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No Ordinary English: Gertrude Stein Defines Literacy

BY NICOLE WILLIAMS AND AMANDA MORRISH

Reading Gertrude Stein's experimental works (*Tender Buttons, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, How to Write, The Making of Americans*) is like drowning in alphabet soup; you catch glimpses of words, their meanings flash through your mind, but you feel utterly helpless and can't tell which way is up. You start wondering: Did I just see a sentence? and Shouldn't there be some punctuation in this mess? Ask Stein for the answers and you'll get something like this:

...being intelligible is not what it seems, after all these things are a matter of habit. Take what the newspapers say about what you call the New Deal. If you know just ordinary English you do not have the slightest idea what the newspapers are talking about everybody has their own English it is only a matter of anybody getting used to an English anybody's English and then it is all right. After all when you say they do not understand [my writing] what do you mean...you mean by understanding that you can talk about it in the way that you have the habit of talking...putting it in other words...but I mean by understanding enjoyment. (Watts 91)

Loopy as her rationale may seem, Stein's writing is undeniably thought-provoking. In order to survive even one chapter though, you had better learn to like drowning.

You'll have to sacrifice your conventional notions of grammar, too. Stein insists that writers owe no one explicit form or context, and that readers are entirely capable of heavy brainwork. She rejects punctuation, relying instead on words and sentences to convey emotion, since

...capital letters and quotations marks are useless. They are hangovers from the days when people didn't read very well, that all goes into the
question of life and death of punctuation marks, if you don’t know a question without a question mark what is the use of writing the question? ... the average reading mind does not need them. (Watts 94)

To individually intuit what Stein’s words mean in relation to one another is no easy task. Even when we don’t find plot or setting or well-developed characters (because those she thinks we can make up for ourselves), it is possible to make some sense of her works, to identify subjects and objects and modifiers within her sentences.

Stein’s critics now call her style “Steinese.” Reading Steinese is much like viewing cubist art. Stein and Pablo Picasso were friends, and when Picasso introduced his cubist paintings around 1909, Stein began implementing cubist styles into her own work. Both Stein’s and Picasso’s careers are split into two respective stages. Stein called her initial obscure style prose, and later transitioned to a second obscure style, which she called poetry. By examining these two phases in relation to the work that Picasso was doing, we can learn more about the roles that Stein assigns to writers and, most especially, to readers.

Analytic Cubism/ The First Obscure Style

Picasso started out using analytic cubism, and then shifted three years later to synthetic cubism. In his analytic phase, Picasso broke down subject matter into repetitive overlapping planes, using mostly browns, ochres, and greys. In this phase, the whole picture surface is brought to life by interaction of the shaded, angular planes. Some of these planes seem to recede away from the eye into shallow depth, but this sensation is always counteracted by a succeeding passage which will lead the eye forward again up onto the picture plane. The optical sensation produced is comparable to that of running one’s hand over an immensely elaborate, subtly carved sculpture in low relief. (Dubnick 4)

An example of this style is Picasso’s Portrait of Wilhelm Unde (1910), a canvas full of brown and ochre repetitive shapes that create a sharp, angular look.

The art community had never seen anything like this before, and although people understood that it was representational they still found it hard to understand.

The same is true of Stein’s experimental works. She starts out by borrowing the repetitive characteristics of analytic cubism; in her early work, we see “Repeated clauses, extended syntax, and used a vague constricted vocabulary” (Dubnick 4). In Stein’s The Making of Americans, she got “rid of nouns and adjectives as much as possible by the method of living in adverbs in verbs in pronouns in adverbial clauses written or implied and in conjunctions” (Dubnick 5). Her primary focus was on syntax. To her, individual words were of less importance than the sentence as a whole.

In Poetry and Grammar Stein writes, “The vocabulary in respect to prose is less important than the parts of speech, and the internal balance and the movement within the given space” (Dubnick 6). Stein linked clauses together in repetition in order to create movement within a long sentence, and then would collect them in paragraphs to develop larger meanings. That purposeful repetition “conveys a sense of process and duration, and of the time it takes to know a
person or understand an idea" (Dubnick 9).

In constructing her prose, Stein loosely developed meaning for the reader over long syntax. She does not give anything away with just one phrase but instead leaves the meaning to be decided at the end of the paragraph. This paragraph, taken from Stein's How to Write, is one of her favorites:

Pleasantly or presently. How or have. A sentence is. Made or make a meaning. Now feebly commence a sentence. How has he hurried. That is a paragraph because it means yet. How has he hurried. (26)

In that book, Stein models how she thinks one ought to write, but she gives unconventional and indirect instructions, leaving the reader at the end of each paragraph to interpret the message.

Synthetic Cubism/2nd Obscure Style

Picasso's synthetic style involved collage as well as a variety of color and textures, and he started using lines instead of cubes.

In this second phase the cubists began to use pictorial elements plastically, often composing works in which the original compositional ideas may have been developed by the arrogant of a few abstract pictorial shapes that suggested a subject rather than beginning with a subject that is analyzed. (Dubnick 4)

In Picasso's Green Still Life (1914), the focus is upon the objects on the table, but both the foreground and the background blend in tones of green.

During this stage, Stein was busy writing Tender Buttons. Halfway through the book she modified her style, adopting principles of synthetic cubism.

Now focusing on the word rather than on the sentence, her "Vocabulary is extended and syntax degenerates into sentence fragments" (Dubnick 5). Stein's emphasis shifted to vocabulary choice and suppression of the sentence. Her new style was about being in the moment, conscious of the world. She wanted to look more at the world around her and take in every part of it instead of simplifying it.

Since Stein's experimental writing was so largely influenced by Picasso's cubism, and because cubist art is generally thought to be abstract and non-representational, critics have made the mistake of calling Stein's abstract as well. However, synthetic cubism is completely focused on the concept of subject. The idea of being abstract means not focusing on a subject matter, and that is never the case with Stein. In Tender Buttons and subsequent writing, Stein's "subject matter is the intersection of the object with consciousness. Attention is focused on the process of perceiving and that process becomes part of the subject as well" (Dubnick 30). Not unlike Picasso, who broke up single subjects and portioned them into different elements, Stein's careful word choice is intended to describe a subject in a provocatively fragmented way. The work of Picasso and Stein is therefore not abstract, because it does focus on a subject matter.
To this day, after mucking through a few of Stein's jumbled pages, readers will typically respond to Steinese with concern, condemnation, disgust, or some combination of the three. Stein would combat these responses by suggesting that the average reader is spoiled, a creature of habit who has come to expect literature to provide some fantasy journey or some mirror of humankind or some opportunity to emote. Surely we have grown accustomed to literature that offers what critic Linda Watts calls “purposeful obscurity” -- a witty mixture of allusion, metaphor, and other meaningful subtleties. Stein, on the other hand, presents us with, “...the absence of fixed symbols writ large... truly free-form texts that convert[s] readers into writers” (112). For some, this reader-to-writer conversion can be painfully exhausting, but Watts thinks that for truly dedicated readers the experience can be one of liberation. She suggests that

If the reader truly collaborates, the writer no longer wields over an audience the final word on a text’s implication. Neither does the author stand obliged to discipline the text such that it flatters the reader with the sensation of mastery in textual explication. In place of an orderly text, satisfyingly collected, is the prospect of a more ongoing relationship in which the reader and writer perform their identities and test out their understandings of the text and one another, a testing complete with missteps, misunderstandings, gaps, pleasures, and sensual play. (Watts 8, 9)

By pushing us to “truly collaborate” in this way, Stein is not completely unreasonable. In Understanding reading: a psycholinguistic analysis of reading and learning to read, literary theorist Frank Smith points out that all readers, when encountering narrative gaps (between chapters, for instance), subconsciously fill in the blanks. To be sure, Stein leaves us with no other choice! In order to make any sense at all of her rambling writing style, her reader absolutely must be an active participant. It is because Stein demands that her readers think for themselves that her works are so interesting and, in various ways, freeing.

Gertrude Stein was Postmodern before Postmodern. Although it’s probably impossible to prove whether or not she actually meant to develop her own theory of literacy, she has. Her approach to reading and writing was revolutionary, open-ended, and therefore frustrating. She allowed readers to fully engage the text, not limiting themselves to her thoughts and ideas but coming up with their own. In Lives on the Boundary, a book which takes a look at undereducated students in America, Mike Rose writes, “Error marks the place where education begins” (Rose 189). If Rose’s assertion is correct, then Steinese literature is a great place for one’s literacy to take shape. Gertrude Stein places unusual faith in us as readers, fully expecting that with or without directed focus, we will create meaning as we read.

Any reader who is willing to meet these challenges stands to gain quite a lot. By sensing what is missing in the text, the reader gains a sharpened awareness of what reading is or can be. By trading in our conceptions of writers as authorities and by not interpreting narratives as absolute doctrines, we can experience our own personal literacy conversions. Once we accept that “Stein insists on a resourceful, active reader, one willing to take part in the text’s formation, to contribute rather than comply” (Watts 8), each of us can come away from her work knowing that by reading we have in fact accomplished something, created something, shared in something.
Works Cited


