and dies. The story itself is simple; however, the art lies in Stein's unique form of characterization. Rather than revealing the character's personalities

in their actions, Stein chooses to place the focus on the characters' stream of consciousness and an omniscient narrator to divulge their traits rather than a sudden epiphany or willful action.

Paramount in Stein's longer writing is her belief in the stability of a character. She accepts the Jamesian notion of characterology and expands upon it by asserting her conviction that, once a character is set in his archetype, the possibility of any major changes is unlikely. This again is evidenced by her use of repetition and habit in "Sacred Emily" and *Melanctha*. "Melanctha Herbert was a graceful, pale yellow, intelligent, attractive," Stein writes continually throughout the piece (*Three Lives*). Despite the environment, Melanctha is always described exactly the same way. While this constant affirmation may at first appear to be monotonous nonsense, Stein utilizes this structure to convey her beliefs about humanity. Namely, because a person is permanently stuck in their character type, defining him or her consists of a constant cycle of assertion and realization of the same simple thing. The character's thoughts may drift from subject to subject, but their core personality is always constant. Melanctha may fall in and out of love, she may live or die, but she will always be "graceful, pale yellow, intelligent, attractive" (*Three Lives*).

More specifically, Stein uses her verb tenses and word choice in *Melanctha* to dictate the characters' personalities. Melanctha's lover, Jeff, believes in "loving" and "being good to everybody" and "trying to understand" (*Three Lives*). His consciousness is filled with participles, qualifying adjectives and clauses as he struggles to achieve his emotions, rather than simply feeling them. In contrast, Melanctha says, "I certainly do understand," thus asserting her definitive and logical nature through her verbs rather than through her actions (*Three Lives*). As a result of the importance placed on word choice, the events of the story can come in any sequence. Melanctha is the same person throughout the story, unchanged by her environment, which Stein proves by removing the logical progression of time.

A final tenet of Jamesian psychology used to portray characters in Stein's writing is his notion of a "continuous present" (Miller 19). At its core, "continuous present" is the visualization of time as fluid and all encompassing. Rather than a traditional linear structure of "first, next, then, last," James promotes the concept of every event occurring simulta-

neously in the mind. Stein utilizes this ideology in *Melanctha* by creating discontinuities in narrative time. The piece begins:

Rose Johnson made it very hard to bring her baby to its birth. Melanctha Herbert who was Rose Johnson's friend, did everything any woman could . . . the child though it was healthy after it was born, did not live long. (1-3)

Nearly a hundred pages later, this information is relayed again almost identically. Although *Melanctha* and Rose's friendship does not flourish until late in *Melanctha's* life, the piece opens with their relationship and the eventual death of Rose's child. This purposeful removal of chronological continuity, while seemingly nonsensical, is integral to Stein's style. By presenting the reader with all of the important character information at once, the reader is forced to consider all of the facts equally. This closely follows James' concept that what is emphasized in the consciousness, regardless of time or event, is the best measure of characterization. In this way through his notions of "stream of consciousness," "characterology," and "continuous present," Jamesian psychology serves as a key to decode Stein's seemingly erratic writing style.

## Cubism

Of secondary importance in Gertrude Stein's life and poetic style was the cubist work of artists such as Pablo Picasso and Juan Gris. The artists were close friends with Stein and her partner Alice Toklas and frequently displayed their work in the couple's apartment. As W.G. Rogers asserted in his book *When This You See Remember Me: Gertrude Stein in Person*, "*Tender Buttons* is to writing...exactly what cubism is to art," stressing the connection that the artists forged. A basic description of cubism is the destruction, dissection, and reassembling of an object with the intention of capturing its essence. The idea falls in line with Stein's belief of the "continuous present." As Picasso wrote in his 1923 *Statement to Marius De Zayas*, "to me there is no past or future in art. If a work cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all," thus stressing his belief in the timelessness of any artistic style ("Picasso Speaks"). At its core, cubism operates on the notion that an object is not the sum of its parts, but rather every atom of an object contains within it the essence of the whole, and

therefore can be rearranged at will while still maintaining the overall sense of the thing.

This concept of the strategic reassembling an object is explored at length in Stein's book of poetry *Tender Buttons*. Take, for example, Stein's description of "A Handkerchief": "A winning of all the blessings, a sample not a sample because there is no worry" (24). What the piece lacks is cohesion. The words themselves are not challenging, just as a piece of cubist art is nothing more than a simple color or shape; the art comes from the organization as a whole. Stein's work is not meant to be analyzed word by word, connecting the concepts of "blessings" to the common phrase "bless you" following a sneeze. Rather, she intends her poetry to be digested all at once, in the "continuous present" with every word carrying the same weight because every word contains within it the essence of the whole.

Another crucial principle of cubism is the concept that the subject is "veiled by the medium of description" (Lewis). For Picasso, the "veils" were the planes into which the painter broke up the canvas, while Stein's "veils," according to Marjorie Perloff in her book *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, are the abstract patterns of her words. Perloff asserts that Stein's objects "not only are fragmented and decomposed as they are in cubist still-life; they also serve as false leads forcing the reader to consider the very nature of naming." In this way, Stein's manipulation of her syntax, while seemingly random and senseless, is actually a calculated strategy enacted to shake up the reader's preconceived notions of the subject. Eyeglasses become "A color in shaving, a saloon is well placed in the centre of an alley," rather than two clear glass lenses in metal frames (*Tender Buttons* 21). This conscious action of portraying glasses without the expected combination of words forces the reader to see the subject in a new light. The initial confusion caused by the apparent lack of cohesion acts as a fog or veil through which the reader must actively try to see through. Stein is attempting to make her audience sit up and pay attention, to read critically and engage their minds just as Picasso wanted to engage his viewers in his art.

## Linguistic Relativity

A final influence that gives context to Gertrude Stein's writing is the psychological theory of Linguistic Relativity pioneered by Benjamin

Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir, sometimes referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Throughout her studies at Johns Hopkins medical school and her interactions with William James, Stein focused much of her education on uncovering the mysteries of the brain, with a specific concentration on the neural connections between consciousness and language (Weinstein 52). Among the theories gaining popularity during her time in school was the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, which, summarized, states that language influences thought. In this way, people speaking different languages would therefore have different perceptions of the world around them. With this in mind, what Stein seeks to accomplish in her writing is a completely novel view of reality. She intends to explore the limits of language in the hope that it will lead to an entirely new understanding of the world in which we live.

Among Whorf and Sapir's more controversial assertions is the notion that, if a word for an object does not exist in a given language, then the individuals who speak that language must not think about that object. This concept is not proven or refuted by Stein's writing, but rather explored. In her poetry in *Tender Buttons*, Stein purposefully avoids using common nouns when defining her objects and instead chooses to talk around the subject while still alluding to its existence. For example, in her poem "A Red Stamp," the omission of words is just as important as the words she chooses to include. Consider a stamp. The words most commonly associated with it would likely include envelope, letter, send, mail, corner, etc. Stein, however, seems to be playing a form of the game Taboo in which she avoids these words of association at all costs. In doing so, she asserts that the sense of an object can be gleaned without typical or expected explanation. And, while Whorf and Sapir would argue that a culture with no word for telephone must not think about telephones, Stein would answer by stating that it is possible to indicate an object without stating it outright.

This strategy of talking around a subject to capture its essence adds to her desire to depict an object in its entirety. As expressed by her cubist influences, Stein's writing revolves around the concept of the subject as a whole, completed, entity. Her pieces in *Tender Buttons* represent the reality of a specific item as reflected by her consciousness. This concept is most thoroughly explored in her poem "A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass."

Structured as a definition, she first gives the object (a Carafe) followed by its description. However, her description is not the general depiction commonly found in a dictionary. The key to Stein's poetry is understanding that she is not defining a carafe. She is defining *her* carafe. The glass that she sees at a certain time, in a certain light, through her eyes, is different from any old glass on a table. With this in mind, the description becomes purely experiential and personal. Phrases such as "an arrangement in a system to pointing" may mean nothing to a reader sitting in a library because they were crafted to capture a certain subject in its full essence at one moment in time (*Tender Buttons* 9). Her poetry therefore is not meant to be understood and accessible to all, but rather a way of transmitting across time and space the experience of life itself.

With the consideration that Stein's poetry is meant to capture an experience, what follows is the notion that traditional grammar rules do not and should not apply. Critics of Stein will point to her omission of traditional punctuation and abundant usage of verbs as crass or meaningless; however, this could not be further from the truth. Her refusal to abide by the laws of coherent language frees her to create new meaning with her poetry and stand as a maverick forming new methods of thought. Just as notes can be combined to form melodies and symphonies, words too can create music. However, the desire to form a "logical" sentence restricts the writer to using melodies that have already been written. When these restrictions are removed, the writer is free to conduct symphonies that have never before been heard. The cadence of her poem "Vegetable" is a perfect example. She writes, "it was a cress a crescent a cross and an unequal scream," which, at first glance is complete nonsense (*Tender Buttons* 53). But, read aloud, read as music, the sentence is melodic and unfamiliar. It is a combination of simple words that has never before been written simply because of the fear inherent in not being understood. Therefore, Gertrude Stein uses her language to shatter the preconceived notions of reality and create a new perception of the world through her word choices.

By taking into consideration the influences of psychology and art on Gertrude Stein's poetry, her words are transformed from puzzling gibberish to works of deep intellectual merit. In many ways, however, Stein's stream of consciousness writing can even be taken as a form of Taoist meditation, as her exploration of the inner consciousness leads to

her perceptual formation of her own personality. Perhaps Stein's writing cannot possibly be understood by anyone other than herself. Therefore, the harder we struggle to understand her words, the more meaning we inject in our desperate attempts to stave off the emptiness that encroaches in the absence of complete understanding. Like Jeff Cambell in "Melanctha," we are "trying to understand" and are constantly fighting our natural state of emptiness, when maybe what we should be doing is turning inward to embrace our inner chasms as Stein did with her poetry. After all, it was Robert Frost who said,

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces  
Between stars—on stars where no human race it.  
I have it in me so much nearer home  
To scare myself with my own desert places. (13–16)

## WORKS CITED

- "Gertrude Stein." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web.
- Gold, Michael. "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot." *The Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing*. Univ. of Pennsylvania, 18 July 2007. Web.
- Lewis, Pericles. "Tender Buttons." *The Modernism Lab at Yale University*. Yale University, 6 Jan. 2010. Web.
- Miller, Rosalind S. *Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility*. New York: The Exposition Press, 1949. Print.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981.
- "Picasso Speaks," *The Arts*, New York, May 1923, pp. 315-26; reprinted in Alfred Barr: Picasso, New York 1946, pp. 270–1.
- Stein, Gertrude. "Sacred Emily." *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, vol. 1. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003. 36. Print.
- Frost, Robert. "Desert Places." *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, vol. 1. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003. Print.

Reid, B.L. *Art by Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein*. *American Literature* 31.1 (1959): 92–93. New York: Duke UP, 1949. Web.

Stein, Gertrude. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Vintage, 1990.

Stein, Gertrude. *Tender Buttons*. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1914. Print.

Stein, Gertrude. *Three Lives*. New York: Grafton Press, 1909.

Weinstein, Norman. *Gertrude Stein and the Literature of the Modern Consciousness*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1970. Print.

CARLY SITRIN is a sophomore in Boston University's College of Communication intending to major in Journalism with a concentration in International Relations. She was born and raised in a cornfield in Hillsborough, New Jersey two decades ago and wants to thank her writing professor Jason Tandon profusely for his support and guidance during her writing process.