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| Stein, Gertrude (1874–1946) |
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| Gertrude Stein was a modernist writer of the twentieth century, notable for the extremity of her stylistic innovations. During the first half of her career, her radical experimentation made her a target of mockery. In 1933, she published *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, a memoir of modernist activity in Paris written in a more accessible style. Intellectually serious but amusing and filled with gossip about charismatic figures (Picasso and Hemingway, among others), it was a surprise bestseller in the U.S. and made Stein a celebrity; she remained an affectionately regarded public figure for the rest of her life. However, at her death and for decades after, she was not a respectable object of critical attention. To university critics, Joyce, Pound, and Eliot had set the standard for literary achievement, and Stein's work seemed a formless self-indulgence. It was not until the latter decades of the twentieth century, with the rise of a number of related intellectual and artistic forces—feminist critics and poets, the general U.S. innovative poetic tendency, Language writing, and post-structuralism—that Stein began to be taken seriously. In the twenty-first century, while her writing still raises controversy, it is prominent in the modernist canon. |
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It was not until the latter decades of the twentieth century, with the rise of a number of related intellectual and artistic forces—feminist critics and poets, the general U.S. innovative poetic tendency, Language writing, and post-structuralism—that Stein began to be taken seriously. In the twenty-first century, while her writing still raises controversy, it is prominent in the modernist canon.  Stein was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, and grew up in California. Intellectually ambitious, she attended Radcliffe College, studying with the psychologist William James, and, in 1897, beginning medical training at Johns Hopkins University. She soon dropped out and travelled to Europe with her brother Leo. They settled in Paris in 1903, where they became interested in post-Impressionist and Cubist art. They met Picasso and other painters, and began to amass a pioneering and influential collection of visual art. In 1908 she met Alice B. Toklas, who became her lifelong companion. With the exception of a lecture tour in the U.S., Stein spent the rest of her life in France, though she wrote almost exclusively in English and strongly self-identified as American. Stein's interest in science, her passion for painting, and the fact of her being lesbian are now seen as key factors in her work.  Stein is difficult to categorize: neither high modernist nor avant-garde are accurate labels. High modernist reading habits — where striking imagery, intricate historical and literary reference, economy of phrase, and complexity of procedure are valued — will find little of interest in her work. Further, while her writing strikes first-time readers as quite strange, Stein is unlike other avant-garde figures in that provocation was never a primary goal. Rather, she was engaged in a lifelong exploration of her medium (words) with the expectation that public recognition would ensue. Whether in the hermetic work of the 1910s and 1920s or in the more popular work of the 1930s and 1940s, Stein was not trying to shock the public, but to reach it.  Stein's early work reflected the influence of William James. It is nominally fiction, but Stein was more interested in a scientific analysis of character-types than in presenting a compelling narrative arc. *Q.E.D.* (1905) is an account of a deadlocked lesbian love-triangle. ‘Melanctha’, the central story of *Three Lives* (1909) and one of Stein's best-known pieces, is a retelling of *Q.E.D.* using African-American protagonists, one man and two women. It has occasioned critical controversies. Novelist Richard Wright celebrated it as a pioneering effort in presenting African-American characters and language seriously; but others have critiqued it for racist condescension. It has been read as extending the stylistic possibilities of naturalism or as having initiated Stein's turn toward a nonrepresentational, textually-focused writing. Stein's novel *The Making of Americans* took this turn toward textuality much farther. A narrative of two families can be discerned in its almost one thousand pages, but what is foregrounded is the increasing stylistic extremity: the simplest words assembled into long, gerund-packed sentences and then into long paragraphs. Careful readers will find continual minute variations of phrase and sentence; if one reads for plot, the book will be intolerably repetitious. Stein considered *The Making of Americans* a masterpiece, but it has found few readers.  From this point on, the categorizing influence of William James gave way to writing strategies based on modern painting, with Stein abandoning any gesture toward fiction, and presenting her work as the written analog of Post-Impressionist and Cubist innovation. With *Tender Buttons* (1912) and pieces that she termed ‘portraits’, Stein experimented with the basic mechanisms of representation, inventing, according to some, a kind of written Cubism.  She spoke of learning from Cezanne that one should not resolve a painting into subject matter dramatized by distinctions of foreground and background; rather, one should consider every brush stroke of equal importance. The lesson she took from this was to abandon narrative, loosen ordinary syntactic sequence, and to treat words as autonomous entities. Stein spoke of such procedures as ‘the continuous present’. She didn't stop using ordinary diction, but she would also splice phrases together: ‘a sentence should be arbitrary it should not please be better’; and she would use words a-syntactically as if juxtaposed in a Cubist collage: ‘Black ink best wheel bale brown’. Treating language in what can be termed a painterly fashion allowed Stein to continually play across distinctions of sameness and difference. Take the following sentence: ‘I cannot tell you how often like and alike are not alike’. Here, the second ‘alike’ is used conventionally, but the first used as a unique object, approximately: ‘this instance of the word 'alike’.  Occasioned by the success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein toured the U.S. in 1934-5, lecturing on her work. The results, *Lectures in America*, are a useful primer for reading her work, as is an earlier lecture, ‘Composition as Explanation’ (1923). In the last fifteen years of her life, Stein wrote as a public figure, mixing more accessible work such as *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937)and *Wars I Have Seen* (1945) with more hermetic writing such as *The Geographical History of America* (1936). Her opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) with music by Virgil Thomson, was received enthusiastically. |
| Further reading:  (Stein)  (Chessman)  (Corn and Latimer)  (DeKoven)  (Dydo)  (Mellow)  (Ngai)  (Perelman) |