

Gertrude Stein and *Three Lives*

Stein and Art

Cezanne 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 [“Melanctha” in *Three Lives*] was a quintessence of it.

- Gertrude Stein, “A Transatlantic Interview, 1946”

- As Stein was writing *Three Lives*, she was said to have been sitting beneath Cezanne’s portrait of Madame Cezanne
- As in Cezanne’s paintings, one part is as important as any other thing
 - Suggests a stylistic flatness where background and foreground merge to create a “frozen” presence
 - An emphasis on the whole field of the canvas as important
 - A subjective relationship that includes more than one viewpoint – Stein: “The important thing is that you must have deep down as the deepest thing in you a sense of equality.”
- As in Cezanne, there is a motivated repetition – a wandering style (like the way Stein thought the unconscious worked)
- As with Picasso, she provides a new vision of reality
 - She said of Picasso, “One must never forget that the reality of the twentieth century is not the reality of the nineteenth century, not at all and Picasso was the only one in painting who felt it. the only one [sic]. More and more the struggle to express it intensified” (from *Picasso*)
- Her similarities with Picasso:
 - Cubist-like approach
 - Looks at a focal point of action, and this point lacks climax
 - Every part of narrative is as important as every other part
 - No linear progress – story isn’t as important as character (portraits)
 - Style concentrated on what is seen
 - Emphasis on flat art – what is actually seen is what is – character’s “soul” not inferred, but only through what they say and actually do – this is objective in the most profound sense of the word – not emphasizing one thing, but everything

- Calligraphic, non-symbolic
 - The importance of divorcing oneself from the subject and experience – the subject is a matter of secondary importance – not subject matter, but *style*, that's what are is all about
 - No symbols, since symbols suggest something not seen

Influence of William James on Stein's fiction

- The emphasis on stream of consciousness
 - While working with her when she attended Radcliffe College, James encouraged Stein's abilities at automatic writing, a stream of consciousness technique in which the conscious mind is suspended and the unconscious directly evoked
 - Absence of linearity and collapse of emphasis
 - Rejection of linear progression of thought
 - Can also be read as a feminist rejection of patriarchal language
 - Selective attention – attention relaxed
 - Encourages rhythmical word-paintings or “portraits”
 - Evokes "the excitingness of pure being" – similar to cubism or photomontage
 - Repetitive comments and phrases (as found throughout *Three Lives*) – there is no exact duplicate
 - *Repetition with variation*
 - Changes occur to accommodate new experience and thoughts – contexts change
 - Encourages a kind of wandering – Melanctha's wanderings (of body and mind, and experience)
- Memory is part of preperception
 - Melanctha's pathological forgetfulness (similar to her wanderings)
- Adults don't attend simultaneously to phenomena – no dispersed attention
- Links to thoughts of Freud
 - Emphasizes the unconscious – articulates an unconscious that determines being (moving away from stream of consciousness as found in James?)
 - Narrative as an excavation of unconscious processes (similar to that found in Joyce and Faulkner)
 - Repetition compulsion – narrative repetition

Stein's fiction

- Uses everything in her writing
- There is a continuous presence
 - An privileging of the present tense, the “ing” of language, that focuses on the *now* – perception in the narrative is based on sequenced and repetitive *now* moments
 - Stein once said, “One can delve more deeply into a human being's psyche through the repetition of words, actions, thoughts, and behavioral patterns in a present setting”
- Narrative repetition
 - Events seem to begin again and again
 - Repetition, but with a variation

- An event or mentioning is never the same way twice
 - Similar to William James's assertion that consciousness is "sensibly continuous" – James: "no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before"
 - Gives the effect of a verbal "after-image" that penetrates the reader's consciousness and evoke some kind of genuine response
- Stein's creation of the modern – making something new (avant-garde), making it ugly
 - Applies avant-garde art to the Naturalist impulse – the nihilistic or deterministic impulse in *Three Lives*
 - Naturalism in *Three Lives*
 - Characters unfit for world – weeded out by natural selection – no time for preservation – diffused attention
- Emphasizes an objective voice
 - Almost matter-of-fact reportage (but not entirely of external reality) that resists judgment
 - It is up to the reader to decide how to respond to the writing – readers must complete the description of an event or object
- At the same time, deemphasizes external realities
 - For Stein, reality is internalized
 - Emotional states of her characters, not their physical presence
 - Outer world is only as significant as is registers on the phenomenological world
 - Interior speech and free indirect discourse (where narrator and character overlap)
- Rather than emotional manipulation which is more characteristic of linear writing, Stein opts for narrative *play*, where words and phrases are repeated, mixed up, and juxtaposed in curious and new ways – provides a sense of non-authoritative experimentation with the language
- "Melanctha"
 - Melanctha as psychological (W. Jamesian) figure – she's a defective individual
 - Melanctha as wise – she embodies superior, disinterested wisdom of the body
 - Melanctha as victim – the product of male aggression, female roles, cultural conditions (* feminist critique of society)
 - Melanctha is always wanting things that are exciting – in this way, W. Jamesian in that she attends to exciting things – Campbell's attentions are toward practical ends - Experience = "habits of attention" (for James, things that bear upon our individual needs)
 - Excitement for its own sake –vs– excitement toward practical things
 - For own sake: a childlike, perceptual life – immediate sensation – attends to everything – mind *wandering* (parallels Melanctha's literal wanderings)
 - Toward practical: selective attention – selection determines our perception of objects – sensation is not "wandering" but modified by ideas
 - Melanctha's wanderings are not necessarily sexual, but toward an experience with life – wandering experience without mediation
 - Melanctha sticks to those whose stability complements her own mind – Jeff and Rose