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Gertrude Stein: Autobiography and Play

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Introduction

As a student, the richness and complexity of writing by various authors has always fueled my interest in literary study. Due to this interest, my discovery of Gertrude Stein was particularly exciting. The first of Stein's works that I read was ironically titled, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and Stein's experiment with language where she offers a unique way of viewing the world sparked my interest in American modernism. Although my initial reaction was confusion, it shifted into deep curiosity and interest as I read and learned more. As opposed to other modernists like William Faulkner, T.S. Elliot, or Hemingway, Stein seemed to be doing something very different. The modernism of Faulkner, Elliot, and Hemingway is a modernism of high seriousness, despair, and disillusionment; Stein is a playful writer who works through her intense interest in the world with a sense of pleasure and enjoyment.

More than that, Stein's writing breaks from a tradition of requiring the reader to uncover some deep underlying truth or meaning where the parts add up to a whole that is more important than the parts. Instead, her writing encourages the reader to think about the world as multiple, unfinished or unsolved, and still available for Stein's and the reader's continued thinking. By writing this way, Stein's work is experimental in the manner defined by Marianne Dekoven because of the way it disrupts the way we typically read (*A Different Language* 5). Rather than searching for some singular or overarching meaning where the whole is more important than the parts, Stein's work requires a reading where each part is equally important and cannot be abstracted into a singular meaning or value. While other modernists consider traditional values with despair, Stein looks at writing as an opportunity to rethink the world.

When I began research on this project, I hoped to find out more about the playful aspect of Stein's writing that seemed so surprising and interesting to me, but the research did not meet my expectations. Most critics briefly mentioned the playfulness of Stein's writing and passed over it; few delved deeply into it. However, I wanted to explore its importance in her writing, especially in her autobiographies. Even though I was unable to find a scholarly discussion of Stein's specific play to match my interest, I was introduced to Roger Caillios and his theory on play. Caillios begins his discussion of *Man, Play and Games* (1961) by claiming that there are six characteristics of play: "Free," "Separate," "Uncertain," "Unproductive," "Governed by Rules," and "Make-Believe" (9-10). When reading through his characteristics of play, my mind connected them with Stein's because of the clear rejection of tradition she plays with. Stein has no interest in writing as others were. She goes against the grain in order to show how you can find enjoyment and pleasure in a complex and constantly changing modern world.

Upon first look, the titles alone announce this quality of play: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody's Autobiography*. Its immediate absurdity offers a rejection of the genre, while also portraying a deep sense of playfulness about the world. Writing another person's autobiography is impossible due to the nature of the prefix "auto," which means "the self" —let alone the autobiography of every person (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Stein is playfully upfront in her rejection of traditional autobiography and found that this genre was an effective playground to show her joyful attitude towards writing and the world around her. She does not hide some singular truth deep within these works; rather, she posts it on the front covers of her work.

Through her autobiographies, Stein treats the nature of identity as playful in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and turns to a problematic, yet playful mystery within *Everybody's Autobiography*. The first of these works maintains a more joyful attitude through her depiction of pleasure in the everyday and the games she invites her readers to participate in —speaking through Toklas' voice, hiding her lesbian relationship in plain sight, etc. However, due to her massively popular success after Toklas' publication, Stein lost that sense of pleasure and playfulness in writing, causing her to cease writing for a time. She felt dead inside and that there was no writing within her. Ironically, she encounters a strange case concerning a dead Englishwoman one summer, which re-kindled her interest in thinking about the world. It gave her something with no solution to allow for continuous thought.

As a result of this event, Stein began writing again, which led to the publication of *Everybody's Autobiography* where she recounts the events of that strange death. This work readdresses the question of identity, previously discussed in Toklas, but in a darker way through its problematic nature. Instead of her joyful play with identity and the world, she engages her readers in a new game through the inclusion of playful mystery. Mystery brings back the continuous thinking about the world where every part is as important as the next. By the end of *Everybody's Autobiography*, she offers no solution to the question of identity other than the fact that it is multiple and unsolvable and continuously in process, which allows for further thought on her and her readers' parts.

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas

In "Gertrude Stein: Overview," Peter Quartermain compares Stein's writing to Cezanne's way of painting in the sense that both artists attempted to rethink the basic components of their art differently than their predecessors. He describes her work as "a systematic investigation of the formal elements of language (syntax, parts of speech, grammar, etymology, punctuation) or of the formal elements of literature (narrative, poetry, dialogue, fiction, drama)" (Quartermain 1). As a modernist, Stein rejects the conventional rules of language and traditional forms of literature by creating her own rules, as seen through her writing. By creating her own rules of grammar, she teaches her readers how to read her writing. This is especially apparent in her so-called "less experimental" writings, such as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

With the publishing of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) Stein shifted away from her more highly experimental works like *Tender Buttons*. Instead, Stein focused on Toklas being more accessible to a wider audience. Yet, various critics and reviewers still thought her writing unreadable and ridiculous. For example, Michael Gold's "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot" describes her writing as "a reflection of the ideological anarchy into which the whole of bourgeois literature has fallen" and similar to "the monotonous gibberings of paranoiacs in the private wards of asylums" (1). However, she was not swayed by these critics and continued writing.

Overall, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is a deeply playful meditation on identity and writing, as suggested by the title. Reading the cover of her book with the title "The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas" and the author indicated as "Gertrude Stein" already suggests this playfulness. While reading, the audience is continually aware that the writing inside the covers of the book is presented as Toklas' even though the book cover announces that Stein actually wrote it. Through this playful lens, the autobiography reflects on questions of writing and identity while inviting her readers to play the game with her.

Everybody's Autobiography

Everybody's Autobiography was published in 1937, four years after Toklas. In it, Stein recounts her triumphant tour of the United States following the enormous success of Toklas and how it impacted her views of identity, writing, and the relationship between them. In Toklas, playfulness is evident in what Caillios defined in terms of "freedom" from what is already known, its refusal of conventional forms of utility or productivity, its creation of its own grammatical set of rules, and the make-believe games she invites her readers to play. *Everybody's Autobiography* exhibits Stein's playfulness in her continued investigations of identity, writing, and thinking. However, the nature of her play has changed its tone to one more restrained and dark at times. Her views on identity shifted after sudden fame and the experience of writer's block into a less joyful reflection on selfhood. The element of play and her thinking about the human mind are now centered around the concept of mystery and the relationship between identity and writing becomes multiple and fluid —as opposed to singular and constant. Overall, *Everybody's Autobiography* could be described as a darker, yet equally playfully and now mysterious sequel to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

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Conclusion

Among the modernists, Gertrude Stein is an exception. Generally, modernists like Faulkner, T. S. Eliot, and Hemingway tended to view the world with a kind of high seriousness, despair, and disillusionment, finding no hope or meaning within their lens. In many ways, Stein's writing opposes the despair of high modernism: it is playful, joyful, and takes pleasure in the richness of the world. With *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein presents a way of writing and thinking about the world that finds pleasure and interest in the world's abundance of possible meanings, rather than the presence of any singular meaning. Her writing is a type of writing and thinking that Stein associates with what she calls the "human mind": a way of writing and thinking that is free of the habits and pragmatism that limits everyday thinking, which she refers to as "human nature." For Stein, playfulness and the human mind go hand-in-hand. As she writes in *The Geographical History of America*, the human mind "does play. Of course the human mind does play. Human nature. No human nature does not play, it might desire something but it does not play" (217). Even though I was unable to find much scholarship that focused in much depth on the concept of play in Stein, I was still able to find the scholarship of Roger Caillios that attempts to theorize and categorize play.

The success and fame caused by the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* changed the manner in which Stein thought about identity and writing, as well as the playful elements within her writing. Previously, Stein found pleasure in writing and played with the world and how she viewed it, especially in her writing. She was able to find this pleasure because she was not writing for anyone in particular or for any commercial value or wealth. However, once fame hit, she began to worry about her audience and how she was now valuable in utilitarian terms of wealth. She let her "outside," or identity, affect her "inside," or entity, which caused her to lose interest in the world and her writing. Stein found herself dead inside because she had no writing within her. Ironically, that was until she encountered a mysterious corpse while spending a summer with Toklas in Billiggin, France, which somehow sparked that interest back into her.

With this dead woman, she was faced with a mystery of what happened and how it happened, which caused her to begin thinking again —and, in turn, writing again. Through this event, she went on to publish *Everybody's Autobiography*, where she revisits not just this corpse but also her discussion of identity and writing. By the end of the work, Stein recognizes that identity is unsolvable, multiple, and constantly moving or happening. This identity with no solution connects to her idea of writing because of the process of constant interest and thinking. Rather than finding a singular meaning to writing or identity, Stein believes you should always be thinking about identity due to its flowing nature. There is no one solution or meaning to anything that is worth thinking and writing about, and Stein prefers it that way.

While Stein playfully considers identity in Toklas, identity became overbearing when she started having an audience to worry about. However, she comes back to this idea in *Everybody's Autobiography* through mystery and a darker form of playfulness. In Toklas, play came through the enjoyment of the world and finding pleasure in the mundane. *Everybody's Autobiography* offers a different play through the genre of mystery, which allows for the human mind to play in a world where every part is as important as another. Through Gertrude Stein's "autobiographies," she offers a different version of modernism filled with playfulness and pleasure by looking at every part rather than the whole.

Stein's writing stands as an opportunity to think about the world in a radically different way, unconstrained by traditional values. Throughout my study of her work, I have had to drastically shift the way I typically analyze literature. Previously, my studies have involved me searching deep within the words for the underlying truth. However, with Stein's writing, I could no longer read it like I would with someone like William Faulkner. I learned to first read at surface level and take up a playful way of reading that I was unfamiliar with. As my exploration of her work went on, I began to also see the world in a different light; it was almost like I began thinking in a different language as her words crept under my own skin. The multiplicity of identity and writing opened up, leading to my thinking about everything in a new way. I no longer searched for singular answers or explanations in her writing; instead, new questions arose to explore for more thinking.

For some Stein readers, this way of thinking scares them and fills them with anger. Thinking about the world in this way is uncomfortable and challenges what we understand as reality. Most people desire solutions and one correct answer and so the work of thinking comes to an end; however, Stein invites us to view the world in a manner where the play of thinking goes on indefinitely. Her writing poses questions about the answers or explanations we are presented with regarding what we are told about the real world, or normal life. At first, this revolution confused and frustrated me. However, the playfulness eventually rubbed off on me and I began to find pleasure in a similar way to Stein.

While revolutionary, existing within the human mind can be dangerous and even difficult. If you completely resist the conventional ways of thinking about the world (human nature), you can get lost in the complexity of it all; you begin to question the nature of everything from a pencil to your own identity. However, it is important to continue thinking about the world rather than accepting things the way they are. If nothing is worth thinking about anymore —or writing about—because it is already known or has already been thought, all interest in the world is gone. Stein's writing teaches us how to inhabit the human mind, renew our interest in the world, and find pleasure in doing this activity.