“An arrangement in a system to pointing”: Reading Strategies for Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*

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Gertrude Stein

Gertrude Stein was born February 3rd, 1874 in Pennsylvania and died July 27th, 1946 in France. She was a white, Jewish, lesbian woman. She opened a salon in Paris where many artists such as Pablo Picasso, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway all visited. She lived with her life partner, Alice B. Toklas, referring to Stein as the “husband” and Toklas as the “wife.”

Gertrude Stein is often understood as a modernist writer. Modernism was an artistic movement which was interested in, as Ezra Pound described, “making it new,” and sorrow of the dissolution of common meaning-making methods. Many scholars instead position her with postmodernism, which normally is understood as coming about decades later, due to the joys Stein takes in the dissolutions of those methods.

Gertrude Stein was certainly a Nazi collaborator during the Second World War. Scholars debate the motivations behind it, but likely a mixture of agreements with their politics and measures of self-preservation.

Tender Button’s Thesis

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

Passages

Star-light, what is star-light, star-light is a little light that is not always mentioned with the sun, it is mentioned with the moon and the sun, it is mixed up with the rest of the time.

EATING.
…
Eel us eel us with no no pea no pea cool, no pea cool cooler, no pea cooler with a land a land cost in, with a land cost in stretches.

CUTLET.
A blind agitation is manly and uttermost.

Nothing aiming is a flower, if flowers are abundant then they are lilac, if they are not they are white in the centre.

ROASTBEEF.
…
Hope in gates, hope in spoons, hope in doors, hope in tables, no hope in daintiness and determination. Hope in dates.

The time when there is not the question is only seen when there is a shower. Any little thing is water.

References

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Gertrude Stein". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 30 Jan. 2023, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gertrude-Stein.

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Will, Barbara. "The Strange Politics of Gertrude Stein." *The National Endowment for the Humanities*, HUMANTIES, Mar. 2012, www.neh.gov/humanities/2012/marchapril/feature/the-strange-politics-gertrude-stein.

Reading Strategies

Sentence Mapping

Work out the what is doing, what is being done, and what is being done to. Ask: is this segment a whole statement or command on its own, or is it something that would appear in a longer statement?

Homophones and Sound

Read the passage aloud. How does it feel in your mouth? Does it sound like another word or phrase?

Word Association

If you see a word or phrase that doesn’t make any sense, ask what things the item in question makes you think of, especially broader concepts.

Useful book-wide motifs

Lists are sets of related objects. If a poem reads something like “a fork, a plate, a sink,” look for the associations between those items.

“No” is an important negatory device. If a statement reads “no,” the statement is most likely flipping. This is common in colloquial English: not good and good are two very different things, but with Gertrude it requires specific explanation.

Repetition is an insistent device. If a poem reads “big big,” it is emphasizing the repeated trait.

An Understood Passage

A PETTICOAT.

A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm.