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Tyler Moore

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THE FACE OF GERTRUDE STEIN

by

Tyler Moore

I first read Gertrude Stein when I was sixteen years old.

She was one of the Modernists, a group of writers who sought to revolutionize the functions of grammar and prose, and a bunch of whom all moved to Paris and ended up knowing each other. My American Literature class and I studied their capstones: Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow." I was mind-blown. These masterworks taught me that good literature can enchant and entertain in the same way that good movies do.

Then we read Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. And I did not like it. I thought it was a dumb book and that Stein must have just been a historical accident, who only got studied because she had powerful friends. I quickly dismissed her as just another of the "crazy modernist lesbians." (I am sorry to say that in high school I was not very nice.)

But Gertrude Stein kept coming back. The more I learned about Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Pound, the more her influence on them kept getting emphasized. She read their books and helped

edit them. She probably edited *The Sun Also Rises*! Hemingway asked her to be his son's godmother!

So when my professor assigned *Tender Buttons* for last week's reading, I figured I might enjoy it this time around. But I was taken straight back to junior year when I got to this paragraph:

Book was there, it was there. Book was there. Stop it, stop it, it was a cleaner, a wet cleaner and it was not where it was wet, it was not high, it was directly placed back, not back again, back it was returned, it was needless, it put a bank, a bank when, a bank care.

(That paragraph is even more fun if you read it out loud.) Was I missing something? Did anyone else find this paragraph to be absolutely bananas? Were there people out there who would pay money for this kind of stuff? And even if there were, why are we studying it? Literature like this, though it often has critical and influential value, is simply not what I enjoy reading. I gravitate towards works of connection—ones where you feel like you're there with the author, having a conversation. Rather than that sense of synchronization, *Tender Buttons* gives me the feeling I'm being largely ignored.

Next to *Tender Buttons*, though, in our anthology, was a small biography of Stein, and a picture, taken by Man Ray in 1922. In it, Gertrude Stein sits on the right, next to a portrait painted by Pablo Picasso. Of herself.

A lot of cool things converge in the picture. First, the obvious joke: Gertrude Stein is in a picture with herself. Because the image on the left is a painting, it seems like it should just be part of the backdrop of the photograph. But Stein is her own background, and

Ray has positioned them to sit *facing* each other, as though they have just stopped a conversation with themselves in order to look at the camera.

Then there's the comment on the artistic moment. Picasso experimented with cubism and surrealism, which attempted to paint the heart of the thing, not necessarily how it appeared visually. His vision of Stein has an unnaturally geometric, oval head, and her eyes are two different sizes. Her face is lean and young, while Stein's is full and weathered. But regardless of those differences, the resemblance between both Gertrudes is spot-on. The painted work sustains all of Stein's dignity: her tightly-kept hair, her round, inviting back, and her soft, quiet hands. When people complained to Picasso that Stein did not look like her portrait, he responded, "She will."

Still, though, something about the photograph is inexplicable. How did Stein feel when she got to see her own portrait? What thoughts ran through her head while Ray took this picture? She got to see herself as the Modernists saw her, and that floors me with jealousy. What would I have looked like to a Cubist? How would Picasso have painted me? What would Hemingway have thought of my notes?

You can picture them all standing there, behind the lens of the camera—Fitzgerald and Pound and Matisse and Hemingway and all of them—watching and smiling. The face of the painted Stein is curious and sly, like she knows the joke that's going on but doesn't want to talk about it. But the real Stein has a face of gravity. She knows the joke too, and she knows how important her group is. She knows what Hemingway's next book is going to be

Inscape

about, and she knows the world of World War I. She knows that her book is crazy. She knows the artist's burden, to create good art in the shadow of her predecessors. She knows what Hawthorne and Emerson and Rachmaninoff and Cervantes and Caravaggio and Shakespeare and Chaucer and Moses all knew. She knows Picasso. She knows what's next.