

Bedford Cultural Editions

GERTRUDE STEIN

Three Lives

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PALGRAVE MACMILLAN



Gertrude Stein as a student at Radcliffe College (the Harvard Annex), circa 1897. Reproduced by permission of the Beinecke Library American Literature Collection, Yale University.

Introduction: Cultural and Historical Background

William James called *Three Lives* “a fine new kind of realism” (Gallup 50). Sherwood Anderson claimed it had helped make him into a writer. And what reviews saw print were favorable (see Part Two, Chapter 5). Avant-garde readers saw Gertrude Stein’s 1909 fiction as an impressive experiment, describing three lower-class women characters in strangely repetitious language, so that the good Anna, the gentle Lena, and the controversial Melanctha left indelible impressions. For those readers who ridiculed the very notion of the avant-garde, Stein was a strange Parisian, the “Mama of Dada,” a person to be avoided rather than read. As a proponent of the dadaism movement, Stein joined other artistic minds and challenged established canons of art and literature, thought and morality.

As a classically formalist experiment published in the midst of realistic American fiction, *Three Lives* illustrated the new. As a set of scientifically objective portraits, the characterizations of women in *Three Lives* puzzled readers. Who *were* these women? Why were they valued enough to become the subjects of literary narrative? Where did their heroism, their nobility, lie? What was Gertrude Stein’s relationship to these characters? Why was Stein — an educated woman who lived on proceeds from a family trust fund — writing so carefully about two German immigrant women and the black, lower-middle-class Melanctha? And why — despite the book’s title of *Three Lives* — did each story end with the death of the character?

GENDER AND STEIN AS WRITER

Melanctha now really was beginning as a woman. . . . Girls who are brought up with care and watching can always find moments to escape into the world, where they may learn the ways that lead to wisdom. (p. 95)

The role of the woman who wants to write has often been complicated by the infringement of expected social duties on her writing time; there is much reading and thinking, living and acting necessary before she can even dare to imagine becoming a writer. For Gertrude Stein, the youngest child of a traditional German Jewish family, being a daughter was both a role and a discipline. Daughters (like Gertrude and her older sister Bertha) had different roles in a family than did sons (like Michael, Simon, and Leo). Sons had tutors and learned difficult materials; daughters had governesses and learned to be sociable: they played the piano, drew, visited, and wore velvet dresses. Because the Steins traveled and lived in Europe for much of Gertrude's childhood, differences within the Austrian and French cultures made gender and sex differences even more noticeable.

Born in 1874, Gertrude lived in both Baltimore and the San Francisco area during the height of American "separate spheres" socialization, a social code pertinent to white middle- and upper-class society. Men earned good livings and maintained control over their wives and families; wives usurped what power they could from managing the household and the children. Men went out into the world and women lived sheltered lives at home, supposedly innocent of the brutality of capitalistic endeavors. Sons of wealthy enough families were sent away for educations; daughters helped at home. As the youngest of the five Stein children, Gertrude quickly saw that she wanted to lead a son's life rather than a daughter's. Her intellectual propensity coupled with her tomboyish nature made her more like her brothers than like her sister, Bertha. After the lingering illness and eventual death of their mother, Millie Keyser Stein, Gertrude (still called "Baby" by her siblings) realized that Bertha had become their mother, tending to all the household needs, the cooking, and what organization she could maintain. To avoid helping Bertha in the mother role, Gertrude stopped having anything to do with her sister, and with the chores.

Note: Page references are to the work reprinted in this volume.

Much to her often irate father's dismay, Gertrude shaped herself into a student. When she was not in school, she read and studied at one of San Francisco's large libraries. For entertainment, she and Leo frequented used book stores and saved their money to buy drawings, books, and other curiosities. The oldest son, Mike, was venerated in the family because, after starting college at University of California at Berkeley, he transferred to and graduated from Johns Hopkins. Then he did a year of postgraduate work. Leo's courses of study took longer, and moved him from the West Coast to the East — to both Harvard and Johns Hopkins — and eventually Gertrude followed him to Massachusetts. When she enrolled at the Harvard Annex (later to become Radcliffe College) as a special student (because she had never graduated from secondary school), she was probably the first woman of her family to attend a university.

Stein's personal fight for gender equality and her right to an education mirrored the efforts of many women late in the nineteenth century. Included in this text are cultural documents that show the almost continuous battle for not only women's suffrage (the right to vote), but for women's opportunity to become formally educated (see Part Two, Chapter 1). Elizabeth Cady Stanton's cry for suffrage foreshadows the eloquent arguments of Anna Julia Haywood Cooper, a black North Carolina teacher, and Charlotte Perkins Stetson Gilman, an economist, that women be both educated and valued for the real worth of their work. Without training, women were ineffectual in the labor market, and the essays by Fanny Fern and the anonymous farmer's wife included here describe those extremely limited lives (see pp. 219–46).

In a complex way, Stein's realization that her art could differ from that of men because of her gender grew slowly, modulated by her successful experiences at Radcliffe, where she did psychological research with Harvard graduate students, and at Johns Hopkins, where she chose not to attend seminars in gynecology that she found offensive. Just as her graduate work could be defined in part by her sex and her gendered interests, so could her writing. That she chose women characters as her subjects, grounding them in the very dailiness of the lives they would have had to cope with, is one marker of her consciousness about the restrictions of separate spheres. Her gender informed much more than her fictional pursuits, as was illustrated when she wrote so forcefully to her critic/friend, Henri Pierre Roche, "You are a man and I am a woman but I have a much more constructive mind than you have. I am a genuinely creative artist and being such my personality determines my art just as Matisse's or Picasso's or Wagner's. . . . Now

you if I were a man would not write me such a letter because you would respect the *inevitable* character of my art. . . . But being a man and believing that a man's business is to be constructive you forget the much greater constructive power of my mind and the absolute nature of my art which if I were a man you would respect. . . ." (see p. 246). Had it not been for the decades of women writing and speaking to gain equality — in education, in the workplace, and in society at large — Stein would have been unable to base her argument on any recognizable logic. She used the concept of women's rights effectively in her fiction because she understood what it meant to be recognized as a woman artist.

THE STORY OF THE STORY

In 1903, approaching the age of thirty, Gertrude Stein had decided she would become a writer. A magna cum laude graduate in philosophy and psychology from Radcliffe College, she had gone to classes for the four years of medical school at the Johns Hopkins University. But she had not graduated. Stein had intended to specialize in "women's medicine," but her beliefs about the female body and the care that was appropriate for it conflicted with medical practices at the turn of the century (see Part Two, Chapter 1). One of the professors of gynecology with whom she argued made the motion during a meeting of the medical school faculty that Miss Stein not be graduated with her class. The intention of the faculty was that she attend summer school, do the remainder of her required work, and then graduate. But in Stein's recollection years later, in the first of her memoirs, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), she said that she was relieved not to have become a physician. She had been much more bored than she knew, and saw the delay in her graduation as a way to avoid that continued boredom (82).

Stein spent more than a year after medical school doing independent research on the human brain under the direction of Professor Llewellyn F. Barker; he admired her work and urged the leading journal in the field to publish her long essay, with its quantity of drawings. For political reasons connected with the medical school, the work was never published (Wagner-Martin). Stein had, however, already published papers in the *Harvard Psychological Review*: one was coauthored; the other was her senior thesis, based on research into students' ability to pay attention when they were tired. Stein was fasci-

nated with the powers of the human mind, and her undergraduate work with Harvard's brilliant William James, one of the founders of the discipline of psychology, shaped her interests for the rest of her life (see Part Two, Chapter 3).

Gertrude Stein knew she could write scientific papers. But what she decided she wanted to write, after traveling abroad in the months between her scientific training and her moving to Paris to live with her art collecting brother, Leo, was fiction.

Three Lives was not her first effort. During 1903 and 1904, while she was still living in Baltimore and doing research on the brain, Stein was also writing narratives about love triangles. Both *Q.E.D. (Quod Erat Demonstrandum)* and *Fernhurst* were short works of fiction that dealt with lovers who were not yet fully committed to each other and were involved with several people. In one story, the affair was heterosexual; in the other, it was lesbian. Because the only person to whom Stein showed her writing was her brother Leo, and because he was offended by its intimate subject matter, she did not attempt to publish these fictions until decades later. But her efforts in writing them gave her confidence.

After her move to Paris, Stein immersed herself in reading. She had always read a great deal, and continued throughout her life to read a book a day. She knew all the British and the European novels, and she also knew that realistic writing was moving to the forefront of literary taste, particularly in the United States. Having been a student of William James, she was well aware of the work of his younger brother, Henry James, one of the most prominent of America's realists. As a beginning writer, she avidly followed William Dean Howells's pronouncements, and she knew who Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, and Frank Norris were (see Part Two, Chapter 4). She admired all these writers for experimenting with *realism* — they used common people as characters, they told their stories in everyday language, and they relied on the concrete details of place and time to convey life's circumstances.

Despite her interest in living abroad (for its advantages both economically, being inordinately cheaper, and socially, being much less restrictive about friendships and sexual liaisons), Stein enjoyed the fact that she was an American. She wanted to be known as an American writer, an American person, and the work she considered her greatest early effort — *The Making of Americans* — testified to that enthusiasm. She remained stridently American throughout her life, even though she lived the last forty years of that life in France. Yet

because of her brother's negative reaction to materials he could identify as personally reflective, she understood that she might be better off writing fiction that could not be identified as autobiographical. So, Stein looked around her for narratives she could write about other people.

When realism, then, became the mode of preferred writing in the United States, with characters often drawn from the lower echelons of society, Stein felt that she understood both the literary and the human motives: she could tell stories about something other than the elite themes and characters of traditional literature, about something other than her own relatively wealthy, well-educated culture. With information gleaned from a lifelong penchant for observing others, she could follow the adventurous trends of current realist/naturalist writing in Émile Zola's *Nana*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. In these tales of hungering women, the latter character a prostitute, Stein found subject matter that — as a woman herself — she was interested in. She also found value in describing and probing cultural restrictions on women's lives: the Victorian period put women in spheres separate from men, "protecting" them from life's realities, keeping them, literally, virginal and chaste. As exemplified by Stein, herself, that period was about to end (see Part Two, Chapter 1).

As an intellectual Radcliffe graduate and a medical student, Stein was already an anomaly. Few upper-middle-class women received formal educations; most were tutored at home or sent to finishing schools for a brief time. With the prospect of analyzing women's sexual lives as subjects for her fiction, Stein would define herself even further outside the realm of Victorian womanhood. Sexually experienced women, in particular, were dangerous subjects for a woman to write about; the reader would be bound to wonder where the author had gotten her information. In American realism, Stein found a touchstone of technique: she learned that with careful nondisclosive language, the writer could portray subjects that even the most sheltered readers would not find offensive. Style, language choices, and tone might be made to be more important to the writing and the reader than the more obvious plot and theme of the work. Style might, in essence, eclipse the story itself.

It is not accidental that Stein felt great confidence in her ability to become an American realist. One of her great enthusiasms in life was what she saw as her ability to understand the average person. Later in life, when she was asked to teach an informal Great Books course at

the University of Chicago, she prided herself on the fact that undergraduate students would talk with her, whereas they were much less responsive with the regular professors, Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins, men who had founded the program. Her hobby in life was walking the streets of Paris, talking in her idiosyncratic French with people she met. She had behaved similarly in California as an adolescent, as well as in Baltimore and Boston and London — wherever she traveled. While in Baltimore, she considered the high point of her medical school training being able to work in a medical clinic and make house calls, attending pregnant women who had no other medical attention. Many of these women were black. Such shared intimacy was rare at the turn-of-the-century for there were few social situations, especially in a southern city, where white and black races met. For Stein, this experience held great importance. A decade later, when the European art world discovered African sculpture and painting, forcing acknowledgment of what had previously been considered mere primitive art, Stein felt herself, once again, on intimate terms with the black race, comfortable with the knowledge she had acquired about the African American women she had known in urban Baltimore. Whether or not her experience gave her the right to assume such an intimacy is questionable; but she felt that her knowledge about black culture was more valid and true than her friends' less personal information. In Stein's mind, then, it was not a difficult choice to write about Melanctha.

The catalyst for *Three Lives* (which Stein originally titled *Three Histories*) was, however, less the knowledge she had accumulated than it was an exercise her brother suggested to her during a period of writer's block: that she translate, from French into English, Flaubert's story "*Un coeur simple*" (a simple heart), taken from his book *Trois contes*. The translation, Leo said, would both improve her language skills and, perhaps, give her a model for realistic writing (see Wineapple). While Stein wrote away on this practice, she absorbed Flaubert's story of Félicité, the young serving girl, and her mind moved quickly to her own servant, the German woman who had kept house for her and Leo when they were students living in their own rented house in Baltimore. Lena Lebender, loving and self-effacing, whose devotion to Gertrude was well known, became the model for Stein's first character, that of the ostensibly "good" Anna Federer. Complex and somewhat older than either Lena or the Flaubertian model, the Anna in Stein's story lived discretely and amiably — she was, after all, despite her "arduous and troubled life," characterized as "good" — but she

managed in the midst of her duties to carve out a lesbian relationship for herself.

Stein reserved the name “Lena” for what was to be the third story in the collection, the short tale of the young German maidservant who let herself be directed into an unsuitable and unwanted marriage — which led to her eventual death in childbirth. Stein wrote this story to criticize the well-intentioned, first-generation immigrant relatives in the States who saw no alternative but marriage for the wistful young German cousin brought to America as a serving girl. “The Gentle Lena” was Stein’s attempt to discredit at least some of the assimilationist attitudes in the States at the turn of the century (see Dearborn). The implicit question at the end of Lena’s literal and figurative journey is: Why must all women marry? A more basic, gendered question is: Why do women who are themselves settled into unwanted marriages try to coerce other women into the same patterns? Is there no choice available in a woman’s existence?

By the time she had completed both “The Good Anna” and “The Gentle Lena,” Stein had her prose method — of insistence, not mere repetition — firmly in hand (see Part Two, Chapter 3). Her fiction was unlike any she had ever read, in any language that she knew; it was her attempt to make words fresh. The reader who began the narrative of the work-obsessed Anna would long remember the dutiful woman, even if her life was a repetitious maze of largely self-inflicted painful service:

Anna led an arduous and troubled life.

Anna managed the whole little house for Miss Mathilda. It was a funny little house, one of a whole row of all the same kind that made a close pile like a row of dominoes that a child knocks over, for they were built along a street which at this point came down a steep hill. They were funny little houses, two stories high, with red brick fronts and long white steps. (p. 37)

Strange as the description may at first appear, the Baltimore row house emerges accurately from the simple language, shaded sentence by sentence. The house is simply compared, in the “row of dominoes” image. Nothing about this paragraph would be off-putting to the reader, nor would the language send him or her to a dictionary. There is also a hint of observant humor in the description, attained through the hyperbolic adjectives “arduous” and “troubled” and the almost childlike emphasis, “the *whole* little house.”

As Stein herself expressed, her technique of repeating the same general information by varying it slightly, appropriately, makes the reader pay attention. She preferred to think of it as insistence rather than repetition. What may be most surprising is that after nearly a century, her descriptions — even though written in very common language — still work. For instance, this is a paragraph that describes the changes in Anna's voice, depending on her audience:

Her voice was a pleasant one, when she told the histories of bad Peter and of Baby and of little Rags [her dogs]. Her voice was a high and piercing one when she called to the teamsters and to the other wicked men, what she wanted that should come to them, when she saw them beat a horse or kick a dog. She did not belong to any society that could stop them and she told them so most frankly, but her strained voice and her glittering eyes, and her queer piercing german english first made them afraid and then ashamed. . . . (p. 39)

What is repeated here is less the language than it is the structures of Stein's phrases. Taken word by word, her description is remarkable — "piercing" (repeated), "strained," "glittering," "german english" written as a noncapitalized melding of the two spoken languages. Anna's denigration of her own social position — or lack of it — as she tries to coerce the teamsters (men who drive a wagon with a team of horses) out of their habitual cruelty to animals is effectively used. There is no question that Stein is dealing with a lower-class saga, focused on the frustrated German servant who is so powerless she cannot change anyone's behavior. Anna becomes a classic realist figure and as she does, Stein becomes a pioneer of twentieth-century realism.

Even with Stein's use of repetition, there is nothing mechanical in the narrations composed for *Three Lives*. As this passage from "The Gentle Lena" shows, as Stein conveys information that has a higher emotional content, her use of insistence becomes more noticeable, but not stagnant and fixed. For example, the following passage reveals that Lena, the shy German girl, has no language for extreme and debilitating fear, the emotion she had first felt on the stormy passage over to America, and which she feels again at the prospect of birthing a child:

And so things went on, the same way, a little longer. Poor Lena was not feeling any joy to have a baby. She was scared the way she had been when she was so sick on the water. She was scared now every time when anything would hurt her. She was scared and still and lifeless, and sure that every minute she would die. Lena had no power to be strong in this

kind of trouble, she could only sit still and be scared, and dull, and lifeless, and sure that every minute she would die. (p. 213)

Stein's language truly insists on the powerlessness of the fearful young woman. Actual repetition of words combines with the shortness of the paced phrases to create in the reader the reality of Lena's fear, allowing the rawness of Lena's pain to be fully absorbed. Drawing on her experiences with the ill-informed pregnant women she had treated in Baltimore, Stein manages to write an objective and unsentimental portrait of Lena's paralysis.

The portraits in *Three Lives* reflect the emergence of irony in modern literature, requiring readers to look beneath the surface of the characters to find their hidden stories. Stein took great pride in her self-perceived radicalism — her ability to work on multiple levels, to describe a life convincingly enough to convey depth while still maintaining the utmost in simple, accurate language (see Farber). Fatalistic trends were also creeping into modern literature, as evinced by the feelings of doomed inevitability so often expressed by Stein's characters. For all the “goodness” and “gentleness” of Anna and Lena (qualities that should have brought them happiness in the Victorian world) both women die miserable, their only happiness coming from friendships with other women. In the case of Lena, the women she trusts as mentors place her into the irrevocable marriage that leads to her death; the friendships that can save her are those with other lower-class servants — the Irish and Italian girls she is dissuaded from seeing. In the case of Anna, the breaking of her relationship with her lover leads to her spiritual and physical wearing away. Even the epigraph to *Three Lives*, Jules Laforgue's line “*Donc je suis un malheureux et ce n'est ni ma faute ni celle de la vie*” (Thus I am unhappy and this is neither my fault nor that of life) exemplifies this burgeoning fatalism in modern realism.

Once Stein had honed her new realistic style, she began the most difficult challenge of the three narratives, that of the bisexual, black Melanctha Herbert. It is this middle story, the longest of *Three Lives*, that made Stein comparatively famous. At the time, very little fiction about black characters was available in the United States. What writing did exist was either autobiographical (slave or postslave narratives or tales of pastoral or southern culture) or “uplift” literature, fiction and poetry intended to reach out with a strong moral purpose. Motivated by both Christian and heterosexual belief systems, writers of uplift literature wanted to lead readers into acceptable life paths. The

dominance of uplift literature tended to encourage women to lead exemplary lives: if culture itself did not coerce women to behave in virtuous ways, "the polemics [arguments] of nineteenth century 'racial uplift' fiction" did (Blackmer, 232). Stein's creation of a sexually experienced yet not socially "fallen" woman — one treated in a nonjudgmental manner — was unique to the time and culture. As Blackmer notes, in Stein's writing "racial and sexual taboos inevitably intersect and function to contain the desires of nonconformist and independent women to define themselves" (234).

NARRATIVE METHOD AND STYLE IN "MELANCTHA"

It is important to emphasize that the American Gertrude Stein, living in Paris, was sitting for a portrait Pablo Picasso was painting of her before she began writing the story of *Melanctha* during the winter of 1905–06. During her more than eighty sittings at his humble studio, Stein listened to Picasso's mistress read and tell stories; she gained a new appreciation for the spoken narrative. Not only was she surrounded by the avant-garde in Picasso's studio, when she returned home to 27 rue de Fleurus, she wrote, daily, sitting under Paul Cézanne's large and striking "Portrait of Mme Cézanne." A few blocks away, her brother Michael and his wife, Sarah, were collecting the most recent work of Henri Matisse as fast as their finances would allow. In "*Melanctha*," then, in light of all these influences, Stein's style changes: her use of repetition intensifies, her syntax grows more complex, and she seems to see for the first time what the qualities of impressionist and modernist painting might have to do with writing, especially with her own innovative brand of realism (see Part Two, Chapter 5).

Stein's presentation of the black protagonist of this novella is both more complicated, and more sympathetic, than her characterizations of Anna and Lena; her narration continues to be innovative, but it is also risky. The style of incremental repetition that attracts readers' attention can also repel, and in this fiction, that repetitive style has been elongated. Not only are phrases and sentences repetitive, but the prose circles back on itself: whole sections of the text seem to be repeating other sections. Blackmer comments that in "*Melanctha*," Stein may have been trying to create a three-dimensional effect. The fact that *Melanctha* is clearly bisexual (unlike the very tentative portrayal of Anna's sexuality) might also drive readers away. It is clear

that Melanctha has had heterosexual relationships during her adolescence; the reader is told that she spent much time “wandering” at the docks (p. 96). But later she becomes intimate with the alcoholic Jane Harden who, at twenty-three, is sexually adept. Stein says clearly, “It was not from the men that Melanctha learned her wisdom. It was always Jane Harden herself who was making Melanctha begin to understand” (p. 101). The two years of the women’s relationship pass quietly, Melanctha spending “long hours with Jane in her room,” a description that echoes lovemaking scenes from Stein’s earlier novella *Q.E.D.* (p. 101) Melanctha’s later liaison with Rose, which is the story that opens the novella, adds to the lesbian strand of the narrative and suggests Melanctha’s double injury when Rose betrays her — first by marrying Sam and then by disguising their lesbian affair.

After thirty-five pages of Melanctha’s varied bisexual history, Gertrude introduces Jeff Campbell, the black doctor who grows to love Melanctha while he tends her dying mother. The story then becomes an extended dialogue between the arbitrarily rational Dr. Campbell and the purposefully inarticulate Melanctha, a tour de force of voiced dialogue unlike anything yet published in American literature. During the lengthy Jeff-Melanctha interchanges, Stein defines Jeff as the rational speaker who wants permanence, exclusivity, security. His polemical insistence is shown to be absurd, however, when contrasted with Melanctha’s meaningful silences. She loves through acts; she gives Jeff what she has to give and does not talk about it. While he accepts her love, he verbalizes all parts of their relationship and forces her into language that becomes destructive. Whatever Melanctha says, Jeff argues with. By the end of the fifty-page dialogue, the reader sees that Stein has constructed a classic philosophical discourse between reason and emotion. Because the language sounds so much like actual speech — circular, repetitious, boring — its classic pattern is often overlooked.

Stein’s fiction furthered what was becoming her life process, melding the knowledge she had acquired from her studies of philosophy and psychology at Radcliffe College and her studies of brain anatomy and medicine at Johns Hopkins with her understanding of literature and painting. Her main interest was presenting the person; her fascination with the “portrait” — a form in which she worked for the next twenty years — was a culmination of years of formal study as well as the result of the contemporary artistic excitement over Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse as they worked to change the nature of painting, particularly through *their* portraits. In “Melanctha,” Gertrude not

only creates the title character, she also creates a fictional portrait of herself as a deeply divided individual — a double portrait, if you will. Although the long dialogue between Jeff and Melanctha has been described as typical of conversations Stein and her female lover often had, with Jeff Campbell representing Stein, the author also reveals aspects of herself in the character of Melanctha. Born of very different — and irreconcilable — parents and later isolated from her family, the maturing Melanctha — like Stein — tried to escape her feelings of difference and looked to sexual love for self-knowledge. Jeff and Melanctha's impasse mirrors Stein's own conflicted emotional loyalties to different facets of herself.

Reading "Melanctha" as a double portrait of Stein herself — with Jeff Campbell representing the logical, argumentative, and philosophically trained consciousness and Melanctha standing for the intuitive and warmly sexual being, the persona who did not want to talk about her emotions — creates three critical problems. First is the issue of gender. How can Stein as author identify with both the male speaker and the female? How can she avoid stereotyping male and female response to sexuality? If Stein was comfortable with her own sexuality, which — despite her tentative romances with men in Cambridge — appeared to be lesbian, how did she translate that homoerotic response into a heterosexual world that fiction expected? The second concern is the issue of class, for despite what Stein saw as her comparative poverty, she was wealthy enough to live abroad, to collect paintings (however inexpensive those paintings were), and to travel widely. Her life was as different from the lives she described in *Three Lives* as possible — none of those characters had freedom of choice. Third, and probably most troubling to today's reader, is the issue of racial identity. Despite the account of Richard Wright's reading "Melanctha" aloud to a group of African American workers, to their enthusiastic response (see Weiss), Stein's story of a sexually promiscuous and aberrant black woman appears to rely on racial stereotyping — although in some ways, Stein's personal identification with Melanctha may counter what appears to be her reliance on obvious stereotypes.

In her unpublished notebooks, Stein identified herself as a sexual, and therefore — in society's eyes — an objectionable, woman. She several times repeated that her nature was sensual, even "dirty": "the Rabelaisian, nigger abandonment . . . daddy side, bitter taste fond of it" (Wagner-Martin 77–80). By likening herself to Rabelais, a sixteenth-century French satirist known for his coarse and obscene humor, Stein locates herself in the camp of the sexual, and uses the

stereotype of the sexual black woman as a kind of disguised self-portrait; the racial difference between author and character is a protective device. Further, aligning Melanctha with the paternal line of her family — “her black brute” of a father — instead of with her better-born (and lighter-skinned) mother is a means of justifying Stein’s own alliance with her father, and her own grudging acceptance of sexuality — though readers of today must still deplore her choice of language (14).

It is Stein’s willingness to take on these three controversial issues that makes *Three Lives* such a conundrum of social attitudes. Readers respond today to the radicalism in all three narratives, but particularly to “Melanctha,” and to Stein’s choice of characters who are lower-class, bisexual (in two of the three cases), and ethnically identified (and, therefore, categorized as beneath polite society). That her protagonists were women also marked *Three Lives* as an unusual, and challenging, set of literary texts (see Part Two, Chapter 2).

THE PLACE OF PHILOSOPHY IN STEIN’S WRITING

Much of the assumed difficulty of Stein’s fiction stems from the fact that her undergraduate training was in philosophy, a discipline that was based on logical argument and abstract correlation. The diction of philosophy was marked with a great many prepositional phrases; arguments tended to be carefully reasoned and often expressed in cumbersome language; and abstractions obscured concrete nouns and verbs. In short, reading philosophy could be time-consuming and less than precise, and writing philosophy shared the same stylistic markers. Some of Stein’s language in her fiction seems to be drawn almost directly from philosophical discourse. Her language was often highly abstract, with comparatively little concrete detail. For instance, when Stein describes the deadening of Anna’s passion for the great love of her life, Mrs. Lehntman, she uses only four sentences:

Mrs. Lehntman she saw very rarely. It is hard to build up new on an old friendship when in that friendship there has been bitter disillusion. They did their best, both these women, to be friends, but they were never able to again touch one another nearly. There were too many things between them that they could not speak of, things that had never been explained nor yet forgiven. (p. 84)

Rather than cause the reader to feel sorrow, Stein’s descriptive passage remains remote, distant. Of what does the women’s “disillusion” con-

sist? Why can't they "touch one another nearly"? The reader remains faced with the same dilemma as the characters, trying to understand "things that had never been explained."

This reliance on the abstract is a way of disguising the women's emotions, but it also reflects the nature of philosophical discourse. As Steven Meyer says in his introduction to Stein's *A Novel of Thank You*, "Stein is concerned to *characterize* thought — not thought generally, but thought as it enters into the composition" (xxi). There is a great amount of "talk about thought" in Stein's fiction (xxii).

Best illustrated in "Melanctha," Stein's "talk about thought" is the basis of the relationship between Jeff Campbell and Melanctha:

Always now Jeff wondered did Melanctha love him. Always now he was wondering, was Melanctha right when she said, it was he had made all their beginning. Was Melanctha right when she said, it was he had the real responsibility for all the trouble they had and still were having now between them. If she was right, what a brute he always had been in his acting. If she was right, how good she had been to endure the pain he had made so bad so often for her. But no, surely she had made herself to bear it, for her own sake, not for his to make him happy. Surely he was not so twisted in all his long thinking. Surely he could remember right what it was had happened every day in their long loving. Surely he was not so poor a coward as Melanctha always seemed to be thinking. Surely, surely, and then the torment would get worse every minute in him. (p. 149)

Jeff Campbell's torment when he is alone is doubled when he is with Melanctha. In contrast to his effervescent rhetoric, she is likely to punctuate his talk with a comment like "What you mean Jeff by your talking?" But the impasse Stein draws remains — language does not serve as a bridge over the emotional chasm, and the affair, reluctantly, dies.

Although it seems at variance with Meyer's comment, Margaret Dickie points out that there is a great deal of description in Stein's early writing — Stein used her scientific training "to classify and describe what she saw" (*Gendered* 6). She did so, however, says Dickie, with a difference. Although "science is continuously busy with the complete description of something . . . with ultimately the complete description of everything," Stein eventually outgrew that notion of the usefulness of description (*Lyrics* 64). But in *Three Lives*, page after page describes, often to the point of reiteration if not exact repetition. Carefully arranged on the page, Stein's descriptions comprise much of the narrative of each story. For instance, after Lena's marriage to Herman, Stein's description creates the seemingly persistent march

of events related to her sexual role — pregnancy, childbirth, the deadly doldrums of her life.

Before very long, Lena had her baby. He was a good, healthy little boy, the baby. Herman cared very much to have the baby. When Lena was a little stronger he took a house next door to the old couple, so he and his own family could eat and sleep and do the way they wanted. This did not seem to make much change now for Lena. She was just the same as when she was waiting with her baby. She just dragged around and was careless with her clothes and all lifeless, and she acted always and lived on just as if she had no feeling. (p. 213)

Stein's detailed prose suggests the quasi-scientific objectivity of a removed observer, and, through that tone, the reader avoids thinking author and persona have anything in common.

For an understanding of what Stein's philosophical training contributed to her writing, essays by William James, George Santayana, Henri Bergson, and Alfred North Whitehead provide both content and stylistic models (see Part Two, Chapter Three). The student of both Santayana and James, Stein wrote in their mode so well that each professor considered her a star pupil (except for her last term with James, when she did not take his final exam). She read Bergson, as did all the modernists in England and France; and she spent the first months of World War I with the family of Alfred North Whitehead, a philosopher-mathematician whose work she had long admired. The two of them spent their time on long walks, perfect for discussions. Philosophical discourse was second nature to Gertrude Stein.

In keeping with this pervasive training, it makes sense that it was less the details of Anna's and Lena's lives that interested Stein than it was the larger questions about human behavior, women's behavior. Rather than one telling detail, Stein wanted to map the complexity of her characters. While she might focus on Anna's need to control people (and, for comic effect, her dogs), Stein's real attention was less on that dimension of Anna's character than it was on her basic psychological need to take charge of everyone — often to her own detriment. In fact, even after Anna has her own business and is responsible for charging enough to make a profit from her arduous life, she fails to make ends meet: she creates a martyr of herself, even though there is no reason for that martyrdom. People would stay with her no matter what she charged. Her inability to ask what she is worth is a grave character flaw, and it leads — Stein implies — to her death. The warning for readers found in all three of Stein's "lives" helps to place her work

into an instructive model that is as appropriate to philosophy as to literature. In this way too, Stein was writing out of the larger impulse to graph lives, and to make the narratives of those lives serve their readers.

QUESTIONS OF OTHERNESS — RACE, ETHNICITY, SEXUALITY

Despite Gertrude Stein's prestigious education, she — and her family — were never part of mainstream America. That they had immigrated from Austria midway through the nineteenth century, that they had worked ferociously and as tradespeople to haul themselves out of severe poverty, and — most of all, by the time of Gertrude's adolescence — that they were Jewish in a largely white, Protestant culture served to keep them marginalized. The latter category had taken on importance as the century moved to its end: the Russian pogroms (the organized massacre of Jews from 1880 to 1885), inscription in various national armies, the general milieu of persecution both subtle and blatant led thousands of Jews to migrate to the United States. But with increasing numbers of Jews in America, prejudice grew. The caricatures and cartoons that peppered the world's newspapers and magazines were continual reminders that to be a Jew was to be not only different, but objectionable.

Crystallizing much of what might have gone as unspoken anti-Semitism during the 1890s was the very visible Alfred Dreyfus affair. The innocent Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, was framed and convicted of treason and imprisoned for life on Devil's Island. Such blatant societal discrimination was paralleled, in a sense, by Irish writer Oscar Wilde's conviction and imprisonment for sodomy: whatever the difference, mainstream culture had the power to deem it criminal. The power of definition — and of life and death — rested with the majority.

In Stein's own lifetime, she saw her family's move to San Francisco take on a socially exclusionary drama once they had left their extended family, and their roots, in Baltimore. Well-placed in Jewish Baltimore, the Keyzers, her mother's family, were confident about their standing; their friendships with other notable Jewish families — among them the wealthy Cones — kept the matrix of social life intact. But in California, where families of long-standing position and wealth controlled society, no such welcome existed. Daniel Stein's business

skills were erratic, and his anger at not being well connected may have kept him from earning the money he desired. After the family moved out of the plush Tubbs' Hotel in Oakland, they had difficulty keeping friendships afloat — even though Daniel, for the first time, tried to ingratiate himself with the local rabbi.

In retrospect, Stein considered the Johns Hopkins Medical School to be anti-Semitic, but she felt little prejudice at Radcliffe or Harvard; perhaps she had missed some nuances while she was in Cambridge (see the 1900 *Harvard Lampoon* cover, p. 297). It is clear, though, that when Gertrude arrived as a freshman, she became part of her brother's social circle — Leo had already been at Harvard for a year — and the names of friends and visitors indicate that their social circles, both in Cambridge and during their later travels in Europe, particularly at their Paris salon, were largely Jewish. To be invited to either of the Stein salons — fashionable artistic receptions at Leo and Gertrude's or Michael and Sally's — meant having some Jewish connection, through birth, family, or friendship. Being so joined with others who feared the increasingly blatant anti-Semitism meant that no one needed to talk about the condition: what remains unsaid in all of Stein's memoirs is the threat of being found unacceptable because of her Jewishness.

Being of German descent tended, in part, to neutralize the Jewishness. To be German made one a part of the largest migrant group in the United States, a group that had already earned acceptance in many circles. Considered “thrifty, frugal, and industrious” by employers (Bodnar 69), Germans seemed content with modest employment — many were laborers, unskilled as well as skilled, and many German girls came to the States expressly to be paid housekeepers or nurses. The patterns Stein traces in both Anna's and Lena's stories were customary, though Anna's financial success was unusual. As the largest nineteenth-century migrant group, the Germans had settled throughout urban and Midwestern America, and the sizable population in Baltimore — where Millie Keyser Stein had grown up and Daniel's family had come when he was a youth — meant a secure society. Diffident and disdainful about competing with blacks for work, most Germans went no farther south than Washington, D.C., and Baltimore; had there been competition, households would have hired Germans before African Americans. According to a social worker in 1900, the black woman got “the job that the white girl does not want” (Woloch 228).

Throughout the early segments of “The Gentle Lena,” Stein presents recognizable portraits of both Italian and Irish nursemaids. Again typed by national characteristics — more volatile in tempera-

ment, more prone to alcoholism, perhaps a rung below the Germans on the social scale of acceptability — these women parallel the German working class by being similarly disinterested in education. Women from all three immigrant groups would have been seen as religious (or at least pious), obedient, and heterosexual — marriage was their destiny. They were working women who worked only until marriage rescued them. The Catholicism that all three groups shared (although Germans were often Protestant) added to their perceived intellectual inferiority.

While the condition of being Jewish and German was less visible than being black, there were affiliations. For the most part, even into the 1920s when the Harlem Renaissance (the New York-based artistic movement that saw African Americans championing racial pride and cultural identity) made black society acceptable in New York, wealthy whites would not have known blacks (the servants in white households would have come from the poor white cultures of the Irish, the Italian, and the German). For all the post-Civil War migration to the North, most blacks lived in urban ghettos far from middle-class whites; indeed, those ghettos of the poorest housing were where the Irish and Italians might intermarry with African Americans or Hispanics. Class reconfirmed the separation that race seemed to mandate.

When Stein describes Melanctha in racially coded language (*blues, wisdom, desire, wandering, trouble*), she intends the descriptions to be exotic for most of her readers. As Blackmer points out, one of the constant metaphors in “Melanctha” is “the central role that racial visibility and invisibility [plays] in establishing gender roles and sexual identities for black and white women alike. . . . [the work employs] the mask as a mediating metaphor of concealment and revelation” (250, 233). Whether what is being disguised is Jewishness or blackness or lesbianism, the method and the principle of masking serves to intentionally mislead the reader.

As the materials included in Part Two, Chapter 2 suggest, a woman’s “inversion” or “perversion” — the accepted terms for lesbianism at the turn of the century — was heinous, and was often discussed (when that discussion did occur) in combination with other “deviant” behaviors such as prostitution or racial degeneracy. Both racial difference and sexual difference constituted pathology, a diseased “otherness.” Dependent on the so-called scientific observations of Havelock Ellis, George M. Beard, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, theories of aberrant sexuality irreparably branded any person inclined to experimentation — with bisexuality as well as homosexuality.

Bearing weight on Stein's writing was the coupling of sexual aberrance with theories of scientific racism, which attempted to prove that one race (specifically, Caucasian) might be superior to another because of biological and racial differences. Unfortunately, Stein's studies in medical school had done much to overexpose her to such prejudicial information.

From this perspective, her clear intention to make the characters of at least Anna and Melanctha bisexual, if not singly lesbian, assumed a great risk. Sensitive to the body of knowledge that the literate world could claim, Stein knew that most of her readers would be unsympathetic to Anna's great love for her woman friend, just as they would wonder why Melanctha had such disappointing affairs with the men in her life. It is only with women that Stein's most significant woman characters are truly happy. *Three Lives* thus became a kind of "brave new world" of feminine portraiture — as well as a brave new kind of realism.

THE PLACE OF AESTHETICS IN STEIN'S WRITING

Changing taste in literature seemed harmless in the midst of the immense social disarray brought on by the close of the Victorian age. Literature was merely reflecting reality; changes in perceived gender roles, class distinctions, and issues involving propriety and sexuality were brewing. Within proscribed black writing, the move from a clearly mandated "uplift" aesthetic (writing geared to instruct readers both black and white in the morality of the day) to more organic and individualized creative forms (writing that might deviate from mandated content) became visible. As W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in his 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*, the marginalized writer or artist, already an outsider, deals with "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings . . ." (see p. 354; see North 72–75, on Stein's mask of language in "Melanctha").

Central to the evolution of American realism, Du Bois's statement of outsider vision linked the less racially directed comments of Frank Norris and Hamlin Garland. To be of "the folk," the common Ameri-

can person and experience, gave a different kind of validity to the burgeoning local color fiction. Garland's insistence on the writer's emotion as the most important quality of literary production dovetailed with William James's insistence that theoretical scholarship somehow isolate and quantify emotion: American realism had become philosophy. "The secret of every lasting success in art or literature lies, I believe, in a powerful, sincere, emotional concept of life first, and, second, in the acquired power to convey that concept to others" (see pp. 338–39). Garland spoke in a plainer idiom, perhaps a more nearly scientific one, than did Henry James, although the latter's pronouncements (particularly in the prefaces to the novels issued in the New York edition — books that Stein purchased in London) remain basic to any understanding of American realism.

Both Garland and James insisted that realism meant new forms, new models, new kinds of characters, and fresh styles. Norris, too, saw that style could only, legitimately, reflect the folk simplicity and character (see Norris on the difficulty of "the simple treatment," which "demands more of the artist," p. 350). Years later, when Gertrude Stein was reviewing her own writing career in the essays she wrote for her 1934 United States speaking tour, she reminisced about this earlier decade:

[N]othing changes from generation to generation except the composition in which we live and the composition in which we live makes the art which we see and hear. I said in *Lucy Church Amiably* that women and children change, I said if men have not changed women and children have. But it really is of no importance even if this is true. The thing that is important is the way that portraits of men and women and children are written, by written I mean made. And by made I mean felt. (*Lectures* 165)

American realism, of course, was a coda to the dramatic break from traditional letters that Émile Zola had instigated. Through her admiration for Flaubert, who in turn championed Zola's art, Gertrude Stein identified herself and her writing with the Continental (European) as well as the United States method. While she understood that her choice of subject and characters for *Three Lives* put her squarely in the realist, even naturalist, line, she did not see her work as imitative in any way. She was writing for readers she herself admired. Accordingly, the stories went first of all to her sister-in-law Sally Stein. Once Sally (who was to become known as both the collector and the pupil of Henri Matisse, as well as the founder of his influential, if short-lived,

school) had approved the work, Gertrude asked her friend Etta Cone to type the manuscript for her. *Three Lives* became the product — perhaps a subversive one — of women's friendship, even collusion.

Once the manuscript was ready, Stein sent it to the most influential of Leo's friends, the well-published Hutchins Hapgood, whose praise of the work did not disguise his warning that "Your stories are not easy reading. . . . They lack all the minor qualities of art, — construction, etc., etc. They often irritate me by the innumerable and often as it seems to me unnecessary repetitions; by your painstaking but often clumsy phraseology, by what seems sometimes almost an affectation of style." Despite his reservations about Stein's methods, Hapgood was clear about the fact that her stories were "excellent. . . . extremely good — full of reality, truth, unconventionality. I am struck with their deep humanity, and with the really remarkable way you have of getting deep into human psychology." Given that Hapgood was not a proponent of realism, he said nothing specifically about the Anna or Lena narratives. His attention fell several times on "Melanctha," and he praised its newness, its unique subject matter as well as style: "It is the very best thing on the subject of the Negro that I have ever read" (Gallup 32).

Whatever that praise actually meant, considering the state of culture in 1906, Hapgood failed to be the proper agent to place *Three Lives* (still titled *Three Histories*, a phrase that emphasized the objective style of the narratives: factual, uninvolved, even journalistic). No publishers were interested in the work. Several years went by: in desperation, Stein turned to Mabel Weeks, an American academic friend, who gave the manuscript and other of Stein's writings to May Bookstaver, the now-married woman who had been the great love of Gertrude's life in Baltimore. It was May Bookstaver Knoblauch who found the vanity publisher Grafton Press, which agreed to publish *Three Lives* for the sum of \$660 — a very high fee for 1908, and nearly half of Stein's annual income.

It was also May who approached Alfred Steiglitz about using Stein's later "portraits" in his journal *Camera Work*; published as they were in 1912, in the company of reproductions of paintings by Picasso and Matisse, her portraits of the two painters made Stein a part of the avant-garde movement. That designation served her better than did that of American realist, because the 1913 Armory Show, an internationally acclaimed New York art exhibit, was bringing the surprise of French impressionism and cubism into United States life. Mabel Dodge Luhan's essay on Stein's writing (see p. 372) was published dur-

ing the furor over the Armory show, which Dodge Luhan had helped to organize, and in the serendipitous manner that sometimes works far better than planning, the name *Gertrude Stein* became synonymous with all that was innovative in Europe.

Such a characterization was not entirely a misnomer; as Stein recalled in her last interview (1946):

Everything I have done has been influenced by Flaubert and Cézanne, and this gave me a new feeling about composition. Up to that time composition had consisted of a central idea, to which everything else was an accompaniment and separate but was not an end in itself, and Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole, and that impressed me enormously, and it impressed me so much that I began to write *Three Lives* under this influence and this idea of composition and I was more interested in composition at that moment, this background of word-system, which had come to me from this reading that I had done. I was obsessed by this idea of composition, and the Negro story was a quintessence of it. . . . [I]t was not solely the realism of the characters but the realism of the composition which was the important thing, the realism of the composition of my thoughts." (15) (See Part Two, Chapter 5.)

And with her customary accuracy about her own psyche and motives, Stein added the telling sentence, "After all, to me one human being is as important as another human being . . ." (16).

patient attention may learn for themselves. From Miss Stein, if she can consent to clarify her method, much may be expected. As it is, she writes quite as a Browning escaped from the bonds of verse might wallow in fiction, only without his antiseptic whimsicality.

MABEL DODGE LUHAN

From Speculations, or Post-Impressionism in Prose

One of the more famous expatriate American women of the twentieth century, Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879–1962) was the only child of wealthy New York parents. After a childhood in Buffalo, she located in Florence, Italy, where her Villa Curonia became an extended intellectual salon. (Stein wrote a now-famous portrait of her friend there, “Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia.”) Part of the committee that brought French Impressionist and avant-garde painting to the United States through the 1913 Armory Show collection, Luhan was also one of the first intellectuals to promote Stein’s writing. Her 1913 essay, excerpted here, made Stein’s literary efforts explicable, as they were linked to the graphic art that so dominated modern European aesthetics.

After the Armory Show, Luhan remained in New York, her Greenwich Village salon becoming a spiritual center. In 1918 she moved to Taos, New Mexico, where she was hostess to a number of internationally known writers and painters, among them D. H. Lawrence, Marsden Hartley, and Leo Stein. There, she married her fourth husband, Antonio Lujan, a Pueblo Indian, and wrote her four-volume memoir, *Intimate Memories*.

This influential essay, which served to promote the avant-garde in the States, appeared in *Arts and Decorations* 3 (March 1913).

Many roads are being broken today, and along these roads consciousness is pursuing truth to eternity. This is an age of communication, and the human being who is not a “communicant” is in the sad plight which the dogmatist defines as being a condition of spiritual non-receptivity.

Some of these newly opened roads lie parallel and almost touch.

In a large studio in Paris, hung with paintings by Renoir,¹ Matisse² and Picasso,³ Gertrude Stein is doing with words what Picasso is doing with paint. She is impelling language to induce new states of consciousness, and in doing so language becomes with her a creative art rather than a mirror of history.

In her impressionistic writing she uses familiar words to create perceptions, conditions, and states of being, never before quite consciously experienced. She does this by using words that appeal to her as having the meaning that they *seem* to have. She has taken the English language and, according to many people, has misused it, or has used it roughly, uncouthly and brutally, or madly, stupidly and hideously, but by her method she is finding the hidden and inner nature of nature.

To present her impressions she chooses words for their inherent quality, rather than for their accepted meaning.

Her habit of working is methodical and deliberate. She always works at night in the silence, and brings all her will power to bear upon the banishing of preconceived images. Concentrating upon the impression she has received and which she wishes to transmit, she suspends her selective faculty, waiting for the word or group of words that will perfectly interpret her meaning, to rise from her subconsciousness to the surface of her mind.

Then and then only does she bring her reason to bear upon them, examining, weighing and gauging their ability to express her meaning. It is a working proof of the Bergson⁴ theory of intuition. She does not go after words — she waits and lets them come to her, and they do.

It is only when art thus pursues the artist that his production will bear the mark of inevitability. It is only when the “*élan vital*” drives the artist to the creative overflow that life surges in his production.

¹ *Renoir*: Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), French impressionist painter and sculptor.

² *Matisse*: Henri Matisse (1869–1954), French painter, sculptor, and lithographer who first exhibited in 1896. Although more strenuously collected by the Michael Steins, both Leo and Gertrude also owned the flamboyant, and clearly innovative, oils. Early a key figure among the fauves, known for raw, untempered colors and bold outlines, Matisse went through a number of styles during his long lifetime.

³ *Picasso*: Pablo Ruiz y Picasso (1881–1973), a Spanish painter who made France his home early in his art career, he was perhaps the most visible artist of the twentieth century — being credited with founding Cubism and other innovative movements.

⁴ *Bergson*: Henri Bergson (1859–1941), French philosopher who attributed a number of concepts to the notion of modern art and thought.

Vitality directed into a conscious expression is the modern definition of genius.

It is impossible to define or to describe fully any new manifestation in esthetics or in literature that is as recent, as near to us, as the work of Picasso or of Gertrude Stein; the most that we can do is to suggest a little, draw a comparison, point the way and then withdraw. . . .

Of course, comment is the best of signs. Any comment. One that Gertrude Stein hears oftenest is from conscientious souls who have honestly tried — and who have failed — to get anything out of her work at all. “But why don’t you make it simpler?” they cry. “Because this is the only way in which I can express what I want to express,” is the invariable reply, which of course is the unanswerable argument of every sincere artist to every critic. Again and again comes the refrain that is so familiar before the canvases of Picasso — “But it is so ugly, so brutal!” But how does one know that it is ugly, after all? How does one know? Each time that beauty has been reborn in the world it has needed complete readjustment of sense perceptions, grown all too accustomed to the blurred outlines, faded colors, the death in life of beauty in decline. It has become jaded from over-familiarity, from long association and from inertia. If one cares for Rembrandt’s⁵ paintings today, then how could one have cared for them at the time when they were painted, when they were glowing with life. If we like St. Marks in Venice today, then surely it would have offended us a thousand years ago. Perhaps it is not Rembrandt’s paintings that one cares for, after all, but merely for the shell, the ghost — the last pale flicker of the artist’s intention. Beauty? One thing is certain, that if we must worship beauty as we have known it, we must consent to worship it as a thing dead. “*Une grande, belle chose — morte,*” And ugliness — what is it? Surely, only death is ugly.

In Gertrude Stein’s writing every word lives and, apart from the concept, it is so exquisitely rhythmical and cadenced, that when read aloud and received as pure sound, it is like a kind of sensuous music. Just as one may stop, for once in a way, before a canvas of Picasso, and, letting one’s reason sleep for an instant, may exclaim: “It is a fine pattern!” — so listening to Gertrude Stein’s words and forgetting to try to understand what they mean, one submits to their gradual charm. Huntley Carter,⁶ of the *New Age*, says that her use of language has a

⁵ *Rembrandt’s*: Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669), Dutch painter and etcher, known for his landscapes, portraits, and his use of striking color.

⁶ *Huntley Carter*: Book reviewer for *New Age*.

curious hypnotic effect when read aloud. In one part of her writing she made use of repetition and the rearranging of certain words over and over, so that they became adjusted into a kind of incantation, and in listening one feels that from the combination of repeated sounds, varied ever so little, that there emerges gradually a perception of some meaning quite other than that of the contents of the phrases. Many people have experienced this magical evocation, but have been unable to explain in what way it came to pass, but though they did not know what meaning the words were bearing, nor how they were affected by them, yet they had *begun* to know what it all meant, because they were not indifferent.

In a portrait that she has finished recently, she has produced a coherent totality through a series of impressions which, when taken sentence by sentence, strike most people as particularly incoherent. To illustrate this, the words in the following paragraph are strenuous words — words that weigh and qualify conditions; words that are without softness yet that are not hard words — perilous abstractions they seem, containing agony and movement and conveying a vicarious livingness. “It is a gnarled division, that which is not any obstruction, and the forgotten swelling is certainly attracting. It is attracting the whiter division, it is not sinking to be growing, it is not darkening to be disappearing, it is not aged to be annoying. There cannot be sighing. This is this bliss.”

Many roads are being broken — what a wonderful word — “broken”! And out of the shattering and petrification of today — up from the cleavage and the disintegration — we will see order emerging tomorrow. Is it so difficult to remember that life at birth is always painful and rarely lovely? How strange it is to think that the rough-hewn trail of today will become tomorrow the path of least resistance, over which the average will drift with all the ease and serenity of custom. All the labor of evolution is condensed into this one fact, of the vitality of the individual making way for the many. We can but praise the high courage of the road breakers, admitting as we infallibly must, in Gertrude Stein’s own words, and with true Bergsonism faith — “Something is certainly coming out of them!”

CARL VAN VECHTEN

From *How to Read Gertrude Stein*

Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964) was born to a middle-class, Iowa family. Educated at the University of Chicago, earning the Ph.D. in English in 1903, he was an arts critic (music, dance, paintings) for several United States papers. While the Paris correspondent for the *New York Times*, he became involved with the 1913 Armory Show and met Mabel Dodge Luhan. In 1914, having by this time met Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, he wrote this essay, which appeared in the *New York Times*, and later arranged for his friend Donald Evans to publish Stein's poetry collection *Tender Buttons*.

Friends with Stein for more than thirty-three years, Van Vechten was loyal to Stein and Toklas through the vicissitudes of their lives; their correspondence has been published in two volumes. Van Vechten was both a novelist and photographer, and made a strong imprint on international modern art.

This essay appeared first in the economics/business section of the *New York Times*, and later in August 1914, in *Trend*, 7, no. 4.

The English language is a language of hypocrisy and evasion. How not to say a thing has been the problem of our writers from the earliest times. The extraordinary fluidity and even naivete of French makes it possible for a writer in that language to babble like a child; de Maupassant¹ is only possible in French, a language in which the phrase, "Je t'aime" means everything. But what does "I love you" mean in English? Donald Evans,² of our poets, has realized this peculiar quality of English and he is almost the first of the poets in English to say unsuspected and revolting things, because he so cleverly avoids saying them.

Miss Stein discovered the method before Mr. Evans. In fact his Patagonian Sonnets were an offshoot of her later manner, just as Miss Kenton's³ superb story, "Nicknames," derives its style from Miss

¹ *de Maupassant*: Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893) was a French short story writer whose writing influenced the United States short story form appreciably.

² *Donald Evans*: Poet and publisher who was a friend of Van Vechten's, and who published Gertrude Stein's poetry collection *Tender Buttons* in 1914.

³ *Miss Kenton's*: Edna Kenton (1876–1954), little-known short story writer of the early twentieth century.

Stein's *Three Lives*. She has really turned language into music, really made its sound more important than its sense. And she has suggested to the reader a thousand channels for his mind and sense to drift along, a thousand, instead of a stupid only one.

Miss Stein has no explanations to offer regarding her work. I have often questioned her, but I have met with no satisfaction. She asks you to read. Her intimate connection with the studies of William James⁴ have been commented upon; some say that the "fringe of thought," so frequently referred to by that writer, may dominate her working consciousness. Her method of work is unique. She usually writes in the morning, and she sets down the words as they come from her pen; they bubble, they flow; they surge through her brain and she sets them down. You may regard them as nonsense, but the fact remains that effective imitations of her style do not exist. John Reed⁵ tells me that, while he finds her stimulating and interesting, an entity, he feels compelled to regard her work as an offshoot, something that will not be concluded by followers. She lives and dies alone, a unique example of a strange art. It may be in place also to set down here the fact that once in answer to a question Miss Stein asserted that her art was for the printed page only; she never expects people to converse or exchange ideas in her style.

As a personality Gertrude Stein is unique. She is massive in physique, a Rabelaisian woman with a splendid thoughtful face; mind dominating her matter. Her velvet robes, mostly brown, and her carpet slippers associate themselves with her indoor appearance. To go out she belts herself, adds a walking staff, and a trim unmodish turban. This garb suffices for a shopping tour or a box party at the *Opéra*.

Paris is her abode. She settled there after Cambridge, and association with William James, Johns Hopkins and a study of medicine. Her orderly mind has captured the scientific facts of both psychology and physiology. And in Paris the early painters of the new era captured her heart and purse. She purchased the best of them, and now such examples as Picasso's *Acrobats* and early Matisse's⁶ hang on her walls.

⁴ *William James*: Harvard philosopher and psychologist (1842–1910) whose theories of the mind and thought influenced Gertrude Stein from the years when she was his student at Radcliffe/Harvard Annex to her death in 1946.

⁵ *John Reed*: Journalist and radical leader (1887–1920) who graduated from Harvard in 1910. An editor of *Masses*, he covered political stories in Mexico, Europe, and Russia. His *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919) is the best account of the Bolshevik revolution. Reed died in Moscow in 1920 of typhus.

⁶ *Matisse*: Henri Matisse (1869–1954) encouraged the Steins to purchase his paintings and sculpture. Although Michael and Sally Stein were the more avid collectors, Leo and Gertrude also bought a large number, especially from Matisse's fauve period.

There is also the really authoritative portrait of herself, painted by Pablo Picasso.⁷

These two painters she lists among her great friends. And their influence, perhaps, decided her in her present mode of writing. Her pictures are numerous, and to many, who do not know of her as a writer, she is mentioned as the Miss Stein with the collection of post-impressionists. On Saturday nights during the winter one can secure a card of admission to the collection and people wander in and out the studio, while Miss Stein serves her dinner guests unconcernedly with after-dinner coffee. And conversation continues, strangely unhindered by the picture viewers. . . .

In *Three Lives* Miss Stein attained at a bound an amount of literary facility which a writer might strive in vain for years to acquire. Simplicity is a quality one is born with, so far as literary style is concerned, and Miss Stein was born with that. But to it she added, in this work, a vivid note of reiteration, a fascinatingly complete sense of psychology and the workings of minds one on the other, which at least in "Melanctha: Each [One] as She May" reaches a state of perfection which might have satisfied such masters of craft as Turgenev,⁸ or Balzac,⁹ or Henry James.¹⁰

⁷ *Picasso*: Pablo Ruiz y Picasso (1881–1973) was a Spanish painter who lived most of his life in Paris. A great friend of Gertrude Stein's, he was the most visible painter of the twentieth century. His portrait of Gertrude is reproduced here.

⁸ *Turgenev*: Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev (1818–1883), the leading Russian novelist, dramatist, and short story writer of his time (paired as he often was with Leo Tolstoy). His studies of the simple lives of peasants bore some relation to *Three Lives*.

⁹ *Balzac*: Honore de Balzac (1799–1850), French novelist who created his own fictional province.

¹⁰ *Henry James*: Brother of William, Henry (1843–1916) gained even greater fame through his novels and short stories, which not only captured some essential truths about American life, but created an inclusive style that led to modernist writing effects.

Famous for her somewhat idiosyncratic "portraits" of her friends — which ➤ included painters such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso (works that appeared in *Camera Work*) and writers such as Harold Loeb and Ernest Hemingway — Stein's publications from 1912 through the 1930s were often these lyric portraits, some very short and others extremely long, book-length even. Her portrait of Hemingway was written at the beginning of their short-lived friendship, and appeared in *Ex Libris* in December 1923.