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Gertrude Stein: Autobiography and Play

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By

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DEDICATION

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ABSTRACT

By using Gertrude Stein's two autobiographies, this thesis attempts to examine to use and evolution of play in writing. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, play stands within the language and games that Stein invites her readers to engage in. By using Roger Caillois' characteristics of play, Stein's writing can be seen as different from the high, serious modernism at the time with writers like William Faulkner and T.S. Eliot. After the publication of *Toklas*, Stein reverted into a crippling writer's block because she could no longer find interest in the world to think and write about. However, after an experience with a dead Englishwoman, she was thrown back into a world of questions with no straightforward answer, which lead her to begin writing again. *Everybody's Autobiography* is a meditation on these questions that haunted her at first but became a playful mystery to think about.

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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* (1933), 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 Caillois and his theory on play. Caillois 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* (1937). 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.

Chapter One: *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*, Stein shifted away from her more highly experimental works like *Tender Buttons* (1914). Instead, Stein focused on making *Toklas* 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 alludes 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 readers to play the game with Stein.

1. Pleasure and Playfulness

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the animated and digressive narrative of Alice and Gertrude is filled with people, places, and opinions that Stein treats with a certain playfulness. The term "play" is often associated with childhood and the way that children experience everyday situations as entertaining, intellectually stimulating, or interesting; this is exactly how Stein encounters her world. In "Gertrude Stein as Humorist," Oliver Evans compares Stein's humor to writers like Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde. As Oscar Wilde stuck to "art for art's sake," Evans claims Stein's playfulness is "fun for fun's sake" because of her ability to laugh at herself (99). In *Toklas*, Stein writes "Gertrude Stein always says to comfort herself, they do quote me, that means that my words and my sentences get under their skins although they do not know it" (244). Instead of being angry and annoyed at the often brutal criticism she received, she only laughed and commented on how the critics who found her writing the most appalling were the same critics who most often quoted her. Evans describes her critical reception as providing Stein with many particularly "bitter moments," but here and elsewhere, she playfully turns these bitter moments into "consolation" by noting how she wins with her critics even when she loses (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 70). In her writing, Stein has a shocking ability to approach even the most troubling material with a certain quality of playfulness whether it's hateful critics, crime, or World War.

Stein's quality of playfulness might be one of the most surprising and complicated aspects of her writing and it is a significant element of her autobiographies due to her experiment with the genre. Most autobiographies at the time were highly serious accounts of someone's journey, usually a man's, from obscurity to success or fame of some sort. Stein's works clearly reject this conventional form of writing. Play was a concept that was not only on the mind of Stein but also on the minds of some other mid-century writers and intellectuals. A modernist near-contemporary of Stein's, French sociologist and philosopher Roger Caillois, extensively studied the idea of play in the 1950s by building on cultural historian Johan Huizinga's idea of play as a principal element of culture and society. In *Man, Play and Games* (1961), Roger Caillois opens with Huizinga's 1940 definition of play: "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly" (4) and then expands it to define six characteristics of play. For Caillois, play is an activity that is: "Free," "Separate," "Uncertain," "Unproductive," "Governed by Rules," and "Make-Believe" (9-10). Caillois' theory of play as an activity and concept offers valuable insights to Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. For the purpose of this discussion, all of Caillois' concepts except "Separate" relate to Stein's play because, as I will discuss, her playfulness is not somehow separated from the real world but operates on it. Her writing poses questions about what we consider the real world, or normal life.

1.1 Free

Caillois argues that play must be "free" or it "would at once lose its attractiveness and joyous quality as diversion" (9). Play cannot be forced; no one can command you to play or else it is not really play. Play must be done freely. When relating the idea of freedom to Stein's

writing, her views on what she calls "human mind" and "human nature" aid in this characterization because "freedom" is a quality directly associated with the human mind while confinement is associated with human nature. In "What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them," Stein describes the "human mind" as a form of free-moving thought, unconstrained by societal and cultural norms. Stein writes, "At any moment when you are you you are you without the memory of yourself" ("Master-Pieces" 147). When you are inhabiting the human mind, you are free of any memory of who you are supposed to be. You are unconfined by cultural or social expectations of how you are supposed to think or behave, so you are able to freely move beyond these limits. On the other hand, "human nature" contains the ideas and values we receive from others and accept without a second thought; she describes human nature as "common knowledge" (149) associated with memory because it is what "everybody already knows." If we already know something, why spend more time thinking about it? In "What Are Master-Pieces," she writes, "The minute your memory functions while you are doing anything it may be very popular but actually it is dull. And that is what a master-piece is not, it may be unwelcome but it is never dull" (150). When memory functions during action, consciousness is limited to the knowledge inherited from society. The human mind fits with Caillois' notion of freedom in play because it is unconstrained by conventional rules, ideas, and modes of thinking.

Stein's playfulness is closely connected to her theory of the human mind, as seen in *The Geographical History of America* (1936): "Of course the human mind does play." In terms of play, you allow your mind to think about the world in unconventional ways, as a child would before learning the common knowledge of society. When you are young, you tend to conform less than an adult to the thinking patterns around you, mostly because you are unaware of those

patterns. Looking back on Caillois, Stein's writing exists outside ordinary life with an air of *un*seriousness. Her tone throughout *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* remains impish and eclectic, existing outside of human nature.

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, one instance where she breaks the conventional rules of the world is when she recounts her time as a student under the philosopher and psychologist, William James, who was teaching at Harvard at the time. She recalls going into class to take an exam. Yet, she reacts in a strange, non-traditional way:

> She sat down with the examination paper before her and she just could not. Dear Professor James, she wrote at the top of her paper. I am so sorry but really I do not feel a bit like an examination paper in philosophy to-day, and left.
>
> The next day she had a postal card from William James saying, Dear Miss Stein, I understand perfectly how you feel I often feel like that myself. And underneath it he gave her work the highest mark in his course. (*Toklas* 79)

Typically, a student would walk into class, take the exam—hopefully having prepared and studied—, and then leave, having finished the test. However, Stein breaks this convention and completely derails the conventions of test taking. Surely, many students wish to tell their professor they do not feel like taking an exam and leave, but this is not conventionally or socially acceptable. If someone were to actually do this, their teacher would simply fail them. Yet, Stein lives this dream and faces no repercussions, receiving from the professor a high grade for this action. Through this passage, Stein frees herself from human nature and thinks of this situation differently than usual. Since human nature is “what everybody already knows” and exam taking is generally a process of memorizing what other people have thought and repeating it, Stein considers the whole process dull and an uninteresting exercise of human nature. On the other

hand, the human mind concerns the process of thinking rather than merely memorizing and repeating what is already known. When you are memorizing, you are repeating answers that are already known, final, and not worth thinking about anymore. Stein is more interested in questions without answers and mysteries because they set the human mind into action, allowing for thinking and moving.

1.2 Unproductive

In the first pages of *Toklas*, Stein—writing as Alice—announces "I myself have had no liking for violence and have always enjoyed the pleasures of needlework and gardening. I am fond of paintings, furniture, tapestry, houses and flowers and even vegetables and fruit-trees. I like a view but I like to sit with my back turned to it" (3-4). Stein, as Alice, or perhaps, with Alice, enjoys the mundane activities of the everyday: the "voices and rhythms" of words (70), reading anything and everything (74), and "the sounds of the street and the movement of automobiles" (206), and many long walks and talks with friends.

These activities align with Caillois' idea of play being unproductive. He writes, "Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money" (Caillois 5). For an activity to be playful, it must be an unnecessary usage of time. Rather than the utilitarian way of thinking, play does not seek profit or any traditional meaning of usefulness. Typically, society finds value in the practical paths of life that produce some type of wealth or useful skill. However, mundane activities allow for playfulness to happen because you typically are not searching for a pragmatic goal. What Evans describes as Stein's "fun for fun's sake" (99) is equally true of play, and Stein found unproductive fun and interest everywhere. Stein's play

does not do anything. It neither adds, subtracts, or works towards any certain, singular, practical goals but it does work towards impractical and unconventional goals and values.

1.3 Governed-by-rules

Caillois describes play and its characteristic of being "governed-by-rules" in terms of how play "suspend[s] ordinary laws and for the moment establish[es] new legislation, which alone counts" (10). Similar to other modernists, Stein experimented with language to the point where people would become irritated that they could not understand her work. While her more controversial experiments lie in other works, like *Tender Buttons* or *The Making of Americans*, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* stands as Stein's popularly successful work, meaning it was the first time a non-Steinian could find pleasure in reading her work. In "Poetry and Grammar" and other places, Stein establishes her own rules of grammar, while suspending traditional rules. Even if *Toklas* is less experimental than her previous writing, it still plays by the rules of Stein's new legislation for writing.

For example, repetition holds a significant place in Stein's writing. Her emphasis on repetition lies in how every time a word or phrase is repeated, more meaning tacks onto it. For example, when reciting her "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," every time the cycle completes the word "rose" adds extra weight. The meaning becomes ambiguous; however, it naturally happens regardless of how many times the phrase repeats. One of these instances of repetition involves Stein's famous Saturday evenings at 17 Rue de Fleurus, where Stein and Alice hosted a variety of celebrated modernist artists and intellectuals:

You know how painters are, I wanted to make them happy so I placed each one

> opposite his own picture, and they were happy so happy that we had to send out twice for more bread, when you know France you will know that that means that they were happy, because they cannot eat and drink without bread and we had to send out twice for bread so they were happy. (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 15)

In moments like this, Stein's wit and pleasure with her world are evident. Stein reuses the word "happy" four different times throughout the passage with her set rules for making painters happy. These rules act as the conditions for her word-game created through this passage. Overall, her description of this evening at 17 Rue de Fleurus conveys amusement and playfulness, especially with the repeated word "happy" to remind us of the evening's mood.

Her rules can be found in other works like "Poetry and Grammar," which she deemed important to understanding her work. For example, Stein covers the topic of question marks:

> The question mark is alright when it is all alone when it is used as a brand on a cattle or when it could be used in decoration but connected with writing it is completely entirely completely uninteresting. It is evident that if you ask a question you ask a question but anybody who can read at all knows when a question is a question as it is written in writing. (126)

Even though she says they are alright alone, the question mark has no place in writing. In line with Stein's democratic view of writing, she believes readers are smart enough to know when they are being asked a question. Her hatred for the question mark also circles back to her distaste for questions and answers. Readers do not need to be told they are being asked a question. Relating back to Caillois, Stein's play follows rules; however, these rules are set by Stein opposing normal rules of writing.

1.4 Make-believe

As the last characteristic, Caillois specifies how play is "accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life" (10). In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein plays make-believe when she positions herself as Toklas. As a game, we accept this state of being and go along with Stein for over 200 pages. She finds pleasure in the amusing narrative technique she uses, which is revealed in the last sentence:

> About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it. (252)

Ending the novel on this sentence pivots the whole perspective and effect of the piece. Stein has invited her audience into playing along with a game of make-believe that Toklas has written her autobiography, even though we are well aware that Stein is the one speaking. Even though the book cover alone reveals a similar contradiction, forgetting this fact happens easily as the reading progresses. When reading "*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by Gertrude Stein," an immediate contradiction presents itself, creating a confusing problem—or as Stein might see as a game—among readers: Who is speaking? By also acknowledging the text itself in this passage and Stein's completion of Alice's autobiography— "And she has and this is it" —Stein takes us back to the beginning of the book, which creates another loop and another repetition.

Through this type of play, Stein invites readers into a hide-and-seek game, making us question "Where is Stein now?" This also leads us back to an earlier concept from Caillois: unproductivity. Stein's *Toklas* creates something like an infinite loop. By stepping away from the central narrative, saying "And she has and this is it," Stein constructs a meta-narrative effect that

takes us back to the beginning of the autobiography. In this sense, both unproductive and make-believe play go hand-in-hand. The loop effect causes a never-ending play, or a constant movement of play. The last lines ironically double as an introduction to the "it" of the autobiography we have just read, which takes us back to the first page again, and calls us to re-read the book with a different perspective. Once the novel again concludes, we reach the same introduction again— “And this is it” —and the process could repeat and go on indefinitely. Regarding this hypothetical, Stein's previously-mentioned idea of repetition becomes applicable: each read-through accumulates new meaning to *Toklas*.

In Stein's "Poetry and Grammar," she states her preference for verbs due to the same fact: they are constantly moving forward. This is an integral part of Stein's philosophy of writing. Writing should always be moving and doing something. When it is stationary, as she views nouns to be, Stein sees no purpose in doing it at all. For example, she writes that a noun is just “a name of a thing” (“Poetry and Grammar” 124). Nouns are just the names of things that everybody already knows and have ceased to think about. Regarding *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, her playfulness seems never-ending, especially since it exists in a peculiar space between fiction and nonfiction.

Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* also dives into her relationship with Alice Toklas. The title alone presents an intimate partnership because it shows how Toklas trusted Stein enough to speak through her voice. Both Stein and Toklas share the narration, while also not trying to debunk the other; both parts are more important than the whole. It exhibits an intimacy, where one can speak for the other and no resentment appears through this act. Through Toklas’s voice, Stein narrates not only the events that pass through the earlier part of the 1900s but also their personal relationship. As readers, we think we are receiving their relationship

through Toklas's lens, when we actually get a variety of perspectives. This narrative strategy also emphasizes her playfulness through the multiple roles she inhabits. The game of hide-and-seek also pops up while we—as readers—attempt to pinpoint where Stein is in a certain moment of narration. Other writers tend to fill one narrative space, but Stein takes the game up a level with multiple voices.

Carolyn Barros's "Getting Modern: The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas" poses the idea of the "Gertrude Stein/Alice" voice (179). With this voice, the audience suspects that we are being told the closest thing to the truth; however, it cannot be completely verified. While characterized as the most intimate, there is no clear definitive narrative between Toklas and Stein, because we are always aware at some level that it is Stein speaking for Alice with her permission. In this voice, Stein and Toklas entangle themselves in each other, causing their identities to meld together into one—similar to the marital joining of two people becoming one—and place readers in a game of hide-and-seek.

In traditional autobiographies written by men, gender roles maintain the classic husband-and-wife trope; Stein's text is no exception. Along with this, autobiographical narratives contain only one authoritative voice/self. While Stein and Toklas' voices are mixed, an oddly multiple identity and shared intimacy appears in the narrative. Early in the novel, Toklas identifies as the wife:

> Miss Stein told me to sit with Fernande. Fernande was always beautiful but heavy in hand. I sat, it was my first sitting with a wife of a genius
>
> Before I decided to write this book my twenty-five years with Gertrude Stein, I had often said that I would write, The wives of geniuses I have sat with. I have sat with so many. I have sat with wives who were not wives, of geniuses who were real geniuses.

> I have sat with real wives of geniuses who were not real geniuses. I have sat with wives of geniuses, of near geniuses, of would be geniuses, in short I have sat very often and very long with many wives and wives of many geniuses. (14)

The phrase "wife of a genius" repeats six times throughout this passage, while "genius" reappears 10 times —27 times throughout the whole work. By deduction, with Toklas as the wife, Stein would be classified as the husband. This is a recurring, subtle theme within the depiction of their relationship. However, by casting Toklas as the "wife of a genius," Stein's playfulness rises to the surface once again. The amount of the said phrase popping up is humorous by itself due to its nature. Considering how Stein wrote during the early 1900s, referring to marital relations between women—as well as men—walks the line between dangerous and ambiguous. In terms of playfulness, Stein and Toklas hide their relationship in plain sight.

Another area of the text where their husband-wife dynamic appears later within a nuanced, intimate moment:

> Well I too said when she woke me, is it a revolution and are there soldiers. No, she said, not exactly. Well what is it, said I impatiently. I don't quite know, she answered, but there has been an alarm. Anyway you had better come. I started to turn on the light. No, she said, you had better not. Give me your hand and I will get you down and you can go to sleep down stairs on the couch. I came. It was very dark. I sat down on the couch and then I said, I'm sure I don't know what is the matter with me but my knees are knocking together. Gertrude Stein burst out laughing, wait a minute, I will get you a blanket, she said. No don't leave me, I said. She managed to find something to cover me and then there was a loud boom, then several more. It was a soft noise and then there was

the sound of horns blowing in the streets and then we knew it was all over. We lighted the lights and went to bed. (157)

Stein is evidently the protector of the two, who takes care of Toklas in critical moments. This specific moment maintains a certain intimacy commonly portrayed through literary heterosexual relationships. However, in Stein and Toklas' case, this scene portrays a queer relationship. Not only does Stein take on the role of protector, the environment itself adds to the erotic feeling. This happens in the middle of the night and when Toklas goes to turn on the light, Stein tells her not to—Stein even mentions "It was very dark" (157). The description of "knees knocking" and the simple short sentence "I came." also insinuates sexual innuendo. "Came" as a term for an orgasm dates back as far as 1604 (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Whether or not her readers picked up on this metaphor, this passage proves a sufficient example for Stein and Toklas hiding their relationship in plain sight.

2. Identity

Re-established again and again, Stein considers herself as a "genius," along with a few others: Pablo Picasso; philosopher, Alfred Whitehead; and fellow modernist writer, Sherwood Anderson. Her list of geniuses changes through time; nonetheless, Picasso and Whitehead remain in their genius status throughout Stein's writing. While she never directly defines "genius," she indirectly defines it in terms of the art of what she calls "master-pieces": a genius, she explains, is a person who produces master-pieces. To begin understanding Stein's concept of genius, her essay, "What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them," is important. According to Stein, being a genius has everything to do with the "human mind" and nothing to do with "human nature" ("Master-Pieces" 149). When you are unanchored from common ideas and

perceptions, you see and think about the world in unconventional ways. One can think about this in terms of the detective novel, which Stein references multiple times throughout her works:

> It is very curious but the detective story which is you might say the only really modern novel form that has come into existence gets rid of human nature by having the man dead to begin with the hero is dead to begin with and so you have so to speak got rid of the event before the book begins. ("Master-Pieces" 149)

Crime stories disrupt the way we normally think about the world and make us question everything we thought we knew. They make everything a clue, forcing you to pay attention to every detail and every single part of the story. Readers must rethink everything outside of its familiar, conventional meaning. In this way, Stein believes them to be connected to master-pieces because they make you think about the world in unconventional ways. On the other hand, human nature is what everyone already knows: the ideas and values in culture we accept without really giving a second thought. Stein writes, "The moment it is in relation it is common knowledge and anybody can feel and know it and it is not a master-piece" ("Master-Pieces" 149). Once something is in relation with other things we know, it no longer requires a constant movement of thought because it becomes part of a larger known whole: no need to think about it anymore, it is known. Stein believes this to be the true potential of writing. For Stein, writing is all about thinking as opposed to repeating what has already been thought. With this in mind, master-pieces derive from individuals in touch with the human mind rather than human nature.

Stein also mentions identity in "What Are Master-Pieces," combining it with discussion of the human mind and human nature. For Stein, identity originates externally from others rather than from yourself: "I am I because my little dog knows me…" ("Master-Pieces" 146-147). What Stein considers herself to be is different than how her dog views her. While identity is

constraining and practically inescapable, Stein combats identity with "entity," which means being or existing. Entity as "being" changes and moves as a verb, rather than identity defining you as a noun which references a static essence. The "I" in the previous quote stands as her identity as seen by others, in this case her little dog, as opposed to the entity of Stein herself. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, entity is the existence "as distinguished from the qualities or relations, of anything" (OED). As a result, an entity is more like a verb than a noun, independent from the normalizations of the world. Stein believes entity to fall in line with the human mind, while identity relates to human nature. Therefore, geniuses function outside identity and more in the realm of entity.

Later in the essay, Stein states geniuses are "eternally young," aligning them with childhood and play ("Master-Pieces" 150). She cites the example of a boy growing up to be a man: " …what is the use of being a boy if you are going to grow up to be a man, the boy and the man have nothing to do with each other, except in respect to memory and identity, and if they have anything to do with each other in respect to memory and identity then they will never produce a master-piece" (150). As a boy, the title of a "man" is generally thought of as the end goal of being a boy. Being a boy is a step to becoming a man. If the only goal while being a boy is to become a man, being a boy in itself is no longer significant and holds no value because it becomes merely a part of a larger whole that is the man. Stein wants every part to be valued for what it is, not what it will be. In this sense, identity is reductive, similar to other types of social identities, such as gender, are confining.

However, Stein's concepts of "entity" and "genius" allow an escape route from this suffocating way of thinking about identity as they provide a way to think freely and write about

the self and the world. Not surprisingly, Stein places herself in the category of geniuses as she takes on a project of a thinking that resists identity and reducing parts into greater wholes:

> I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken, and I may say in each case it was before there was any general recognition of the quality of genius in them. The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso and Alfred Whitehead. I have met many important people, I have met several great people but I have only known three first class geniuses and in each case on sight within me something rang. In no one of the three cases have I been mistaken. In this way my new full life began. (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 5)

The repetition of the word "genius" establishes a connection between Stein herself and this status. By saying "I was not mistaken," Toklas's voice maintains confidence and directness, which influences the reader's opinion of Stein's character (5). In "Getting Modern: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*," Barros writes, "This voice is dead sure of itself, matter-of-fact; it matches the solidarity of the persona that the Gertrude Stein/Alice narrator has described throughout the *Autobiography*" (182). The narrative technique of using Toklas's voice places Stein out of the equation. If she had written this in her distinct narrative, it would have seemed egotistical and arrogant. Instead, Stein combines herself with Toklas, and speaks about herself through her intimacy with Toklas and her thoughts.

Nevertheless, the point remains that Stein believes herself to be a genius. According to Stein, geniuses are by definition ahead of their time and, therefore, not appreciated in their time. While geniuses have an audience, the quality of their work means that most people, who favor

the comforts of an art that fall in with “human nature,” are shocked and mainly upset by the work of geniuses. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein covers this era of her life:

> It has always been rather ridiculous that she who is good friends with all the world and can know them and they can know her, has always been the admired of the precious. But she always says some day they, anybody, will find out that she is of interest to them, she and her writing. And she always consoles herself that the newspapers are always interested. They always say, she says, that my writing is appalling but they always quote it and what is more, they quote it correctly, and those they say they admire they do not quote. This at some of her most bitter moments has been a consolation. My sentences do get under their skin, only they do not know that they do, she has often said. (70)

Even though people found her writing “appalling,” they still quoted her and unintentionally showed themselves to be thinking about it because they are interested enough in her writing to quote it (70). Stein ironically points out that the “precious” reader/reviewers of literary magazines may admire her writing, but they don’t really understand why and so do not quote her. The angry newspaper reader/reviewers “abhor” her writing, but they quote her; therefore, they inadvertently reveal their interest in her writing because it “gets under their skin.” In “What Are Master-Pieces,” Steins claims, “Everything that makes life go on makes identity and everything that makes identity is of necessity a necessity” (151). Here, she emphasizes how everything is against geniuses—or those who inhabit the human mind instead of human nature—because they are thinking differently than everyone else. This thought connects to the discussion in the passage above, where so many are against Stein, which then would classify her as a genius in "What Are Master-Pieces."

2.1 Relationship

The marriage between two people can cause their identities to become intertwined in some way. With this in mind, Stein's rejection of the "I" can be read as her and Toklas's identities as one, or "we." The title and narration also allude to this idea. Stein speaking through Alice's voice weaves their identities together into one. In line with the connectivity between Stein and Toklas, we are also shown how involved Toklas was with Stein's work. During their relationship, Toklas transcribed Stein's notes, as well as constructed her books, lending towards a collaborative writing between them. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein writes "you cannot tell what a book is until you type it or proof-read it. It then does something to you that only reading never can do" (113). Since Toklas edited and proof-read Stein's writing, her involvement gives her a deeper insight to Stein's writing—and by extension Stein herself.

Their collaborative writing creates another level of intimacy beyond the physical. Stein includes many scenes, pointing towards this element of their relationship. For example, Toklas had part in one of Stein's most well-known literary phrases:

> Speaking of the device of rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, it was I who found it in one of Gertrude Stein's manuscripts and insisted upon putting it as a device on the letter paper, on the table linen and anywhere that she would permit that I would put it. I am very pleased with myself for having done so. (*Toklas* 138)

Stein clearly did not mind Toklas being involved with her work. The same can be said of Toklas considering she let Stein write her entire autobiography. There is a profound intimacy between the two, seemingly stronger than portrayals of heterosexual relationships in other autobiographies during this time. For example, we do not see many wives influencing their husbands' life and work as Toklas did Stein's. When Stein (as Toklas) mentions possible titles

for the autobiography, all the titles mentioned reference their close relationship in some form: “My Life With The Great,” “Wives of Geniuses I Have Sat With,” “My Twenty-five Years With Gertrude Stein” (251). These are all referential to their marital-adjacent relationship, specifically titles placing Toklas as the wife and Stein as the genius husband. In doing this, even the title intertwines their identities as one by including both Stein and Toklas in the title of Toklas's autobiography. Not only is Stein writing Toklas' autobiography, she also dictates her own.

2.2 The Title

In “Gertrude Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography* and the Art of Contradictions,” Timothy Galow explores the effect of her autobiography’s titles. Stein uses her titles as the first separation from the genre. Typically, we think of autobiography as what Galow defines simply as “the expression of an individual consciousness interacting with the material world” (112), but Stein’s titles are neither completely material nor individual. While Toklas is the narrator of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* within the text, the cover identifies Stein as its author, and the subject matter spans from Toklas to Stein to all the people and events in between. Different critics find different reasons for Stein’s decision, but there is no denying that pleasure and playfulness occupy an important role in Stein’s choice. In Stein’s next autobiography, her sense of play is evident in a title that appears to be similarly impossible and self-contradicting: rather than “*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*” by Gertrude Stein; this time it is “*Everybody’s Autobiography*” by Gertrude Stein. Both titles disrupt our understanding of an autobiography being the story behind a unique singular identity. Given Stein’s concerns about identity, this makes sense.

Chapter Two: *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 Callois 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*.

1. Fame

While Stein was admired within her modernist community, as seen from the constant overflow of artists and intellectuals from her salons at 27 Rue de Fleurus, the rest of the world stood mostly unaware of her until *Toklas*. Before the publication, her writing was not productive in the traditional sense of the word: neither profitable nor popular beyond her inner-circle. According to Stein, her audience had no place in her mind while she worked on her texts, which also meant she had no thoughts of money or fame while writing. Early in *Everybody's*

Autobiography, Stein acknowledges a shift in her relationship to her writing that transpired after the publication of *Toklas*:

> Before one is successful that is before any one is ready to pay money for anything you do then you are certain that every word you have written is an important word to have written and that any word you have written is as important as any other word and you keep everything you have written with great care…when something began having a commercial value it was upsetting. (40)

Before publicity hit, Stein believed every word she wrote was important and had purpose, even if it did not produce wealth or fame. However, now that people "pay money" to read her work and the public considers her a celebrity, her thoughts regarding writing have been "upset." While there are multiple meanings to the word, in this context it is important to consider the more literal definition: to be "overturned" or "capsized" (OED). By this definition, her view of writing has drastically changed into the opposite view—meaningless and unimportant—now that her writing is productive and contains commercial value. What she previously thought to be important is not now; what was not important is now. Another meaning is "to throw into mental discomposure or turmoil" (OED). The shift in her view of writing and identity sent her into a state of distress, ultimately leading to her writer's block. Instead of her play being "unproductive" through values of practical wealth or traditional standards of usefulness, the commercial value strips away the playfulness. When writing is no longer playful, it is no longer interesting to Stein because the play in writing happens without thought of profit or a celebrity status.

In addition to this upsetting quality in the way she now views her writing, the publicity that followed *Toklas*' publication also affected her view of identity. Instead of presenting identity

as form of play, the success of *Toklas* presented her with an experience of identity over which she has little control:

> But now well now how can you dream about a personality when it is always being created for you by a publicity, how can you believe what you make up when publicity makes them up to be so much realer than you can dream. And so autobiography is written which is in a way a way to say that publicity is right, they are as the public sees them. (*Everybody's Autobiography* 71)

Now a celebrity system creates a "personality" or identity for you, practically telling you who you are. Rather than having your individual relationship to your writing, readers, reviewers and publishers now tell you what your writing means and have expectations about what you will write next. Stein is no longer Stein; she is "GERTRUDE STEIN" in all caps, as seen on a billboard by admiring fans: "then we saw an electric sign moving around a building and it said Gertrude Stein has come and that was upsetting" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 180). She becomes a public commodity for commercial use. There is now a distinct difference between herself as Stein and this celebrity GERTRUDE STEIN. To Stein, this diminishes her view of herself. Thinking about "What Are Master-Pieces," the public affecting your sense of identity negates your genius. In her lecture, she writes, "The second you are you because your little dog knows you you cannot make a master-piece and that is all of that" (151). When you inhabit the self formed by others, you are no longer capable of creating a master-piece because you are existing within human nature, or "what everybody already knows." Instead, Stein feels that master-pieces come from entity rather than identity because "identity does stop the creation of master-pieces" ("Master-Pieces" 152). You think about yourself according to others, which

forces identity on you and confines you to societal norms like what your role in society is or how much commercial value you hold.

Typically, we see the word as “masterpieces;” however, Stein forms it as “Master-Pieces.” Separating those two words creates a new sense of the word: they are parts rather than the whole. To Stein, parts are deemed more important than the whole. Master-Pieces were not a whole something or even a complete something. They are separate pieces, each piece as significant as the others. In hand with this, once a master-piece is aware that it is a masterpiece, —or something whole and complete— it is no longer a master-piece.

Stein's fame also negatively affected her writing by uprooting her original playful relationship to writing and identity. Her fame forced her to evolve her thoughts on these topics, which led to the writing of *Everybody's Autobiography*. In “Inside and Outside: Gertrude Stein on Identity, Celebrity, and Authenticity,” Kirk Curnutt discusses how Stein “suffered a brief but unprecedented bout of writer's block” due to her “concern for readers' expectations” following the success of *Alice B. Toklas* (292). In addition to this concern, Stein worries about her outer self overwhelming her inner self in *Everybody's Autobiography*.

According to Curnutt, Stein saw art as the expression of an inner “I” she constantly questions. Consequently, when Stein focused on her art, she no longer focused on her outer identity, or identity for others. Rather, it allowed Stein to become more in touch with her inner “I.” As Curnutt writes, it “allows artists to proclaim their disinterest in the outer world of fame and to present their motive solely as expressing their intrinsic self” (297). Gertrude Stein did just this. In "What Are Master-Pieces," Stein explains, "The moment [writing] is in relation it is common knowledge and anybody can feel and know it and it is not a master-piece" (149). The

same logic can be applied to publicity and fame. If you are aware of your fame as a writer or live in relation to it, you are no longer able to truly write and are no longer adherent to your inner "I."

2. Tone

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas consists of many playful moments, where Stein engages her readers in a game of sorts. While playfulness is still important to Stein's writing in *Everybody's Autobiography*, it has evolved by taking on a darker tone at times. Some passages appear as deeper, more somber reflections on topics like identity and its relation to writing. For example, Stein explicitly discusses a new relationship between identity and writing early in the text:

> Nothing inside me needed to be written. Nothing needed any word and there was no word inside me that could not be spoken and so there was no word inside me. And I was not writing. I began to worry about identity. I had always been I because I had words that had to be written inside me and now any word I had inside could be spoken it did not need to be written. I am I because my little dog knows me. But was I I when I had no written word inside me. (*Everybody's Autobiography* 66)

For Stein, writing is closely tied to the process of thinking rather than representing completed thought. If something needs to be thought about, it needs to be written; if it is already known and your thinking completed, why write about it? Years prior to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*' publication, Stein seemed to have plenty to think about as seen through her extensive bibliography. Yet, when she hit this writing block, she could not find any words that *needed* to be written. Nothing seemed to need thought. As she writes above, when she was not writing, she "began to worry about identity" (66). Calling back to the inner self and outer self, she was

always herself because she had something to write. Her words were her inner self without concern for the outer self. However, since no words needed to be written anymore, she poses her main question: “was I I when I had no written word inside me” (66). Here, she directly connects the inside self with writing. If she had no writing that needed to be done, her identity appeared to waver into something she did not understand anymore: an alien persona built through fame staring back at her from a billboard in New York (*Everybody’s Autobiography* 115). Identity became a concept understood through her status as celebrity rather than from the inside.

Her questioning contributes to this dark tone through its brooding sense of identity loss. Stein could no longer find meaning in writing due to her loss of interest in the world around her, which rips away a large sense of herself as a writer. Her identity as a writer—as well as a genius—gets stripped away. Then, what is she left with? In *Everybody's Autobiography*, she cannot give a straight answer. Her audience can infer that Stein probably felt hopeless and filled with despair at her inability to write. Yet, there is also a sense of playfulness because she is actively writing this: she writes about no longer being able to write. However, when one becomes stuck in such a writer's block, how will one get out? Will one get out at all? Ironically, the thing that brings her writing back to life is the appearance of a corpse.

The unnatural shock and mystery brought by the corpse makes it possible for Stein to begin writing again. In the first page of *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein immediately connects autobiography to the genre of mystery and detective fiction: “That is the way any autobiography has to be written which reminds me of Dashiell Hammett” (1). Samuel Dashiell Hammett was an American writer contemporary with Stein. He wrote detective novels and short stories. Through this connection to Hammett, she makes autobiography—or true autobiography—and mystery parallel genres. Stein rejects the typical autobiographical work because you are writing about

events that happened in the past, relying on your memory to provide information. However, memory is terrible and unreliable. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein claims that "you cannot remember right and if you do remember right it does not sound right and of course it does not sound right because it is not right" (70). What you remember is wrong because there is no possible way to remember everything, especially if it happened years prior. For example, remembering exact dialogue from a conversation is impossible. Since memory fails in this way, Stein sees autobiography as impossible in the form past writers have attempted. Readers trust the writer to be telling the truth when, in reality, it is not the truth. There will always be numerous different perspectives and different interpretations of the "same" story.

All the more, memory is connected to Stein's concept of human nature and how it has nothing to do with master-pieces. In "What Are Master-Pieces," she writes, "The minute your memory functions while you are doing anything it may be very popular but actually it is dull. And that is what a master-piece is not, it may be unwelcome but it is never dull" (150). Autobiography is based on memories of what happened in the past. However, mystery happens in the present. Mystery appeals to the human mind because it portrays a world where everything is important because anything can be a potential clue. You start to exist in a present where every thing, every part, every piece, becomes important. When this process happens, you begin detecting, which leads to thinking and writing.

Mystery and detecting brought Stein back to writing after *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. When she encountered the mystery revolving around the dead Englishwoman, she began to shift from human nature back into human mind. This process of analyzing every part and detecting or thinking about every detail got her back to writing. The first writing she was able to

do after the success of Toklas was a detective story titled *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor.* Writing what she considered a detective story was her way out of her writer's block:

> I never have wanted to write about any other summer because every other summer was a natural one for me to be living, but that summer that first summer after the Autobiography was not a natural summer and so it is a thing to be written once more and yet again. (*Everybody's Autobiography* 53)

For Stein, this summer stood out because of the mysterious events she encountered. It was something different than what was expected and what had happened in the past. To Stein, a natural summer is where everything is known and expected, on the side of human nature because it is what everybody already knows. The mystery surrounding the dead Englishwoman flipped what was supposed to be a natural summer to one that was unnatural. That period of time did not inhabit human nature but the human mind since she was required to begin thinking about what was "unnatural" about the mysterious summer.

In Stein's "What Are Master-Pieces" she explains that "It is very curious but the detective story which is you might say the only really modern novel form that has come into existence gets rid of human nature by having the man dead to begin with the hero is dead to begin with and so you have so to speak got rid of the event before the book begins" (149). She repeatedly mentions this idea in *Everybody's Autobiography*: "novels are therefore not very good these days unless they are detective stories where the hero is the dead man and so there can be no beginning and middle and end because he is dead" (127). For Stein, a detective novel is a form of play in itself. It becomes a game for the reader: Whodunit? Every part matters because it could be a clue to finding out the answer, which speaks to Stein's importance of parts over the whole. Readers have the freedom to play in the human mind because mystery gets rid of the hero and

plots with a beginning, middle, and end. To Stein, characters and plot are not interesting because they rely upon identity and memory, which are part of "human nature" and the "common knowledge" or "what everybody already knows" (*Geographical History* 191). Readers begin to question everything they previously thought they knew, bringing them out of human nature and into the human mind. Stein is deeply interested in detective stories because she says, "I never know ever how they are going to happen" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 41). Within the human mind, you are able to explore and detect every little detail without constraints or limitations, or any interest in any particular solution.

The corpse and mystery enter into *Everybody's Autobiography* when Stein recalls a phone call she had with George Lyon about a dead woman. The back-and-forth conversation seems to not offer much to the situation, meaning no answer to who she was or how she died, just the man on the phone telling Stein to come see the body. After the phone call, Bernard Fay and Stein go see the corpse, where they learn some details of the woman's death. From here, the mystery blooms. They are unaware if the woman intended to kill herself or if she was murdered: " …I said but if she intended to kill herself she should have done it on the boat coming over and not waited until when she did do it it was most inconsiderate of her" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 85). Claiming this woman to be "inconsiderate" for not having killed herself on the boat, which would make things easier on her, is funny in a dark way. This "suicide" is also comically impossible because it involves two shots to the head. It is this mystery that brings her out of that block: "It never bothered us any more but every time I want to write I want to write about what happened to her" (85). Yet, she continues to confirm that they still do not know what happened to this Englishwoman. Stein's *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor* focuses on this story of the dead Englishwoman and was written before *Everybody's Autobiography*, even though it

was not published until Stein's death. Stein's desire to write about this mystery calls back to her belief of writing as thinking: she was not through thinking about this event and found that she could continue writing about it again and again, as she does in *Everybody's Autobiography*.

3. Identity

After the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and her new celebrity status, Stein reconsidered her theory of identity. She decided these two selves should not mix because "if the outside puts a value on you then all your inside gets to be outside" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 48). The "you" your little dog knows and the "you" the audience knows are cases where an external force identifies you. For Stein, these began to overwhelm her internal sense of identity. The idea of "your little dog" knowing you appears in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and carries through to *Everybody's Autobiography*. At first, the dog creates an external identity that forces you into a state of human nature because she connects the two: "I always write about dogs why not they are always with me and identity and that is always with me" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 211). Stein prefers entity and the human mind because she can enter into a different way of thinking about self "without the memory of yourself," allowing for movement of thought ("Master-Pieces" 147). Regardless of preference, externally-originated identity is inescapable. From the moment a person is born, they are assigned categorizing traits, which sum up to this external identity: family name, sex, religion, occupation, citizenship and endless more. Society calls for identity, and Stein realizes this, especially during this time in her life.

When considering Stein's in-depth discussion of identity in *Everybody's Autobiography*, her idea of identity differs from previous discussion in *Toklas*. Stein now viewed anything she

did before her fame as valuable because it had no utilitarian or commercial value according to society. Not many people paid to read her work, let alone place general significance on her work—other than her inner-circle of modernists. As Stein says, it is "funny about money" because of the drastic shift it caused in her identity. The "you" your dog knows now becomes its own separate entity and is put up against the you the public "does not pay for" (46). The self that the public "does pay for" holds no value to Stein. Now that her public is paying for her work, she is accumulating wealth through an identity. Placing a utilitarian commercial value on writing and identity strips both of the interest and possibilities of play, which is what led Stein to lose interest in her own writing and identity.

Another way to look at this loss of identity is through the difference of the inner self and the outer self. The inner self, or "inside," is composed of your entity and the part of you connected to the human mind. The outer self, or "outside me," is your social identity and the formation of you according to human nature (*Everybody's Autobiography* 132). These two are always connected in some way because it is still *you*, but now the outer self threatens to suppress the inner self. This is exactly what happened to her after publicity:

> The thing is like this, it is all the question of identity. It is all a question of the outside being outside and the inside being inside. As long as the outside does not put a value on you it remains outside but when it does put a value on you then it gets inside or rather if the outside puts a value on you then all your inside gets to be outside. (*Everybody's Autobiography* 48)

As long as the external forces that dictate identity do not mix with the internal self, Stein maintained a relatively carefree understanding of how she should think of herself. However, once those outside influences place value on identity rather than entity, the separation no longer

exists. Within the frame of *Toklas*' success, Stein's "outside" began to place value on her "inside," which led to writer's block. If her writing required access to the play of the human mind, human nature—the you that everybody knows—now interfered with her ability to play with the human mind and, in turn, writing.

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein's view of herself is clear and unwavering. She was many things: a partner to Toklas, a writer, a sister, an art-collector, a friend, a dog-owner, but, above all, a genius. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, the title remains, but the connotation changes. Genius was a crown of self-achievement, awarded to herself through Alice's voice repeatedly throughout her first autobiography. Stein previously reveled in angering reviewers because they still thought about her even though they claimed to hate her. She was not writing for anyone or worrying about what anyone thought of her. Instead, she writes for herself and strangers ("Master-Pieces" 148). When writing for strangers, you are not writing with anyone in mind because they are strangers; you do not know them. Yet, her faith in her writing came crumbling down with such questioning of identity. Instead of the public mainly criticizing her, she was now a beloved celebrity personality.

4. Pleasure and Playfulness

When considering Stein's playfulness in *Everybody's Autobiography*, an effective place to start is the title. Similar to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the title is a contradiction in itself. An autobiography of everyone is impossible. Stein acknowledges this aspect of hertitle a while into her work:

> …if this Everybody's Autobiography is to be the Autobiography of every one and it is not to be of any connection between any one and any one because now there is none. That is

> what makes detective stories such good reading, the man being dead he is not really in connection with any one. (*Everybody's Autobiography* 102)

On the one hand, she could be making fun of the writers creating autobiographies at the time. They write about themselves, yet Stein questions how this process is even possible. As she states, memory is unreliable. When you write about yourself, you "do not believe yourself, why should you, you know so well so very well that it is not yourself, it could not be yourself because you cannot remember" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 70). In fact, Stein believes the conventional idea of an autobiography as a narrative about the evolution of a singular, unique identity is impossible because identity is something you do, not a noun that you just are; specifically for Stein, it is something you do through writing. Stein likes detective stories because the main character whose identity is at the center of the story is dead, which allows readers to be interested in things beyond that character's identity.

With a title like "Everybody's Autobiography," Stein could also be showing how everyone reading an autobiography envisions a different identity for the subject of the autobiography. Different readers of an autobiography construct a multitude of different identities for the author, not the only truth that exists, because everyone reads differently. Each reading of her autobiography's title reveals how Stein playfully points out the impossibility of autobiography as a genre.

Besides the title, moments of playfulness appear through the darker humor of *Everybody's Autobiography*. For instance, her play with language—as in most of her work—emerges in different spots. One obvious example stands out format-wise:

STAND	TAKE	TO	TAKING
I	YOU	THROW	MY

In this visual presentation, she plays a word-game that doubles as a joke to those who ask how a writer like herself can become popular. Upon first reading, it seems like a senseless arrangement of words or an immensely cryptic poem in need of analysis. However, it should be understood as a game she invites her readers to play, involving the material and spatial arrangement of words on the page. Stein goes on to say, “I understand you undertake to overthrow my undertaking” (*Everybody's Autobiography* 126). The visual location of the words on the page and the sentence blends together to open itself up for play with the readers, allowing them to think and read in a new way. Thinking about or reading the arrangement of the words spatially resignifies what the sentence says—it requires a literal surface reading. For most critics of writing, staying at the surface tends to be difficult. Nonetheless, Stein encourages readers, in moments like this, to look at things differently and enjoy them. After presenting this visual, she goes on to sarcastically comment that her writing “is as clear as mud” (127). Her writing is in fact “clear as mud” because there is no deep, symbolic meaning beneath the surface, where literary meaning often lies. While this statement is true, her joking manner is still present through this writing as is elsewhere. Stein wants us to read differently, think differently, and genuinely enjoy the process of it.

Another moment of playfulness calls back to the dead Englishwoman. As serious as the situation is, Stein's treatment of it can be looked at through a lens of a dark irony. During her writer's block, she saw herself as a corpse, empty inside due to having no writing inside herself. However, when she is introduced to this corpse, she is animated again and brought back to life. As stated before, this was the moment where she broke from her writer's block because this excited her. A corpse interested her enough to begin writing again.

Before and after her writer's block, Stein found solace in the genre of mystery because it invites the human mind to play. In traditional novels, the writing relies on the understanding of a problem or conflict being presented and—as the novel progresses—all the questions about said problem being answered. Most readers want what Charles Rzepka's *Detective Fiction* calls a "desire for the end" (25). People tend to want the normal chronological beginning, middle and end, as well as the sense of closure in a literary work. However, mystery functions differently for readers. Mystery presents an ongoing problem the reader needs to solve through their thinking or detecting. That is what Stein feels in the power of the mystery genre: Everything happens in the present time, forcing readers to pay attention to every part of the novel. This power was a catalyst for Stein to begin writing again with *Everybody's Autobiography*. Her pleasure for mystery stands in her pleasure of detection. She revels in the prolonged action of solving the mystery, but she does not want it actually solved. Once a problem is solved, she loses interest because "it is the detection that holds the interest" ("Master-Pieces" 149). The interest comes through the detection, enabling the human mind rather than human nature. Mysteries, problems, questions without answers allow the human mind to engage in a continuous and free form of thinking or writing about the world—which is what Stein is interested in.

In "What Are Master-Pieces," she connects this to her idea of master-pieces: "It is another one of the curious difficulties a masterpiece has that is to begin and end, because actually a master-piece does not do that it does not begin and end if it did it would be of necessity and in relation and that is just what a master-piece is not" (149). When there is an ending, solution, or answer, Stein is no longer interested because that means it no longer requires thinking—and by extension writing. Stein mentions this again in *Everybody's Autobiography*:

> To me when a thing is really interesting it is when there is no question and no answer, if there is then already the subject is not interesting it is so, that is the reason that anything for which there is a solution is not interesting. (219-20)

Later in her work, she mentions this idea again in relation to the summer of the dead Englishwoman. She states how every time she goes to write, she wants to write about what happened to the Englishwoman because "there is no use in not forgetting what you know and we do not know what happened to her" (85). Since she does not know what happened, the event continues to interest her; it still requires thinking, writing, and detecting. This moment is an example of how Stein finds pleasure in mystery and how it brought her out of writer's block since it allows for the human mind to play. She could find no answer to the mystery, allowing her thoughts to continue to run rampant on this event. She finds no interest in the lack-luster form of writing a beginning, middle, and end in a chronological format. Instead, she is interested in a mystery with no end. When questions continue to wander, the human mind can do its thing. If the end appears, there is no longer a point in thinking or writing on it.

All things considered, Stein believes mystery to be a parallel genre to autobiography—at least true autobiography. Mystery frees the human mind and presents a world where everything is worth thinking about because nothing is solved and poses a problem (usually a murder) that calls for continuous thinking. Autobiography presents a problem (identity) that also requires constant movement of thought:

> it was a description and a creation of something that having happened was in a way happening not again but as it had been which is history which is newspaper which is illustration but is not a simple narrative of what is happening not as if it had happened not

> as if it is happening but as if it is existing simply that thing. (*Everybody's Autobiography* 312)

To Stein, autobiography is not an account of what happened in the past; in that form, autobiography cannot be true because of an unreliable memory; even if memory were reliable, it would only be a report of things that happened in the past. Instead, autobiography is simply "existing" as itself without an ending or solution. True autobiography for Stein allows for the space to do so because there is no solution, placing it under the category of mystery. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, she states that identity is "always with me," which indicates both that she cannot escape and that it is like a constant companion but not somehow truly her (213). Since she cannot avoid it, why not write about it? Identity then becomes the problem that calls for continuous thinking and detection, thus blending the genres of mystery and autobiography.

Due to Stein's take on these genres, one could consider *Everybody's Autobiography* as detective fiction, working through the problem of identity under the semblance of an autobiography. However, this work of detection offers no solution; the mystery of identity is the solution because the kind of identity that Stein values happens in the process of thinking, detecting, and writing. The last line of *Everybody's Autobiography* proves Stein's non-solution as a solution: "perhaps I am not I even if my little dog knows me but anyway I like what I have and now it is today" (328). Here, she confirms that identity is not something solid and concrete, rather something that is in constant movement and change. The concept about the dog appears again, but in a negative way. First, Stein theorized that she was her because her little dog knew her; now, she thinks identity extends beyond this. She now realizes that identity is not just recognition from others or an internal understanding of self. Rather, it is a mystery involving the movement between human nature and the human mind—the outside and the inside. Identity is

constantly changing and being created in a present with no end in sight. Stein also finds herself relieved when she states she likes what she already has. By ending her work in such a way, Stein comes to terms and finds pleasure in the fact that identity will never be solved—but remains a mystery she is quite interested in.

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 lenses. In many ways, Stein's writing in the two texts I've analyzed 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 texts are a type of writing and thinking that Stein associates with what she calls the "human mind": a way of writing and thinking free of the habits and pragmatism that limit 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 Caillois 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 Bilignin, 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 also to 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.

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