

The relationship between verse and prose is critical to understanding *Tender Buttons*. Many even describe the novel as “Prose Poetry”. However, this writing works beyond the scope of this paradigm entirely. Stein strips away the common momentum and structure that novels find through narrative, in exchange for more elusive meanings, found in metaphors and repetition. Seeing the form this novel takes, it would seem intuitive to describe *Tender Buttons* as blending the two types of writing. It looks like prose, but in reading the text it is more like verse, like an interesting mixed-media piece of writing.

Typical readings of Gertrude Stein’s abstruse “*Tender Buttons*” look through the lens of experimentation. The writing is seen as disruptive, antithetical to the idea of narrativity. Often people will draw parallels between the novel and the cubist art movement, examining how the perspectives collide in distorted and revealing ways. These analyses see the similarities as helpful tools to glean meaning from Stein’s novel, but tend to omit the way cubism, while having depth and dimensionality, shatters the viewer’s tendencies towards realism. It is not mere experimentation for its own sake, it is a specific dissent upon the crystal clear, looking to challenge an audience’s relationship with meaning through laying bare the complexities of the art’s form.

While experimentation certainly was significant to the novel’s creation, its essence must be understood within the context of the history of the novel. As Moretti explains, the tension between narrativity and complexity was polarized through our desire to know and to understand, giving way for narrative dominance. We want our novels to connect as clearly as the world around us, and time to move forward with momentum as it does day to day. But because of this tendency, much was lost in the way of complexity. Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* not only denies the forward moving nature of prose, but critiques the reader’s affinity for narrativity, attempting to steer the course of the novel towards complexity through abstraction.

The novel creates moments that are close to narrative to provoke the reader into attempting to draw conclusions where they may not exist. Reminding the reader of his desire to make sense of the words allows Stein to deconstruct this and instill a more complex and abstract mindset within the reader.

-Many excerpts from the “Rooms” chapter may be helpful in supporting this sub-claim

The novel mocks intellectualism in writing and questions the order and definitions which we hold on to so tightly. This critiques narrativity broadly and also specifically critiques realism, and the value we place on perfect descriptions.

-Roast Beef from “Food” may serve to support this sub-claim

Abstraction makes the reader question whether the text is void of meaning, but in trying to find meaning the audience is forced to see complexity in prose without the context of narrative, conditioning the reader to see writing through the paradigm that exists on the opposite side of the narrativity-complexity spectrum.

-Colored hats in “objects” may show how sections of the novel deny interpretation

Connection and meaning does exist, but is distant from the reader. In forcing the audience’s gaze to the “pointing finger” the audience must realize that there is more than just the subjects of interest, and the author who presents them, but meaning in the relationship between the two.

-Final paragraph from “Rooms”