Melanctha Study Guide

Melanctha by Gertrude Stein

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" has been a landmark of literary modernism since its first printing. The author broke radically new ground with both her subject matter and style. She focused on emotional process almost to the exclusion of action and other conventional plot structures, and she chose to people her story with black characters at a time when other white writers wouldn't do so and when few black writers had the opportunity to publish. Furthermore, Stein's central character—Melanctha—was sexually liberated and assertive at a time when Victorian values still dominated women's lives.

First published in 1909 as one of the three novellas that comprise Stein's *Three Lives*, "Melanctha" is an experimental story that chronicles the life of a highly intelligent, emotionally complex mulatto woman. The basis of Stein's story arises from Melanctha's emotional conflicts, for which the author never provides a direct cause: Melanctha wanders through life, always in search of something—some knowledge, some experience—she can never wholly acquire. At a time when women were expected to choose conventional and safe paths—marriage, children, middle-class life, if possible—Melanctha is a kind of rebel because her undefinable questing suggests a woman's desire for more, though more what, the author never says. The central relationship of the story, Melanctha's love affair with the young doctor, Jefferson Campbell, also wanders aimlessly, despite Jeff's solidly middle-class aspirations. Telling their story, the narrator highlights the emotional process of their efforts to know and communicate with one another, rather than the progress of their relationship toward some socially-sanctioned goal.

In order to capture her subject matter—the reality of emotional life that may go on unseen beneath the surface—Stein began to experiment with new ways to use words and sentences, developing an essentially new aesthetic, or way of portraying the world through art. Consequently, the reader tackling "Melanctha" is confronted with dense language: thick repetition, grammatically incorrect sentences, a limited and often vague diction—a language designed not so much to explain the characters' emotions as to evoke the immediacy of emotion.

Author Biography

Born on February 3, 1874, in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, Gertrude Stein was the youngest child of upper-middle-class, Jewish-American parents. After her birth, the family traveled in Europe for several years before settling in Oakland, California. Stein was very close to her brother, Leo. The two remained virtually inseparable for several decades. When Leo went to Harvard in 1892, Stein enrolled in the all-female Harvard annex—soon to become Radcliffe College—the following year. Radcliffe, and especially psychology professor William James, became a shaping force in her intellectual development. Many of James's teachings, including his theories of perception and personality types, shaped her own aesthetic theories. With James's encouragement, Stein decided to become a psychologist. After finishing her bachelor's degree in 1897, she began her training in the medical program at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. In 1901, however, she left without completing her degree.

Reading—particularly literary classics—consumed more and more of Stein's time. Taking up the pen herself in 1903, she made her first attempt at writing a novel. This first effort, titled *Q.E.D.*, fictionalized Stein's recent romantic entanglement with a young woman named May Bookstaver. Stein cast herself as the rational Adele and Bookstaver as the passionate and ultimately unreliable Helen. Critics have generally viewed this work—published only after Stein's death—not as a manuscript intended for publication, but rather as a tool for coming to terms with the pain of that relationship. Its primary importance, in fact, appears to be as the model for "Melanctha," in which Stein/Adele became Jeff and Bookstaver/Helen became Melanctha.

Also in 1903, Stein chose her home: after travels in Europe and Africa, she and Leo settled in an apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus in Paris. There, they began to collect work by painters experimenting with new forms of visual representation—the revolution that would become known as modernism. Since many of these artists—including Pablo Picasso—were also their friends, the Steins became known in Paris for the salons, or social gatherings, they hosted regularly. Stein particularly enjoyed the company of Picasso, who in 1906 painted a portrait of her. Engaged with these artists and their goals, Stein began to pursue a similar course in her writing, sacrificing existing formal conventions in order to allow the reader to experience language and ideas in new ways. From 1905 to 1906, Stein applied her experimentation as she composed the manuscript of *Three Lives.* Leo, responding to his sister's work with scorn, caused her anxiety and self-doubt. In need of a more appreciative audience, Stein turned to her friend Alice Toklas, a young woman from California who was then staying in Paris. In 1909 Stein invited Toklas to live with her; the women developed an intimate relationship that Stein referred to as a marriage. They remained together for the rest of their lives. Toklas also supported Stein's literary career, helping her to prepare manuscripts and providing her with encouragement.

Stein's experimentation proved detrimental, at first, to her literary career. When she first submitted the highly unconventional stories in *Three Lives* to publishers, none considered publishing the unprecedented work. *Three Lives* finally reached print in

1909, when Stein financed the printing out of her own pocket. Her spirit was buoyed, however, by the praise of many distinguished friends, including art patron Mabel Dodge, critic Carl Van Vechten, and poet Edith Sitwell. Largely due to "Melanctha," *Three Lives* enjoyed an underground celebrity until, by the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Stein was regarded as a central figure in the modernist movement. That year, she composed one of her most abstract works, a collection of prose poems called *Tender Buttons.*

While many Americans left Europe to escape the war, Stein remained in Paris, winning commendation for her volunteer work as a medical supply driver and befriending many American servicemen. After the war, she became the friend and mentor of a new generation of American expatriate artists, foremost among them Ernest Hemingway. She encouraged his early attempts at writing fiction; he was instrumental in arranging for the publication of her 925-page, epic work, *The Making of Americans* (1925). Since Stein was, at this time, as well-known for her social circle as for her literary endeavors, she composed the memoir *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) at a publisher's urging. The least innovative of Stein's works, it was the first to find a mass audience, becoming a bestseller and catapulting her to international celebrity. She was inundated with requests for public appearances, one of the most successful of which was a series of lectures delivered at American universities in 1934. Comprising reflections on her own literary efforts and theories, these talks, published as *Lectures in America* and *Narration* in 1935, have become essential to readers and scholars.

During World War II, Stein and Toklas remained in Nazi-occupied France. Although both women were, as Jews, in danger of being sent to concentration camps, French friends who collaborated with the Nazis arranged for their protection. Stein maintained an active social and literary life until her death from cancer in 1946. In a famous anecdote from her autobiography, *What Is Remembered,* Toklas recalled a conversation she had with Stein just before her death: "She said to me early in the afternoon, What is the answer? I was silent. In that case, she said, what is the question?"

Plot Summary

"Melanctha" opens late in Melanctha's life, as she cares for her friend Rose Johnson during the birth of her baby. After informing us briefly that the baby dies, the narrator uses a number of flashbacks to show the development of the women's relationship and Melanctha's unhappy childhood. One flash-back culminates in a fight between Melanctha and her father, James Herbert, in which it is clear that Melanctha prevails over her father, an encounter that makes her aware of her power. In order to learn more about this capacity, Melanctha begins "wandering," the undefined activity that will characterize most of her life. "Wandering" consists primarily of loitering in the parts of Bridgepoint where she meets men—at first mostly manual laborers. While flirting with the men, Melanctha watches their work, listens to their stories, and observes her own effect on them. Although the story suggests a sexual energy in all of this, we are given the sense that she remains chaste during this time since her wandering is "really very safe." Overall, "wandering" appears to go beyond sexual knowledge to something broader.

Melanctha meets the young doctor Jefferson Campbell. In a brief flashback it becomes clear that Jeff had an idyllic childhood, with caring parents, in direct opposition to Melanctha's own youth. Because of their different backgrounds, Jeff and Melanctha disagree about what makes a good life; he extols a "quiet" and "regular" life, while she supports excitement and emotional experience. The squabble makes them closer, though, because Jeff is impressed with Melanctha's strength of mind. After they have confessed a growing fondness for each other, a second disagreement occurs: Jeff champions "thinking" above "feeling," while Melanctha blames an overload of thinking with impeding Jeff's ability to feel.

After Melanctha's mother dies, Jeff and Melanctha spend all of their spare time together. Although the narrator tells us that they are happy together, the story highlights Jeff's conflicted emotions: he cannot shake a mistrust of Melanctha. Sleepless and riddled with doubt, Jeff discovers that he has learned to "feel," and suffer, at least as deeply as Melanctha herself. With the overwhelming problems in her relationship with Jeff, Melanctha begins to wander again, gradually cutting back the time she spends with Jeff. After one failed meeting, Jeff breaks off the relationship entirely. One effort to resume the relationship follows, but little has changed. Melanctha, always surrounded by friends, makes it impossible for them to be alone together. Rose Johnson is primary among these friends. Unlike others, Rose appears to regard Melanctha with a kind of pity gathered from her impression of Melanctha's childhood. Melanctha tells Jeff she loves him as a brother, without "hot passion." They have a civil parting, after which Jeff goes to work for a while in another town.

Soon after this Melanctha meets Jem Richards, a gambler who lives well on his winnings. The two fall for one another quickly, and Jem proposes to Melanctha. Melanctha is, for the first time, very vocal about her relationship and about her expectations for the future, even to the point of being "foolish," according to Rose. That

foolishness peaks when Jem hits a streak of bad luck and forgets his proposal. When Melanctha presses Jem about their relationship, he backs away.

Rose's pregnancy provides some distraction for Melanctha. Nonetheless, the growing conflict with Jem preoccupies her, echoing in some ways her relationship with Jeff. Rose's baby is born in the midst of this trouble. The trouble with Jem depresses Melanctha to the point that she frequently tells Rose, who has become Melanctha's only mainstay, that she could kill herself. Simultaneously, however, Rose has become more critical of Melanctha, finally exploding in a harsh diatribe in which she bars Melanctha from her home. The break with Rose—utterly devastating to Melanctha—is soon followed by a similar rejection from Jem. The narrator provides the rest of Melanctha's life in a brief sketch, telling us that she falls ill and dies in "a home for poor consumptives."

Characters

Jefferson Campbell

At the center of the story, the narrative focus shifts from Melanctha's life to the feelings and experience of Jeff Campbell, the young doctor whose relationship with Melanctha occupies the bulk of the story. Initially, Jeff embodies the values at the opposite extreme from those of Melanctha: he believes in a world of clear-cut good and bad, he has well-defined goals, and he extols traditional and staid family life. He is also, however, the one who changes the most profoundly in the story, exchanging that starting point for a realization of the importance of uncritical emotion and experience. In his relationship with Melanctha, he goes through an excruciating period of loss and discovery, mostly losing his original sense of certainty as he realizes that he cannot know, or even clearly communicate with, the woman he loves. He is also the only unequivocally compassionate character in the story—typically described as "good and strong and gentle and very intellectual." Most critics have recognized Jeff as a character that Stein based on herself.

Father

See James Herbert

Jane Harden

Melanctha's good friend and mentor in her teenage years, Jane Harden is intelligent and strong, but also alcoholic. Because she is very experienced, Jane teaches Melanctha a great deal about "wandering" and interacting with men. There is also a hint of sexuality in their relationship with one another. Jane's criticism of Melanctha after their friendship ends leads to Jeff and Melanctha's first rift.

James Herbert

James Herbert, Melanctha's father, is generally absent from their home, returning mostly when he is angry with his daughter. Despite their conflicts, the narrator identifies him as the source of Melanctha's "power." This power is somehow related to race, as implied in the description of him as Melanctha's "robust and unpleasant and very unendurable black father."

Melanctha Herbert

Melanctha Herbert is the central character of the story which chronicles the basic events and emotional states that she experiences. As Jeff Camp-bell remarks, Melanctha

appears to have two "sides." We see her at first as Melanctha the caretaker: "patient, submissive, soothing, and untiring," a role she plays in relation to both Rose Johnson and her mother. But she is an unconvincing caretaker, as we learn in her relationship with her mother, since her care seems unmotivated by love. She has, nonetheless, a profound "sweetness" that draws people to her. Her other side is much more enigmatic, both to the other characters and to the reader, due to the narrator's persistent vagueness. She is "complex" and "subtle" and spends most of her life "wandering" in search of some kind of "wisdom" or "knowledge." "Wandering" refers to Melanctha's efforts to satisfy a persistently unnamed desire that at times evokes sexuality, at times evokes the need for freedom and emotional growth, at times the desire to be taken care of and comforted. She displays signs of depression, most explicitly in a persistent despair and the frequent threat of suicide. The narrator provides some sense that Melanctha's emotional intensity might result from her nature—identified as the "power" of her father's character and the "complexity" of her mother's—or from her childhood in an unloving home. The mystery about her character has allowed readers to view her in many different ways; literary critics, for example, have seen her as a victim, a rebel, and a personification of certain psychological theories.

Melanctha's mother, Mis Herbert, is described as complex, difficult to understand, and "sweet-appearing"—traits she shares with her daughter. Despite that similarity, she shows little love for Melanctha; the narrator occasionally hints that this may have contributed to Melanctha's general unhappiness. Nonetheless, Melanctha tends Mis Herbert on her deathbed, a process that cements Melanctha's relationship with Jeff Campbell.

Jeff

See Jefferson Campbell

Jeff's father

Unlike Melanctha's father, Jeff's father is ideally supportive and responsible. Having earned his living as a butler for the white Campbell family, he and his wife represent the kind of "quiet" and "regular" life Jeff values.

Jeff's mother

Unlike Melanctha's mother, Jeff's mother is ideally supportive and affectionate. Beyond her introduction in the story, she appears only once more—when the narrator comments that Jeff was not comfortable telling her about his relationship with Melanctha.

John

An older, married man, John seems to be Melanctha's only friend in her early adolescence. As the coachman for a local family, he works with horses, which Melanctha finds compelling. Unlike Melanctha's father, John is gentle, respectful, and affectionate.

Rose Johnson

Melanctha's last close female friend, Rose John-son becomes Melanctha's only security. Her rejection of Melanctha towards the end of the story seems to precipitate the ill-fortune and ill-health that culminate in Melanctha's death. The story opens with the birth and death of Rose's baby, moves back in time, and then returns to this point at the end; consequently, Rose acts as a "framing" narrative for the story. The narrator describes Rose according to stereotypes of African-American characters: "sullen, childish, cowardly, black Rose . . . like a simple beast." While Melanctha experiences a great deal of doubt and an apparently hopeless "yearning," Rose always seems quite certain in her knowledge of what she wants and of what is right— she seems to feel very little self-doubt or anguish. This difference apparently allows for the power dynamic in their relationship, in which the "cowardly" Rose dominates the "strong" Melanctha. Rose consistently congratulates herself for being so generous with Melanctha, while the narrator consistently wonders why someone with Melanctha's intelligence and subtlety would "degrade" herself to care for someone as coarse as Rose.

Mother

See Mis Herbert

Jem Richards

Jem Richards is the gambler to whom Melanctha becomes engaged after her relationship with Jeff ends. The affair apparently sours when Jem's luck turns bad and Melanctha fails to respect his consequent need not to be pressured. Like Rose Johnson, Jem is one of the few characters who feels sure of himself and the world, untroubled by emotional confusion; the narrator remarks that Jem "always had known what it was to have real wisdom."

Themes

Doubt and Ambiguity

Doubt and ambiguity first appear in "Melanctha" in the guise of a suggested gap between appearance and reality: Melanctha and her mother are both "sweet-appearing," but apparently not sweet in a simple sense. The issue of false appearances comes to its peak with Jeff's fear that Melanctha is somehow deceiving him about herself or her feelings. Ultimately, however, the simple opposition between appearance and reality gives way to some more complicated suggestions about reality—in particular, that it is difficult or even impossible to know, especially over time, what is "real." Jeff's concern that Melanctha is deliberately deceiving him becomes overshadowed by his preoccupation with his inability to know her and her feelings. Even his own thoughts are, at times, uncertain to him. Consequently, Jeff learns to live with doubt and ambiguity. Conversely, those characters who never feel doubt—Rose Johnson and Jem Richards—hurt Melanctha the most and receive the least respect from the narrator. This apparently positive view of doubt and ambiguity may be related to the aesthetics that Stein was developing while working on "Melanctha" —an aesthetic system that, like the ideas of the painters she associated with, emphasized the significance and value of a reality that cannot be seen. Consequently, Stein's experiments with style confront the reader with a good deal of ambiguity, especially in vague and abstract language that keeps concrete knowledge always just out of reach. Many of the terms most central to the story and to our understanding of Melanctha are the most persistently vague: wisdom, knowledge, wandering, wanting. The reader, like Jeff, must learn to live with ambiguity.

Courage and Cowardice

Courage and cowardice, as well as strength and weakness, all arise in "Melanctha" in the characters and their relationships with one another. All four traits are exhibited in the personalities Stein presents. Generally, courage is associated with Melanctha, cowardice with Rose Johnson, strength with Melanctha, Jane, and Jeff, and weakness with Rose and, at times, Melanctha. Like so many central concepts in the story, however, they remain evasive, never put into concrete terms by the narrator. The ambiguity and centrality of courage and cowardice are highlighted in one of Jeff and Melanctha's arguments. Disagreeing about what constitutes courage, they leave it unresolved: is it stoicism, daring, or endurance?

Freedom

Especially in its depiction of Melanctha as she defies gender roles, the story engages with the idea of freedom from convention and from social structures. Freedom from structure operates in form and content at once, since both Melanctha and the narrative

"wander." Oddly, however, as critics have pointed out, freedom as a concept in relation to African-American liberation is quite absent.

Growth and Development

Technically, "Melanctha" is a bildungsroman—the story of one person's growth and development. As with any bildungsroman, we watch Melanctha grow through a series of pivotal, shaping experiences, such as her conflicts with her father and her friendship with Jane Harden. Her adolescence, which receives more attention than her childhood, is characterized by a kind of questing—for knowledge, wisdom, and experience—that gradually contributes to her growing sense of power, which may comprise her sense of self. The growth, however, becomes strangely forestalled in the middle of her story, at about the time she becomes involved with Jeff Campbell. At this point, she is revealed as a character who lives in a "prolonged present" or continuous "now" of emotion, so that in a sense growth becomes meaningless. While Melanctha becomes timeless, however, Jeff's development dominates the story, as he discovers his own emotional intensity.

Love and passion

Many readers have identified "Melanctha" as essentially a love story, albeit a highly unconventional one. The love affair between Jeff and Melanctha obviously consumes the lion's share of the narrative, confronting the reader with an exhaustive, painstaking examination of romantic feelings, including love, desire, jealousy, rejection, and loss. Jeff's feelings, in particular, become the material for this depiction as his every thought and shift in emotion appears in detail. On a broader scale, the story is a love story in its emphasis of emotion over thought, especially desire in the absence of moral judgement. Stein went dramatically against current values not only by presenting a sexually liberated female protagonist, but also because Stein's narrator never condemns Melanctha's sexual behavior.

Time

According to William James, the psychologist with whom Stein studied at Radcliffe, an individual perceives the world not in discrete temporal segments of past, present, and future, but as a continuous awareness of the moment being presently lived. In her long, static narratives, Stein sought to evoke this atemporal sense of a continuous present. She achieved this effect with a variety of stylistic techniques, including a disruption of the traditionally linear narrative and the heavy use of words that denote timelessness (now, always) and present participles. She also addressed time directly in the content of "Melanctha," particularly when memory—usually referred to as "remembering"—becomes a point of conflict between Jeff and Melanctha.

Style

Modernism

When Gertrude Stein composed "Melanctha" in 1905, the twentieth-century upheaval in literature known as modernism was only just beginning. Most of the other major modernist works would come in the years to follow: James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses,* Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,* T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," Jean Toomer's *Cane,* and D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love.* Literary critics, looking back over the beginning of the century, have tended to define modernism according to certain themes, such as alienation, and/or stylistic techniques employed in many of these works. While Stein's style differed from Joyce's and Woolf's, she nevertheless defied many of the same conventions, like making her text much more difficult for a reader used to the clear and supposedly transparent prose of nineteenth-century fiction.

Narrator

Just as "Melanctha" does not follow a course of events clearly from beginning to end, the story does not establish an identifiable and consistent point of view. As in any fiction, there is a narrator, in this case third-person because it is not one of the characters. This narrator practices free, indirect discourse—that is, the ability to relate a character's thoughts without quoting—but not in the clear-cut way that would be typical of most nineteenth-century authors. Rather, the reader may discover at certain points that, for a paragraph or so, one of the characters has "taken over" the narrative voice: the point of view has shifted to show, for example, Jeff Campbell's or Jane Harden's perspective. Their thoughts blend with the narrative voice, creating interior monologues. In "Melanctha" this effect compromises the narrator's omniscience—the capacity to be all-knowing that defines a third-person voice. Unable to immediately and concretely expose causes and reasons to us, unable to demonstrate complete knowledge of the characters, the narrator appears to be caught in the same ambiguity that plagues the main characters.

Structure

"Melanctha" begins, as do many famous pieces of literature, *in medias res,* or in the middle of things; "Melanctha," however, not only begins *in medias res,* it then moves backward in time to our protagonist's childhood, catches up to the beginning again, and moves on to Melanctha's death. This unusual structure eschews the traditional, straightforward chronology of fiction. Consequently, the sense of time becomes confused, jumbled, and variously expanded and contracted. Stein's structural oddities in this regard contribute to her effort, also evident in sentence structure, to create a sense of "prolonged present." According to Wil-liam James, the psychologist with whom Stein

studied at Radcliffe, the individual perceives the world not in discrete temporal segments of past, present, and future, but as a continuous awareness of the moment being presently lived. Essentially, even though the narrator tells the story in the past tense, the sense of "now" always overwhelms the conventional notions of past and future. Toward this same end, Stein makes heavy use of words that denote immediacy—now, always—as well as present participles, which are verbs in the present tense, or "-ing" form.

Writing Style

Stein does a great deal with her sentences that may challenge—and even anger—readers used to fiction that uses clear, direct, and grammatically correct language. In "Melanctha," her primary experimental technique is repetition, which she employs in both narrative structure and sentence structure. Repetition in the sentences has many effects on the reader's experience, especially when combined with her use of a very limited vocabulary. A series of highly abstract words—"wisdom," "wanting," "knowledge"—and the simple colloquialisms that Stein used to suggest black dialect make up the full texture of her story. Stein's tightly constrained word choice, repeated heavily throughout, suggests the inadequacy of language. Even the most educated character in the story, Jeff Campbell, struggles with his inability to express himself—with the inability of language to capture the depth and complexity of his thoughts and emotions.

Despite her own extensive education and broad vocabulary, Stein similarly curtails her narrator's voice. Consequently, a few words, repeated in variations, are forced to carry the story's many layers of meaning. Stein's purpose for this complex weaving of words, as she later explained in an essay called "Composition as Explanation," was to demonstrate how meaning changes according to combination or "relation." That is, one word will change in its meaning depending on changes in the words it stands among. By this device, the inadequacy of language is overcome, and words are once again rich with meaning anyway. Used as a formula, this idea of relativity also applies to people: a person will change with his or her context, much as Melanctha behaves differently in relation to Jeff than she does in relation to Jem.

Finally, the repetitions and the overall difficulty of Stein's sentences force the reader to experience the words as words, the sentences as sentences, thus reminding him or her that this is a book. Stein, like the modernist painters she admired, wanted to move past the late nineteenth-century form of realism, which allowed the audience to focus on the story or scene depicted and to forget that someone was making an image of this thing. In similar experiments, earlier twentieth-century artists wanted to remind their audiences that they were looking at paintings or reading words, thus reminding them that the "realism" they trusted was in fact an illusion.

Historical Context

Stein saw herself as spanning the two centuries in which she lived; she felt ties to the values, often conflicting, that characterized both periods. That split also appears in "Melanctha" in the initial conflict between the "quiet" and "regular" life Jeff extols and Melanctha's passion for unjudged, aimless experience. To summarize the centuries in basic formulas—as many of Stein's peers did—one could place Victorian morality against twentieth-century rebellion. Where the nineteenth century valued social propriety and tradition, the twentieth declared as its motto, "make it new." Where the nineteenth century depended on such certainties as religious faith and a rational social order, the twentieth began by embracing many discoveries and ideas that the Victorians had found threatening. Charles Darwin's thesis about evolution, put forth in *Origin of the Species,* for example, challenged Victorians' assumptions about Godly design and the significance of human life. Political ideas that developed throughout the nineteenth century—including Marx-ism and anarchism—caused rebellions in the twentieth century that left no certainty about social order and who had the right to rule. Ideas about the proper roles of the sexes and races began to break down in the nineteenth century, leaving room for such movements as the Harlem Renaissance and women's suffrage, as well as the virulent racist backlashes manifested in eugenics, a scientific theory that tied behavior to physiology and race, and Nazism.

All of these broad cultural forces have their presence in "Melanctha." Traditional Victorian morality, with its noble and active heroes, appears only briefly in "Melanctha," diminished beside the image of a life without purpose or judgement, moral or message. Not only did Stein's radical experiments with style challenge the conventions of nineteenth-century fiction, but her aesthetics specifical-ly challenged assumed hierarchies: by eliminating foreground and background, normal distinctions of importance, Stein created—in her own phrase—a "democracy" of words. Furthermore, her unprecedented choice to portray supposedly universal human emotions through African-American characters reflected the gradually growing political and social presence of American blacks, despite her reduction of these characters to racial stereotypes borrowed from eugenics.

Of the many changes that bridged the two centuries, probably the most relevant to "Melanctha" were in psychology and the visual arts, both of which Stein knew well. Many critics have documented at length the story's debt to William James, a psychologist with whom Stein studied when she was at Radcliffe. Two features of James's ideas are particularly salient to "Melanctha": his theories of human nature and his theories of perception. Essentially, James argued that all individuals encounter the world in an unmediated rush of perception stimuli—a "stream of consciousness." All of this information would, however, make for chaos in the mind, so a selection goes on that codes the incoming information as important, for foreground use, or irrelevant, to be relegated to the background. The extent to which and how one sifts impressions varies mostly according to where one fits on the spectrum of personality types, ranging from the most passionate to the most logical. In his own moral perspective, James favored the logical, heroic type. In some ways, however, Stein's story also reflects James's

younger colleague, Sigmund Freud, whose theories revolutionized psychology in the twentieth century. Where James emphasized logic, the deliberate ordering of that stream of consciousness, Freud emphasized the irrational. Freud, unlike James, argued that desire underlies all human behavior, and that every individual's interior life is rich with emotion, much of it socially unacceptable and therefore difficult to acknowledge.

Freud's theories of psychology described an individual whose interior life—full of repressed passions that defied social propriety—hid beneath a surface that still obeyed social laws. In this sense, he contributed to a growing belief that outward appearances did not correspond to "reality" or "truth." This belief revealed itself among the painters in the early twentieth century—the same painters whom Stein befriended and found her inspiration in. The nineteenth-century idea of "realism" in art had depended on verisimilitude: the exact copying, visually or in literature, of how something looked. This world, logical and accessible, was supposed to constitute reality. The avant-garde painters, however, no longer trusted verisimilitude. Believing that reality was something beneath the surface, something possibly alogical and changed according to the viewer's perspective, they attempted to create a new realism.

Critical Overview

Stein had her own doubts about the readability of *Three Lives*; she understood that its style would upset readers' expectations and that the simplicity of the characters might make them of little interest to more sophisticated readers. When she was unable to find a publisher, she finally funded the printing of the book herself, paying for a relatively small run. As she expected, few copies sold—fewer than she gave away to friends and reviewers—but the book, and especially "Melanctha," did find an enthusiastic audience. Praise came from many important papers and journals, and contemporaries whose opinions Stein admired, such as Carl Van Vechten and Mabel Dodge, also embraced her efforts. Rather than lapsing into obscurity, "Melanctha" started on a path to landmark status. By the late 1920s, "Melanctha" was already something of modernist classic. In 1933, the book no publisher would publish became a classic of modern literature.

"Melanctha" has also become an object of scholarly study over the decades. The critical responses tend to cluster around certain issues or concerns, determined mostly by the story's unconventionality. Much of the commentary on Stein from 1910 through the 1950s is evaluative rather than interpretive, either arguing her merits, as does Carl Van Vechten, or deriding her, as does Wyndham Lewis, another modernist artist. For Stein's detractors, the superficially simple, almost childish language of the story made easy prey: they could argue that her aesthetics stemmed not from artistic insight, but rather from ineptitude. Consequently, most of the early studies of Stein, even when positive, still regarded her writing in relation to her psychology. Richard Bridgman, for example, albeit an admirer of Stein, nonetheless suggested that "Melanctha" was the product of emotional difficulties rather than artistic purpose.

Later twentieth-century criticism, however, regards the unusual form of "Melanctha" as its author's deliberate experiments with representation. Many critics have looked at it as her effort to work out an aesthetic based on the psychological theories of her mentor at Radcliffe, professor William James. Michael J. Hoffman and Donald Sutherland both pioneered this effort; Lisa Ruddick has recently revised it. Other critics have emphasized Stein's desire to take part in the artistic revolution that was taking place around her in Paris—as Pablo Picasso painted her portrait in the radically unconventional techniques of cubism, Stein composed "Melanctha." According to these critics—including Randa Dubnick, Jayne L. Walker, and Hoff-man—Stein sought to achieve the same unprecedented "realism" in literature that painters like Picasso pursued on canvas.

There has also been a lengthy critical tradition of examining the social issues that surface in "Melanctha," most notably Stein's treatment of African-American characters and Melanctha's femaleness. Carl Van Vechten initiated the study of race with his 1933 preface to *Three Lives.* Although some critics, including novelist Richard Wright, have praised Stein's depiction of black Americans, many more have detected a persistent racism in the stereotypes she employs. Milton A. Cohen provides an extensive discussion; Ruddick also touches on the issue. Just as risky as Stein's choice of making her protagonist black was her choice to make Melanctha a woman untroubled by moral

judgement, especially about her sexuality. Melanctha's freedom, as well as the difficult life from which her emotional complexity arises, has made her a natural subject for feminist scholarship. Marianne DeKoven, in 1983, identified Melanctha as a kind of proto-feminist, a female rebel against oppressive propriety. Ruddick, focusing on the violence of Melanctha's father, interprets her as a victim of patriarchal culture.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Le Blanc is an editor and writer who has taught at the University of Michigan. In the following essay, she focuses on Stein's innovative style and subject matter in the story, and upon Stein's treatment of emotion and time.

At least since Carl Van Vechten's preface to the 1933 edition of *Three Lives*, critics have claimed "Melanctha" as a trailblazing text in its use of African-American characters. Gertrude Stein was undeniably unorthodox, among white writers, in her decision to set "Melanctha" in a black community, using only black characters. Previous to this, non-white characters usually appeared in fiction as marginal actors, such as servants. As progressive as Stein's selection of an African-American setting was in the early twentieth century, her language still carries obvious and marked racism. Her descriptions of the characters, in particular, betray her prejudices: Rose Johnson has "the simple, promiscuous unmorality of the black people"; several characters are identified by their proximity to "the wide abandoned laughter that gives the broad glow to negro sunshine." As Martin A. Cohen has demonstrated at length, in Stein's effort to make use of William James's theories of basic personality types, she assumes connections among racial heritage, skin color, and supposedly inborn character traits. In her description of Jane Harden, for example, Stein writes, "she had much white blood and that made her see clear, she liked drinking and that made her reckless. Her white blood was strong in her and she had grit and endurance and a vital courage."

Rather than condemn or celebrate Stein for her use of black characters, critics have often found it more instructive to ask why she made this choice. As several critics, including Donald Sutherland, have noted, an early twentieth-century assumption that people of color were more "natural" facilitated Stein's desire to suggest the universality of the experiences she was portraying. Regarding Melanctha in particular, this belief supplemented Stein's depiction of her as the least artificial in her processes of perception and in her morality. Stein's idea of black dialect—albeit largely inaccurate—also lent itself neatly to her purposes as an artist. Believing that rhythm, rather than syntax, dictated expression in black speech patterns, Stein could see it as also more natural than the language typically employed in novels. One champion of Stein's in this regard was the African-American novelist Richard Wright, who read the story out loud to an enthusiastic audience of black workingmen.

Another answer to this question about Stein's selection depends on the story's roots in Stein's earliest attempt at a novel, *Q.E.D.*, which was based on Stein's relationship with May Bookstaver. Since the subject of *Q.E.D.*, a sexual liaison between two women, made it unpublishable, the work went unseen until after Stein's death. She did publish other works that treated or drew on her homosexual desire, but these works, like the poem "Lifing Belly," were so cryptic that most readers would not recognize the subject matter. *Q.E.D.*, however, had been quite direct in its treatment. Most critics have taken for granted, therefore, that the strong similarities between *Q.E.D.* and "Melanctha" argue the latter as Stein's encoded portrayal of her lesbian relationship. There is a certain logic, then, in her choice of black characters to stand in for the lesbian

characters in *Q.E.D.* Like Stein and Bookstaver, Jeff and Melanctha stand at the edges of mainstream society. Further, because racial stereotypes in Stein's culture allowed her to view black Americans as more sexually free, she could recast her lesbian desires as the promiscuity of Melanctha's wandering.

The possibility that Jeff and Melanctha re-enact events and feelings from Stein's own life has suggested to critics the importance of "Melanctha" as a psychological self-portrait. The story obviously highlights emotion—at points, in painstaking detail—above events, cause-and-effect, and the other conventions of fiction. Instead, Stein dwells on the layers, vicissitudes, and uncertainties of interior life. Jeff's experiences demonstrate this theme at great length. When the reader first meets Jeff, he sees life simply and with a great deal of certainty: he "believed you ought to love your father and your mother and to be regular in all your life, . . . and to always know where you were, and what you wanted, and to always tell everything just as you meant it." As his feelings for Melanctha grow, however, and as he becomes more in touch with his emotional life, his sense of certainty diminishes: "Then he knew he really could know nothing. He knew then, he never could know what it was she really wanted with him. He knew then he never could know really what it was he felt inside him." Similarly, he discovers his inability to know and communicate with Melanctha, demonstrating, in Sutherland's words, "an incoherence between two subjectivities." In place of the traditional notions of truth and reality, Jeff and the reader come to depend on the "wisdom" of emotional experience.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from Jeff the reader finds Rose, who never doubts herself: "Rose was selfish and was stupid and was lazy, but she was decent and knew always what was the right way she should do, and what she wanted." Jem, also, has little experience of doubt: the world and his own needs are apparently quite transparent to him. Tellingly, these are the characters who most hurt Melanctha and whom the narrator portrays as the least complex and the least compelling.

Stein conveys the "emotional wisdom" that Jeff learns through style as well as content. Stein's centrality as a modernist writer stems from her stylistic innovations, from her efforts to rework narrative structure and sentences in order to represent the world in new ways, thus possibly portraying a reality not accessible to conventional forms. Paramount among these in "Melanctha" is the "prolonged present" she defines in her essay "Composition as Explanation": "a constant recurring and beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of being in the present although naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future, and why, because the composition forming around me was a prolonged present." The idea for a prolonged present originated in the theories of William James, particularly in his idea of a human perception, which also stressed the "stream of consciousness" that Stein employs. In a sense, this rush of sensual perception and emotional experience is the reality in which Jeff learns to live and in which Melanctha seems naturally to exist. The prolonged present exchanges conventional notions of past and future, as well as causality, for time made up distinct but aggregate "now"s. These two notions of time also have their place in the content of the story, particularly in Jeff and Melanctha's arguments about memory: Jeff understands it as a consistent image of the past and Melanctha understands it as rewritten in each moment. Sutherland's insistence that Stein's "has to be read word by

word, as a succession of single meanings accumulating into a larger meaning," points out how her style captured this notion of time.

As much as she owed to William James for her stylistic innovations, Stein owed at least as much to the painters with whom she associated in Paris at the beginning of the century. Also entertaining new ideas of reality and perception, the artists searched for new modes of representation, depicting their subjects—the usual apples, landscapes, bodies, and faces—with very untraditional techniques. A cubist or fauvist painter might, for example, reduce his subject to its basic geometric shapes and intensify the colors; painting a room or a landscape, he might erase traditional distinctions between foreground and background, so that the wallpaper holds the viewer's eye as forcefully as the still life on the table. A futurist might try to put on canvas several different views of his subject at once, so that a face becomes a fan of sharp angles and lines, repeating one part over again with slight variations. And painters working in many different styles would apply the paint heavily to the canvas, compelling the viewer to become aware of the paint itself as a material-and to realize that they are looking at a canvas, rather than at an actual apple or body. Translating these efforts onto the page with her use of repetition, disjointed sentences, and stream of consciousness, Stein leaves her reader with an awareness of how things are represented and none of the usual certainty about what is represented.

Source: Ondine Le Blanc, "An Overview of 'Melanctha'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

At the time this book was published, Ruddick was teaching in the English Department at the University of Chicago. In the following excerpt, she presents her view of Stein's reacting to the ideas of her mentor, William James, in "Melanctha," focusing on Melanctha and Jeff as two sides of Stein's own personality.

Gertrude Stein thought of herself as having spent her life escaping from the nineteenth century into which she had been born. This chapter is about the ambivalent beginnings of that escape. With the story "Melanctha," Stein made her first leap into modernist modes of representation; she herself described [in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*] the story (immodestly but plausibly) as "the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature." Yet the text looks backward at the same time.

"Melanctha" carries on a private conversation with William James, Stein's college mentor and the central figure in the early drama of her self-definition as a modernist. Along one of its axes, Stein's story reads as a tribute to James's psychological theories—theories that despite their well-known continuities with modernist aesthetics are nineteenth-century in their ethics. Yet at the margins of the story, other material shows Stein already beginning to define herself against James.

The love plot of "Melanctha" borrows heavily from James's psychology; indeed, Stein's debt to James is much deeper than has been supposed. But like all intellectual precursors, James was a burden as well as an inspiration, and as early as "Melanctha" Stein began struggling to free herself from him. James's psychology had appealed to her in college for its heartening vision of moral and practical success, which helped her to overcome some of her own self-doubts and inhibitions; in "Melanctha," this ideology of success permeates her characterization of Jeff Campbell, who in fact is her idealized self-portrait through the lens of James. But Jeff and his success plot are already too limiting for Stein, and details at the fringes of the story signal alien ethical and artistic commitments that will soon move into the foreground as Stein wages war more consciously on her teacher.

Among the themes in "Melanctha" that stand in tension with the Jamesian plot of mental success is the notion of a wisdom superior to instrumental thinking, a wisdom grounded in the body. Technically, the story violates James's values by indulging in a kind of aimless play; more than that, it transcribes irrational process, forming itself according to a principle of motivated repetition that is continuous not with James's ideas but with the psychoanalytic view of mental life that will soon dislodge James's presence in Stein's work. Finally, "Melanctha" has a latent feminism, which places on trial the individualistic and (in Stein's mind) ultimately male value system absorbed from James, which she still honors in the characterization of Jeff Campbell.

The two lovers in the story, Melanctha and Jeff, are the products of Stein's imaginative self-splitting. As she experimented artistically with the different ethical systems that

attracted her, she bifurcated herself into a manly Jamesian example and a mysterious woman who became a magnet for her conflicts. Melanctha is the locus of ambiguity in the story. As the focus of this chapter shifts, toward and then away from James, the character Melanctha assumes the appearance, first, of a mere failure in the evolutionary struggle, then of a priestess of the body, and finally of a victim of patriarchal relations....

One way to bring out William James's importance for Stein is to place Jeff, her purest Jamesian creation, against his prototypes in her earlier writings. In Jeff, Stein was able to envision a character who resolved and benefited from internal struggle. For her earlier characters, however, self-division had assured impotence. These characters were paralyzed by the tension between promiscuous and conservative impulses. In the portrait of Jeff Camp-bell, Stein reconceived this self-division in positive terms, terms that had been suggested to her a decade before by James.

Her very early, painfully divided characters are often versions of herself, and they suggest why James's ideas might have appealed to her in the first place. Stein's attraction to James in college had much to do with his giving her a language to apply to conflicts she perceived in herself. Her obliquely autobiographical college essays, known now as the "Radcliffe Themes," shed light on her emotional life during the period in which she encountered James. These pieces dwell on the figure of a young woman in whom a strongly sensual nature competes with a need for self-mastery.

"In the Red Deeps," for example, is a self-portrait of a girl frightened by her own sadomasochistic fantasy life. She recalls a period during childhood when she experimented with various sorts of self-inflicted pain and fantasized about tortures she might devise for others. But she has an attack of conscience, characterized by a "haunting fear of loss of self-control." The sexual component of the forbidden impulses is underscored by the title, borrowed from the chapter in *The Mill on the Floss* about romantic secrecy and guilt.

"The Temptation" again sets illicit pleasures against self-reproach. The heroine, an indistinct surrogate for Stein, is in church one day when a strange man leans heavily against her. She enjoys the "sensuous impressions," but again has a "quick revulsion," and asks herself, "Have you no sense of shame?" Yet still "she did not move." The conflict leaves her immobilized; she vaguely indulges herself, but only passively. Later her lapse stigmatizes her; her companions, who have seen everything, upbraid her, and she becomes "one apart."

When the characters Stein writes about in these college compositions are not oppressed by conscious fears of impropriety, they have vague inhibitions that are no less paralyzing. Stein writes a theme about a boy who is both frightened and interested when a pretty girl asks him to help her across a brook. Once again, "he . . . could not move." Finally he accommodates her, only to flee in alarm. These characters never pass beyond the faintest stimulation; they prefer loneliness to the risk of losing control.

Although none of the characters in these early pieces is a lesbian, Stein's emerging sexual orientation must have exacerbated her sense of being "one apart," or (as a kind

of self-punishing translation) secretly too sexual. Whether or not she yet defined herself as a lesbian, the pressures she was feeling, in some preliminary way, were those of the closet. Her characters in these essays do not dare to let anyone in on their sexual feelings. Stein's own romantic experience in college was limited to a mildly flirtatious friendship with her psychology teammate Le-on Solomons—a friendship that, as she recalled in a later notebook, was "Platonic because neither care [*sic*] to do more." The relationship was close and pleasant, but to the extent that it bordered on flirtation it ironically made her feel asexual and freakish. In the meantime, as her college compositions intimate, she experienced intense longings and loneliness.

Stein's preoccupation during her late teens with conflicts such as those in the "Themes" helps to account for her interest in James's psychology, and explains why of all her professors she singled James out for a sort of hero-worship. James too sees a duality in human nature, one that traps a person between eagerness and self-control. But in his view, the self-division signifies not deviance but mental health. Every mind, by his account, has a promiscuous and a repressive element. In normal perceptual life, part of us is welcoming and indiscriminate, but another part excludes data from awareness. These are the two impulses that Stein later plays against each other in Jeff Campbell.

James's theories doubtless helped to alleviate Stein's guilt about what seemed threatening appetites and, at the same time, suggested a means of forgiving herself her inhibitions. The mind James describes naturally has its thirsty or revolutionary dimension, a menace but also a source of life: we would stagnate if we lost the taste for raw sensation. Stein evidently welcomed the parallel. The unruly libidos of the Radcliffe heroines are refigured in "Melanctha" as a form of perceptual openness: Melanctha Herbert is at once sexually and perceptually promiscuous, and she helps Jeff by introducing him to "excitements" both romantic and more broadly experiential. Stein later validates her inhibitions too, by associating them with selective attention. Jeff is romantically cautious and also incapable of focusing his senses on "new things"; these qualities make him attractive to the heroine of the story. Indeed, the very struggle between yielding and self-control that immobilizes the characters of the "Radcliffe Themes" comes, with an infusion of James's psychology, to seem a creative part of consciousness.

One way to think of Jeff is as Stein's self-idealization through the filter of James. He is, after all, a version of Adele in *Q.E.D.*, who herself was a virtually unaltered Stein. But he is a transformed Adele, robust and successful. Adele, incidentally—or Stein, in the intermediate phase of *Q.E.D.* —had fallen in love but still experienced all the internal pressures of her earlier personae in the "Radcliffe Themes." Like the Radcliffe heroines, Adele-Stein is torn between her sexual curiosity and her inhibitions; the tension freezes her, making her an "unresponsive" lover. Ideologically, too, Adele feels caught, as her author did, between the lesbianism that marks her as "queer" and a bourgeois ideology that makes her wish to "avoid excitements" and become "the mother of children."

But in Jeff Campbell, Stein transforms the tension in herself between sexual needs and conservative values into a source of strength. Jeff's competing impulses make him a more sensitive person and a better doctor. His one excursion into forbidden

"excitements" only helps him to know himself better and to do more for others. James's ideas helped Stein to create an idealized self, conceived in terms of psychic vigor.

On the other hand, "Melanctha" also contains an image of failure to thrive. The heroine of the story does not fare so well as her lover. She never achieves mental balance, and she dies. In portraying Melanctha, Stein slips outside the Jamesian framework and the self-idealization attached to it.

Melanctha herself, by William James's standards, is weak. One way to account for her presence—were we to remain within the limits of the Jamesian paradigm—would be to see her as an example of the high costs, in Darwinian terms, of mind-wandering. Melanctha is not ultimately changed by her affair with Jeff. Whereas he assimilates the new mode of perception Melanctha has given him, she fails to be impressed by his "solidity," his conceptual grip on the world. She tries to adapt to him for a time, but ends by reverting to her former "excited," "reckless," wandering ways.

Rose Johnson, who might have served as a replacement, then rejects her, and the desertion "almost killed her." This might seem an extreme reaction, but in Rose, Melanctha has lost her last point of contact with the "solid safety" of the conservative temperament. "Melanctha needed Rose always to let her cling to her.... Rose always was so simple, solid, decent, for her. And now Rose had cast her from her. Melanctha was lost, and all the world went whirling in a mad weary dance around her." Melanctha is "lost": as James said, without mental conservatism, "we should be intellectually lost in the midst of the world." Melanctha loses touch with the "solid" tendency, and "all the world went whirling in a mad weary dance around her." This is a fair description of what would happen to a mind severed from all perceptual habit and banished to the flux of unfamiliar sensation. Melanctha virtually drowns in the continuum of the world.

Her physiological death, some paragraphs later, seems to follow as a matter of course. Critics have seen in the stories of *Three Lives*, each of which ends with a heroine's death, shades of naturalism. This reading assumes a special force in light of the Jamesian or Darwinian psychological drama of "Melanctha." In Stein's heroine one observes a character unfit for the world who is weeded out by a brand of natural selection. In James's psychology the person who has no mechanism of selective attention is ill suited for the business of self-preservation. The survival of the fittest militates against those "exuberant non-egoistic" individuals who, careless of their own personal safety, diffuse their attention equably over experience. But Melanctha has persisted in wandering on the perilous "edge of wisdom," suppressing personal interests in the name of "excitement." In the end, "tired with being all the time so much excited," she succumbs to the social and bodily suicide that, as James makes plain, would be the outcome of any life of wholly unselfish or unselective perception.

The case of Melanctha, if one reads it, then, in the light of James, is an admonition. Yet Melanctha's failure by James's standards could lead one as easily to question James's values as to take a critical view of the heroine. I have sketched a reading of Melanctha's story as a negative example, but it could just as well be thought of as a protest against the entire notion of mental success represented by Jeff. For in the moral universe of

"Melanctha," self-preservation is not clearly the highest good. Part of the story pulls away from the psychological framework supplied by William James and from the Darwinian gospel of success attached to it.

"Melanctha" is Stein's most deeply Jamesian text, but it comes belatedly, at a point when its author is just beginning to strain against James. Within a few years her notebooks show her explicitly defining herself against him. In "Melanctha," her early ambivalence creates a kind of ethical polyphony. The story hovers somewhere between the ideas and views Stein shared with James and quite different, still indistinct values that would soon propel her in new directions.

James's psychology is shot through with Darwinism; the important thing, in his view, is to thrive. Stein's attachment to this perspective is evident in her sympathetic portrait of Jeff Campbell, the good doctor who does his work and moves ahead professionally. But Melanctha, who has no instinct for survival, is of course portrayed at least as sympathetically herself. She receives a much more positive treatment than her antecedent in *Q.E.D.*, the thoughtless seducer Helen. In the move from *Q.E.D.* to "Melanctha," the moral center of the story has shifted toward the promiscuous member of the couple, whose model was not Stein herself but her former lover May Bookstaver.

Melanctha, far from being merely an object of pitying diagnosis, has qualities that elevate her above a mere survivor like Rose. Her imperfect instinct for self-preservation is the cost of her superior "wisdom," which the story sets against instrumental knowledge as embodied by Jeff and as preached by James. Against the background of James's theories, the word *wisdom* in "Melanctha" can be thought of as referring to the heroine's reckless immersion in the senses, but the word has a spiritual resonance as well. Jeff seems to be pointing to a mysterious power in Melanctha when he speaks of a "new feeling" she has given him, "just like a new religion to me." The world she opens up for him is a world of "real being." This spiritual quality of hers is never explained, but it pushes her beyond the ethical boundaries defined by James's *Psychology* and, for that matter, by James's own more spiritually oriented writings. Part of Stein's story is about a "way to know" that has no bearing on practical life but is more elevated than mere sensory abundance.

At the risk of trying to define precisely something the text leaves vague and suggestive, I want to approach Melanctha's wisdom by setting it alongside some other details in her story, which seem to have nothing to do with the framework of Jamesian psychology. Stein's heroine has a special intimacy with the mysteries of the body. Melanctha is close to the upheavals of birth, death, and puberty. She watches over her dying mother; this seems to be the most important thing she has ever done for or with her mother. She tends Rose Johnson as Rose gives birth, acting as a sort of midwife, even to the extent of moving Rose away from her husband for the last part of the pregnancy. ("When Rose had become strong again [after the delivery and the baby's death] she went back to her house with Sam." Melanctha's story is bounded by her own puberty, the time in her twelfth year when she is "just beginning as a woman," and by her death.

These details—the death of the mother, the birth of the baby, Melanctha's puberty, and her death—were superimposed on the original plot of *Q.E.D.*, and they signal changes in Stein's thinking. The details involving birth and death—which, along with the setting in the black community, were inspired by Stein's clinical experiences at Johns Hopkins Medical School—bear no obvious relation to the primary story of the romance with Jeff Campbell, and they give the narrative of "Melanctha" a wandering quality. Although they are never digested into the main plot, the narrative pulls back to these events, often out of sequence. The story begins, for example, not where one would expect it to begin but with the delivery of Rose's baby, which, we will later find out, actually *follows* the entire love affair of Melanctha and Jeff: "Rose Johnson made it very hard to bring her baby to its birth. Melanctha Herbert who was Rose Johnson's friend, did everything that any woman could." I associate Melanctha's hazily defined wisdom with her quality of presiding at moments of bodily change or upheaval. The text makes no such connection explicitly, but these fragmentary data embedded in "Melanctha" will begin to form a more cohesive picture in Stein's later work.

Within a few years Stein will depart from James altogether by grounding her idea of consciousness in what might be called the rhythms of the body. She will develop a notion of wisdom as a kind of thought that knows its ties to the body. As her spirituality comes to the surface, an emphasis on bodily experience, as sacred and taboo, marks the difference from James's own brand of spirituality. To quote from the dense text of *Tender Buttons*, the most extraordinary thing Stein wrote in the teens, "*out of an eye* comes research" (emphasis added); knowledge emanates *from* the eye, like tears. Or (to use a more opaque passage) spiritual knowing or "in-sight" is continuous with anatomical functions like giving milk or suckling: "MILK. Climb up in sight climb in the whole utter." *Tender Buttons* stages bodily upheavals great and small, from eating to giving birth and dying. An early hint of these preoccupations appears in the liminal Melanctha, stationed at the crises of the body.

Significantly, William James's psychology would not account in an interesting way for Melanctha's intimacy with the body. Compared to a near contemporary like Freud, James seems to keep the body out of focus, except in its role as a machine absorbing data and maintaining itself in existence. Nor would Melanctha's sexuality be something James would illuminate. Melanctha's involvements in birth, death, and sensual experience give her a kind of wisdom distinct from James's instrumental knowledge. To describe the notion of bodily consciousness that develops in Stein's subsequent work, it will be necessary to use a vocabulary closer to psychoanalysis than to the theories of James.

Stein's notebooks and subsequent works suggest to me that in her characterization of the embodied Melanctha, she was depicting something she saw in herself, for all her simultaneous identification with (and self-projection in) the more controlled and rational Jeff Campbell. In one of the notebooks for *The Making of Americans*, Stein identified a side of herself she called "the Rabelaisian, nigger abandonment, Vollard [the art dealer], daddy side." That she associates her bodily gusto, or everything Rabelaisian in herself, with something she calls "nigger abandonment" suggests that the extreme racism she expresses in "Melanctha"—for example, in depicting blacks as carefree and

promiscuous—served (among other things) her own need to distance a part of herself about which she was ambivalent. She had her own sensuous side, which she projected in racial terms perhaps so she could simultaneously idealize and depreciate it; and by playing to the racism of her audience, she partially disguised the dimension of self-exploration in the story.

Source: Lisa Ruddick, "'Melanctha': The Costs of Mind-Wandering," in *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis,* Cornell University Press, 1990, pp. 12-54.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Cohen presents his interpretation of Stein's linking of character traits with degree of skin color in "Melanctha," focusing on racism and its thematic implications.

Gertrude Stein always prided herself on her acute observations of human nature, a talent she attributed to her experimental training in psychology under William James and Hugo Munsterberg at Harvard. But by her own account of these experiments, she reveals an early penchant not so much to observe the individual instance as to categorize the larger type:

I was supposed to be interested in their reactions but soon I found that I was not but instead I was enormously interested in the types of their characters that is what I even then thought of the bottom nature of them and when in May 1898 I wrote my half of the report of these experiments I expressed the results as follows: "In these descriptions it will be readily observed that habits of attention are reflexes of the complete character of the individual" [in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten, 1962].

Stein's interest in defining and categorizing "bottom nature" continued through the next decade in such early works as *Q.E.D* (1903) and *Three Lives* (1905-6), and crested in the numerous chartings and minutely-refined adjectival strings that delineate the characters of *The Making of Americans*. In all of these works, the "bottom natures" that she originally identified at Harvard (nervous and easily aroused vs. phlegmatic) help to determine, in varying degrees and mixtures, the characterizations. In the "Melanctha" story of *Three Lives*, however, Stein set for herself a unique challenge in understanding character. For unlike the characters of the other early works, who were modeled after people Stein knew well from her childhood and college years, the characters of "Melanctha" belonged to a race that Stein had observed at first hand only while she delivered babies as a medical student in Baltimore:

It was then that she had to take her turn in the delivering of babies and it was at that time that she noticed the negroes and the places that she afterwards used in the second of the *Three Lives* stories, Melanctha Herbert, the story that was the beginning of her revolutionary work [*Selected Writings*].

One might expect that such first-hand experience would serve as an empirical check on Stein's theories of bottom nature. But her experience was limited both by time (she was required to spend no more than two months at it) and, more importantly, by the vast cultural chasm dividing upper-middle-class, white medical students from the poor blacks they treated. It is not surprising, then, that Stein's attempt to categorize the blacks in "Melanctha" according to their "bottom natures" is tainted by cultural bias. Although such early admirers of Stein as Richard Wright praised her depiction of blacks as being "the first long serious literary treatment of Negro life in the United States," other critics, both black and white, have found it offensive. Richard Bridgman, for example, writes:

Gertrude Stein's treatment of the negro is both condescending and false.... it swarms with cliches about the happy, promiscuous, razor-fighting, church-going darky [*Gertrude Stein in Pieces*].

The race references in "Melanctha" are infrequent, and when they do appear, they are stereotyped. Negroes possess shiny or greasy black faces; their eyeballs roll; their mouths gape open as they howl with laughter; they fight with razors, yell savagely, are often lazy and are insistently virile [*American Literature* 33 (1961)].

In fact, however, Bridgman is both too kind and not kind enough to Stein. For "Melanctha" contains a far wider range of skin tones than "shiny or greasy black faces," and behaviors far more diverse than "razor-fighting and church-going." But at the same time, Stein organizes these varieties into a racial hierarchy that is more ominously schematic than Bridgman suggests. Here are the characters of "Melanctha" arranged by the skin tones that Stein describes and accompanied by the "bottom natures" she gives them:

Rose Johnson: Melanctha's friend; real black; tall, well-built, good-looking, sullen, stupid, childlike, lazy, promiscuous, unmoral, coarse, shiftless, selfish, decent, ordinary, slow

James: Melanctha's father; black; coarse, big, powerful, virile, robust, unpleasant, brutal, rough, hard-handed, loose-built, common, decent enough, angry, never really joyous, looked evil [before fight], fierce and serious, knew nothing railroad yard workers: greasy black becoming grey when scared; [fearful], eye-rolling shipyard workers: yowling, free-swinging, powerful, loose-jointed, childish, half-savage

John: coachman for white family; light brown mulatto; very decent, vigorous, friendly, pleasant, but knew how to use a razor porter at railroad yard: light brown; big, serious, melancholy, kind, gentle

Jeff's father: butler for white family; light brown; good, kind, serious, religious, steady, very intelligent, very dignified

Jeff's mother: pale brown; sweet, little, gentle, reverenced and obeyed her husband

Jeff: Melanctha's boyfriend, doctor; mulatto; very good, strong, gentle, very intellectual, sympathetic, earnest, joyous, happy, laughing, studious, hard-working, scientific, quiet-living, [not seeking experience], [wants other blacks to adopt these qualities]

Melanctha's mother: pale yellow; sweet appealing, pleasant, mysterious, uncertain, wandering in her ways

Melanctha: protagonist; pale yellow; intelligent, attractive, subtle, graceful, complex, mysterious, suffering, uncomplaining, despairing, pleasant [but has] nasty tongue,

sudden and impulsive, has breakneck courage [but at first is a coward], [attracted to power], [hungry for "experience"]

Jane Harden: Melanctha's tutor and friend; negress but so white that hardly anyone would guess it; roughened, powerful, reckless, drinker [well educated: two years at "colored college"], bad conduct, not afraid to understand ways that lead to wisdom, had much white blood and that made her see clear, good mind, white blood strong in her and she had grit and endurance and a vital courage

Several obvious generalizations can be drawn from this chart. First, Stein clearly links skin tone to personality traits. Second, her associations follow many of the established stereotypes that whites held of blacks: The "black" end of the scale represents coarseness, stupidity, and a "half-savage" childishness. Images of the fearful, eye-rolling, exaggerating Negro also appear at this end. The "white" end of the scale brings intelligence, complexity, and courage. In between, the "light brown" shade denotes seriousness, hard work, decency, kindness, and religiosity, while the "pale yellow" is complex, mysterious, uncertain, sweet but somewhat vague.

The racism of this hierarchy is most glaringly evident at its poles. Stein unfailingly mentions James Herbert's blackness before adding other adjectives:

her robust and unpleasant and very unendurable black father her black coarse father big black virile negro He looked very black and evil a brute of a black nigger father

Appropriately, the "nigger" epithet above comes from Jane Harden, who resides at the other end of the scale, the almost-white. "Roughened" and "reckless," Jane bears a curious similarity to James Herbert (a seeming contradiction considered below), but Stein leaves little doubt about the value of her "white blood":

She had much white blood and that made her see clear.... Her white blood was strong in her and she had grit and endurance and a vital courage.

Unflattering qualities and stereotypes of blacks abound in "Melanctha." Because infant mortality is so common in black neighborhoods, neither Sam nor Rose Johnson "thought about it very long" when their baby dies (from Rose's negligence). Melanctha, "half made with real white blood," "demeans herself" by serving "this lazy, stupid, ordinary, selfish, black girl [Rose]." We read of "the earth-born boundless joy of negroes," the "wide abandoned laughter that gives the broad glow of negro sunshine," "the good warm nigger time" Melanctha could have with "colored men." Even when Stein attempts to praise, as in the last examples, her condescension is as embarrassing as her obliviousness to it is disturbing.

Yet for all of its obvious racism, Stein's skin-tone groupings raise several questions. Why, for example, do some of the "mixed-blood" shades (e.g., the light brown) show fairly consistent qualities, while others (e.g., Jane Harden's almost-whiteness) are contradictory? Curiously, this apparent inconsistency follows the dubious logic of Stein's hierarchy. For the contradictions of the "mixed" shades seem to increase as they approach whiteness. Apparently, Stein equates complexity and contradiction with

intelligence; i.e., with whiteness. Further, personality consistency depends on parental consistency—another aspect of Stein's "bottom nature." Thus, Melanctha's contradictory behavior derives from the genetic opposition of her black father's violent impulsiveness and attraction to power and experience, and her pale yellow mother's "sweet, mysterious, uncertain, and pleasant" character. Although Jane Harden's parentage is not given, we might assume a similar contrast of parental types. Conversely, Jeff's parents are *both* good, kind, serious, and light brown—and so is Jeff.

If racism alone informs Stein's groupings, then why are the "light brown" given white-oriented, "Uncle Tom" values (hard work, seriousness, politeness, self-sacrifice, and sensuous restraint), while the character closest to white, Jane Harden, shares the "roughness" and "recklessness" of the blacks? In one sense, the "bottom nature" of the light browns is perfectly logical. As servants of white families, Jeff's father and John the stableman would be most prone to adopt the values of their employers or, more accurately, the values their employers would expect to see blacks adopt. Hence, Jeff's moralizing about the values blacks should pursue—"I don't believe much in this running around business and I don't want to see the colored people do it.... I want to see the colored people like what is good and what I want them to have, and that's to live regular and work hard and understand things . . ."—is the voice of the white bourgeoisie coming through a black manikin.

But what complicates the question is that these white-oriented views are not entirely Stein's own. Indeed, the central theme and action of "Melanctha"—gaining sexual experience ("wisdom"), learning to trust one's feelings and to live for the present moment—run counter to Jeff's Puritanical restraint. Significantly, Stein does not bias the conflict toward either side. For she speaks not with the moral certainty of the white middle class, but, as Bridgman suggests [in *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*], with a voice divided between the energy and primness she inherited from family and culture and her own emerging sensuality and lesbianism. If anything, Stein's sympathies are with Melanctha's courageous immersion into life, not with Jeff's queasy inhibitions. Thus, Stein had no reason to associate "superior" skin tone (white) with moral restraint.

It would seem, then, that the racial hierarchy in "Melanctha" works against the story's thematic tension. Stein's position, itself, is ambivalent: The stereotypes of her hierarchy locate her well within her culture, the white bourgeoisie of 1905-6; but her delineation of the sexual conflict places her quite outside this culture. One might well conclude, as Bridgman and Claude McKay [Quoted in *The Third Rose*, 1959] have, that the racial setting of "Melanctha" is both false and superfluous to the central story. But what does Stein's hierarchy show about her theory of "bottom nature"?

Certainly, her penchant for categorizing behavior is as evident in her racial hierarchy as it is in her behavioral "types." But the types (nervous vs. phlegmatic) were at least Stein's own generalizations (albeit, based on medieval humors), drawn from her observations in psychology experiments and developed thoughtfully over a decade. The racial types can lay no such claim to original perception: They were merely the cliches of her age. If Stein considered her racial hierarchy to offer valid examples of "bottom nature," then her personality theories join the musty ranks of Gobineau, Chamberlain,

and the other discredited racists as curious antiquities. If, as is more likely, however, she merely incorporated these racial stereotypes *unthinkingly* into her real concern with character and consciousness, then such uncritical acceptance casts considerable doubt on the depth and acuity of her perceptions of human nature, and points, rather, to an arbitrary and subjective *con*ception. Either way, in the racial hierarchy of "Melanctha," Stein's theory of "bottom nature" bottoms out.

Source: Milton A. Cohen, "Black Brutes and Mulatto Saints: The Racial Hierarchy of Stein's 'Melanctha'," in *Black American Literature Forum,* Vol. 18, No. 3, Fall, 1984, pp. 119-21.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Sutherland, reflecting ideas of the 1950s, presents his interpretation of Stein's experimental style in "Melanctha," focusing on her handling of time.

. . . According to the general agreement the big thing in *Three Lives* is the middle story, "Melanctha." It is a tragic love story ending in death from consumption; so that it is available to the traditional literary taste and the educated emotions. Furthermore it is, as Carl Van Vechten says [in his preface to *Three Lives*], "perhaps the first American story in which the Negro is regarded as a human being and not as an object for condescending compassion or derision." It is a good deal to have attained that clarity and equilibrium of feeling in a difficult question, but "Melanctha" as a piece of literature does much more. Where "The Good Anna" and "The Gentle Lena" are composed as the presentation of a single type in illustrative incidents, "Melanctha" is composed on the dramatic trajectory of a passion. If "The Good Anna" roughly corresponds to [Gustave Flaubert's] "Un Coeur Simple," "Melanctha" corresponds roughly to *Madame Bovary*. Very roughly, and there is most likely no direct influence, but it makes an illuminating comparison.

Madame Bovary and the course of her passion are presented in an elaborate series of incidents, situations, landscapes, interiors, extraneous issues; in short they are measured and realized against a thick objective context as the things in the context are measured against her desire. Strangely enough this desire is never directly presented. It is measured somewhat by its casual source in her romantic reading—as Don Quixote is casually accounted for by his reading of the romances of chivalry—and it is known later by its various objects such as travel in far lands, luxuries, poetry written to her, and so on. As a blind desire, and probably as a death wish, it is symbolized by the awful blind beggar who is as it were Emma's *Doppelganger* and who is finally put out of the way by Homais, the type of cheap rationalism. Emma's power is measured again by her being too much for Charles, for Leon, and even for Rodolphe, and by the pathetic infatuation of the boy Justin. She has certainly a variety of states of mind, wild desire, remorse, boredom, religiosity, fear, and so on, but they are a succession of distinct states, presented as complete and not as in process. In brief, Flaubert's art was spatial and intensely pictorial, not temporal and musical. Expressing directly and exactly the immediate movement, pulse, and process of a thing simply was not his business. But it was in this early period Gertrude Stein's business, and in "Melanctha" she did express at length the process of a passion.

She did not yet disengage the essential vitality entirely from its natural context. There are some few descriptions of railroad yards, docks, country scenes, houses, yards, rooms, windows, but these are reduced to a telling minimum. There is also some accounting for the complex forces in the heroine's character by the brutality of her father and the sweet indifference of her mother. She is described at the beginning of the story by contrast and association with Rose Johnson, her hard-headed decent friend, and again by the same contrast enlarged at the end of the story, when Rose casts her off.

But the real demonstration of the story is the dialogue between Melanctha and her lover Jeff Campbell. In this long dialogue, which is like a duel or duet, the traditional incoherence between the inner and the outer life has been replaced by an incoherence between two subjectivities. It is conceived of as a difference in tempo, the slow Jeff against the quick Melanctha. Also there is already very much present in this story the difference, the radical and final difference in people, defined in *The Making of Americans* as the attacking and the resisting kinds or types. It is not quite the difference between active and passive, as both kinds are based on a persistence in being or in living, and they are further complicated by a deviousness and modulation in function. For example, how does a naturally attacking kind resist and how does a naturally resisting kind get provoked to attack? All this is elaborately and dramatically worked out in the long dialogue. "It was a struggle, sure to be going on always between them. It was a struggle that was as sure always to be going on between them, as their minds and hearts always were to have different ways of working." Their differences, shade by shade, and their gradual reconciliations are presented through the whole course of the affair from indifference to gradual fascination to the struggle for domination by a variety of means, to the decline into brotherly and sisterly affection, and finally to the final break.

Gertrude Stein had already, in a story written in 1903 and called "Quod Erat Demonstrandum" but not published until 1950 and under the title *Things as They Are*, worked out a very similar dialectic of a passion. It is very interesting as a preliminary exercise for "Melanctha." As its first title suggests, it is an intensive and exhaustive study of relations in a triangle. In its way it is a Jamesian study or demonstration, and its heroine mentions and quotes the heroine and/or villainess of James' novel *The Wings of the Dove*, Kate Croy. But *Things as They Are* bears a more striking resemblance to the *Adolphe* of Benjamin Constant, it has the same merciless directness and concentration, and though Gertrude Stein had probably not read *Adolphe* in 1903 this earliest work belongs to the tradition of *Adolphe* and of *La Princesse de Clèves*. It has the same unwavering intellectual clarity applied to the perpetually shifting relationships of a passion throughout its course. That much is already mastered in this first work, but the handling tends more to commentary than to presentation and has not the sure grasp of the personal cadences of a character's thought and feeling that makes the analyses in "Melanctha" a direct expression of character in movement. This is partly the fault of the characters themselves in *Things as They Are*. They are white American college women, whose speech and thought are bound to be at odds with their feeling. Gertrude Stein treats this difficulty handsomely enough as subject matter, but the expressive power of the prose is limited by its very propriety to the subject matter. It is very pure, immensely intelligent, and astonishing for a first work in 1903, but it is polite, cultivated, educated, literary. Compare with the passage from "Melanctha," quoted above, the following from *Things as They Are*:

Time passed and they renewed their habit of desultory meetings at public places, but these were not the same as before. There was between them now a consciousness of strain, a sense of new adjustments, of uncertain standards and of changing values.

"Melanctha," in which the characters are Negroes, has thereby the advantage of "uneducated" speech, and of a direct relationship between feeling and word, a more fundamental or universal drama. It is a measure of her strength that in making the most of the advantage Gertrude Stein abandoned polite or cultivated writing completely and forever, so completely that the press where she had *Three Lives* printed sent to inquire if she really knew English.

At all events, "Melanctha" is, as I said the work of Henry James was, a time continuum less of events than of considerations of their meaning. The events considered in "Melanctha" are mostly the movements of the passion, how Jeff and Melanctha feel differently toward each other from moment to moment.

Like the characters of James, Melanctha and Jeff are preternaturally articulate about their feelings, but where James keeps the plausibilities by using highly cultivated characters to express the complicated meaning in an endless delicacy of phrasing, Gertrude Stein uses the simplest possible words, the common words used by everybody, and a version of the most popular phrasing, to express the very complicated thing. It is true and exciting that James often used the simplest possible word for his complicated meaning, but he had a tendency to isolate it to the attention, to force it to carry its full weight by printing it in italics or putting it in quotes, or dislocating it from its more usual place in the word order, or repeating it. Gertrude Stein uses repetition and dislocation to make the word bear all the meaning it has but actually one has to give her work word by word the deliberate attention one gives to something written in italics. It has been said that her work means more when one reads it in proof or very slowly, and that is certainly true, the work has to be read word by word, as a succession of single meanings accumulating into a larger meaning, as for example the words in the stanza of a song being sung. Unhappily all our training and most of our reasons for reading are against this. Very likely the desire for simplicity in style is most often a desire that the words and ideas along the way to the formulated conclusion, the point, be perfectly negligible and that we have no anxious feeling we are missing anything as we rush by. But as an example of how Gertrude Stein forces the simplest negligible words to stay there in a full meaning:

"Can't you understand Melanctha, ever, how no man certainly ever really can hold your love for long times together. You certainly Melanctha, you ain't got down deep loyal feeling, true inside you, and when you ain't just that moment quick with feeling, then you certainly ain't ever got anything more there to keep you. You see Melanctha, it certainly is this way with you, it is, that you ain't ever got any way to remember right what you been doing, or anybody else that has been feeling with you. You certainly Melanctha, never can remember right, when it comes what you have done and what you think happens to you." "It certainly is all easy for you Jeff Campbell to be talking. You remember right, because you don't remember nothing till you get home with your thinking

everything all over, but I certainly don't think much ever of that kind of way of remembering right, Jeff Campbell. I certainly do call it remembering right Jeff Campbell,

to remember right just when it happens to you, so you have a right kind of feeling not to act the way you always been doing to me, and then you go home Jeff Campbell, and you begin with your thinking, and then it certainly is very easy for you to be good and forgiving with it. No, that ain't to me, the way of remembering Jeff Campbell, not as I can see it not to make people always suffer, waiting for you certainly to get to do it...."

The passage is, if one likes, about the synchronization of feeling upon the present activity. Anyone can see what is meant by the argument if the feeling discussed is understood to be sexual feeling. But the thing which makes this passage absolutely accurate and not euphemistic is that the subject is literally feeling, all feeling, inasmuch as all the passions are one. In brief, making abstraction of objects and situations, sexual feeling behaves no differently from other feelings. The readiness, slowness, concentration or absent-mindedness, domination or dependence in sexual feeling are about the same as in all the other activities of a character. So that we have here a perfect propriety and fullness of diction.

The relatively simple dislocations of "you ain't got down deep loyal feeling, true inside you," from the more commonplace order "you have no true feeling of loyalty deep down inside you," not only jar the words awake into their full meaning but follow with much greater exactitude the slow, passionate, clumsy emphasis of Jeff Campbell's feeling.

The phrase "remembering right" could be replaced by a more familiar cliche, "profiting aptly by past experience," or by scientific gabble like "the coordination of habitual reflexes upon the present object," but the advantage of the simpler new phrase is that it expresses the matter in terms of the fundamental and final activities and categories of the mind. It is part of the "impulse to elemental abstraction," the description in terms of the final and generic as against description by context and association. It is like the generically round and sitting apple of Cezanne as against a delicately compromised and contextuated and reverberating apple of the impressionists. The propriety of the simple popular abstraction used in "Melanctha" is in this, that the two subjectivities at odds are seen, and so to be described, directly—directly from common knowledge, and not, as with *Madame Bovary*, seen refracted and described indirectly through an exterior context embodying considerable special knowledge. The immediate terms of *Madame Bovary* are saturated with French history, the immediate terms of "Melanctha" are the final categories of mental process—to know, to see, to hear, to wish, to remember, to suffer, and the like.

However, "Melanctha" is more than an exact chart of the passions. The conjugation or play of the abstractions proceeds according to the vital rhythm or tempo of the characters. In this way the essential quality of the characters is not only described but presented immediately. As Emma Bovary is *seen* against the rake Rodolphe and then against the pusillanimous Leon, and is thereby defined, so Melanctha is, in her quick tempo, *played* against the slow Jeff Campbell and then against the very fast "dashing" Jem Richards.

Gertrude Stein later made some remarks about *Three Lives* in the light of her later problems of expression. In *Composition as Explanation* she said:

In beginning writing I wrote a book called *Three Lives* this was written in 1905. I wrote a negro story called "Melanctha." In that there was a constant recurring and beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of being in the present although naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future, and why, because the composition forming around me was a prolonged present. A composition of a prolonged present is a natural composition in the world as it has been these thirty years [1926] it was more and more a prolonged present. I created then a prolonged present naturally I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one, it was simple it was clear to me and nobody knew why it was done like that, I did not myself although naturally to me it was natural.... In the first book [*Three Lives*] there was a groping for a continuous present and for using everything by beginning again and again.

The difference between a prolonged and a continuous present may be defined as this, that a prolonged present assumes a situation or a theme and dwells on it and develops it or keeps it recurring, as in much opera, and Bach, for example. The continuous present would take each successive moment or passage as a completely new thing essentially, as with Mozart or Scarlatti or, later, Satie. This Gertrude Stein calls beginning again. But the problem is really one of the dimensions of the present as much as of the artist's way with it. The "specious" present which occupied William James is an arbitrary distinction between past and future as they flow together in time. But for purposes of action and art it has to be assumed as an operable space of time. For the composer this space of time can be the measure, or whatever unit can be made to express something without dependence on succession as the condition of its interest. For the writer it can be the sentence or the paragraph or the chapter or the scene or the page or the stanza or whatever. Gertrude Stein experimented with all these units in the course of her work, but in the early work the struggle was mainly with the sentence and the paragraph.

Source: Donald Sutherland, "'Three Lives' and 'The Making of Americans'," in *Gertrude Stein: A Biography of Her Work,* Yale University Press, 1951 , pp. 44-52.

Topics for Further Study

Rose Johnson figures very prominently at the beginning of the story and at the end, although she is largely absent from the center. Looking at where she appears and how the narrator describes her, can you suggest some reasons why Stein might have used her to frame the story in this way?

Ask your librarian to help you find some sources about images of African Americans in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American popular culture (one good source, if it is available, is a film called *Ethnic Notions* by director Marlon Riggs). Compare what you find there with Stein's descriptions in "Melanctha." Can you see ways in which she may have been influenced by the images around her?

Although the story is named for Melanctha, Jeff Campbell's thoughts and feelings become dominant in the story's center, so that he is also a protagonist. If you had to decide whose story this is—Melanctha's or Jeff's—whom would you choose and why?

Look at two paragraphs, one from the beginning of the story and one from the end, that repeat almost exactly. What variations did Stein use? How does that variation and the different context of each paragraph change how you read them? In particular, how does your knowledge of Melanctha change the way you read the later paragraph?

How does Stein treat Melanctha's death? Based on how it makes you feel, speculate about what effect Stein might have wished and why.

Research the avant-garde painters of the early twentieth century, paying particular attention to portraits by Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse. What literary techniques in "Melanctha" correspond to the art techniques with which these artists experimented?

What different things could "wandering" mean? Find examples in the story and fashion your answers around them.

Jeff Campbell is one of the few characters in the story we see change, especially in his relationship with Melanctha. What does he gain from knowing her? What does he lose? In your own opinion, are the changes positive or negative?

In 1903, physicist Albert Einstein formulated his theory of relativity, which revolutionized thinking not just in science, but in the humanities as well. After locating some explanations of what Einstein's theory means, see if you can find some examples of "relativity" in "Melanctha."

Compare and Contrast

Early 1900s: Many writers rely on funding from patrons (wealthy individuals who support the arts) so that they can devote their full time and energies to their work.

1990s: Though institutional support of the arts exists, such as the National Endowment for the Arts, many writers rely on teaching, freelance writing, etc., as their main means of financial support.

Early 1900s: Victorian morals restrict writers' freedom to explore themes of homosexuality in literature. Some critics have suggested that Melanctha is really about a lesbian relationship, and that Stein felt it necessary to mask this relationship.

1990s: Many writers, including Adrienne Rich, Rita May Brown, and Allen Ginsberg, make homosexuality a predominant theme in their writing.

What Do I Read Next?

In *A Moveable Feast* (1964), Stein's friend and fellow-novelist Ernest Hemingway describes the Paris world in which both artists lived. His portrayal of Stein influenced how several generations of critics viewed her.

Stein provided a portrait of her life in Paris in her 1933 bestseller, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas.* Despite the title, the work actually focuses on Stein as allegedly seen through the eyes of her companion.

Novelist James Joyce first established his standing among major writers of the twentieth century with the publication of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). This story of a boy's growth from childhood to young adulthood was, like "Melanctha," revolutionary in its style.

The title character of *Sula* (1973), a novel by Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison, is a black woman who, like Melanctha, "wanders" through life, challenges the morals of those around her, and has her strongest emotional bond with a female friend.

A classic of literary modernism, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) depicts the family life of a middle-class English family, the Ramseys. The author's experiments with form emphasized, like Stein's, the processes of perception and the difficulty of interpersonal communication.

Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), a celebrated text of the Harlem Renaissance, groups together short stories and prose poems that depict African-American life in the rural South. Although Toomer's racial identity remains unclear, he apparently identified himself as African Ameri-can at the time that he lived in the South, observing the lives of the people he met there.

Psychology professor William James, Stein's mentor at Radcliffe, wrote many books about his theories. One introductory text, published in 1961 by Harper and Row, is *Psychology: The Briefer Course.*

Further Study

Haas, Robert Bartlett, editor. *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein,* Black Sparrow Press, 1971.

An anthology of short pieces by and concerning Stein, selected to serve as an introduction to the new reader.

Mellow, James R. Introduction to *Three Lives,* New American Library, 1985.

A brief, accessible introduction that sketches Stein's biography and the history of "Melanctha." Stein, Gertrude. *Fernhurst, Q.E.D., and Other Early Writings.* Edited by Donald Gallup. New York and London: Liveright, 1971.

A collection of Stein's early writings.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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