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**Gertrude Stein's 'Melanctha': A Feminist and Deconstructive  
Approach**

**By**

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## Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation provides specific feminist and deconstructive approaches to Gertrude Stein's 'Melanctha', the second and longest story of *Three Lives*. These approaches outline the contradictions of a text caught between nineteenth-century conventions about sex and race and twentieth-century preoccupations with aesthetics. The individual readings of the text in four chapters are not mutually exclusive; indeed, they are united by a discussion of gender, identity and female sexuality. Each chapter is concerned with demonstrating how Stein's attempts to write her radical views about identity and sexuality are undermined by the difficulty of finding an appropriate space for these views in this early text. Moreover, the final chapter demonstrates that Stein's use of race, which is politically naïve and racist, has profound implications for critics who want to claim this story as Stein's first modern text.

Chapter One provides a reading of Stein's challenge to dominant discourses of gendered identity and mimesis through the trope of the marginal and the "metaphoric lesbian". Chapter Two extends Chapter One into the realms of deconstruction and Jacques Derrida, showing how Stein's concepts of gender and identity prefigure those of Derrida. Chapter Three moves on to a cultural materialist discussion of 'Melanctha' through the trope of the *flâneuse*, and discusses Melanctha's positional challenge to discourses of public and private spaces for men and women at the turn-of-the-century. Finally, Chapter Four continues the cultural materialist reading through an analysis of 'Melanctha' against two African-American texts in order to bring to the reader's attention the problems of a text which Stein claims was her 'negro' story.

These readings are diverse, but brought together, as I have said, through a discussion of gender and identity. More importantly, the final reading of this story, in Chapter Four, draws together the assumptions made in Chapters One, Two and Three in order to demonstrate that this text cannot be read innocently. Stein's bigoted views about race must be addressed if we are to come to a more definitive conclusion about where we place this text ethically, and if we can really accord it the place it has so far occupied in the Canon.

## Abbreviations

Full bibliographical details are provided in the Bibliography

### Works by Gertrude Stein

<i>MOA</i>	<i>The Making of Americans Being a History of a Family's Progress</i>
<i>AABT</i>	<i>The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas</i>
<i>WIHS</i>	<i>Wars I Have Seen</i>
<i>GHA</i>	<i>The Geographical History of America or the Relations of Human Nature to the Human Mind</i>
<i>FF</i>	<i>The Flowers of Friendship: Letters Written to Gertrude Stein</i>

# Gertrude Stein's 'Melanctha': A Feminist and Deconstructive Approach

## Introduction: Preliminaries

When Gertrude Stein wrote in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that 'Melanctha' was 'the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature', she did so by mentioning her own work along side the works of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse.<sup>1</sup> The influence of these two painters on her writing style has been noted by many of Stein's early critics, and by Stein herself, suggesting that much of the direction in her writing sprang from the same impulses and motivations of these modern painters.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Stein acknowledged that up until this point, composition, both literary and artistic, 'consisted of a central idea, to which everything else was an accompaniment and separate but was not an end in itself, and Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing.'<sup>3</sup> The impact of Matisse, Cézanne and Picasso marked the first stages in her departure from traditional modes of representation, which were to become more and more radical throughout her writing career.

Stein's confidence in asserting her break from conventional mimesis, paralleled a whole literary movement concerned with the relationship between language and representation. Modernism, the term used to describe the complex theories and practices that flourished in a period from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, was one in which cultural, political, social and scientific formulations of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. by Carl Van Vechten (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1933; repr, Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 3-237 (p. 50). References are cited from the Vintage Book edition, referred to hereafter as *AABT*, and cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the influence of modes of modern painting on Stein's work, particularly the Cubism of Picasso, see, for example, Marianne DeKoven, 'Gertrude Stein and Modern Painting: Beyond Literary Cubism', *Contemporary Literature*, 22:1 (1981), 81-95; Randa Dubnick, *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language and Cubism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1984), and Marjorie Perloff, 'Poetry as Word-System: The Art of Gertrude Stein,' *American Poetry Review*, 8, (1979), 33-43.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Bartlett Hass, ed., 'A Transatlantic Interview 1946' in *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1971), pp. 15-35 (p. 15).

the modern found themselves in dialogue with the literature of the period.<sup>4</sup> Stein, as Marianne DeKoven points out, was at the centre of three major modernist-avant-garde Parisian groups: the lesbian Left Bank, the bohemian Montmartre of Picasso and Matisse, and the postwar scene of younger expatriate writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite her connections with so many men and women of the period, Stein, for me, stands out as the most radical of them all in her attempt to 'kill[ing] the nineteenth century and kill[ing] it dead'.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, it is almost impossible in the confines of this discussion to provide a summary and analysis of Stein's relationship to, and with, other writers of the period, since the map of Modernism is a broad, if not multifarious one.<sup>7</sup> However, her determination to 'make it new', to paraphrase Pound, involved a radical reformulation of the relationship between language and meaning and, more importantly, a deconstruction of conventional representations of gender and identity.

From the beginnings of her literary experiments in writing, Stein felt a need to forge a personal and artistic identity away from the shadows of her brother, Leo, with whom she lived at Rue de Fleurus for nine years. He believed her 'artistic

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<sup>4</sup> Many discussions of Modernism use the period 1910-1940 as a generic timescale. Of course, modernism comprised diverse, and numerous, political, social, philosophical and artistic theories, and as many 'theorists' of the period maintain, it is often difficult to account for the very broad perspective of the period and the overlapping of ideas and texts. Furthermore, editions of modernist literature take the period 1910-1940 as a practical matter, enabling them to organise the focus of their discussion.

<sup>5</sup> Marianne DeKoven, Introduction to Gertrude Stein in *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Bonnie Kime Scott (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 479-530 (p. 479). Further references to this edition will be given after quotations in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1945), p. 59. All references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number. The text will be abbreviated to *WIHS*.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of Stein's relationship with other writers and artists of the period, see Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933); Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (1987); Van Wyck Brooks, *The Confident Years, 1885-1915* (1952); Edward Burns, ed., *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913-1946*, 2 vols. (1986) and Donald Gallup, ed., *The Flowers of Friendship: Letters Written to Gertrude Stein* (1953); Edmund Fuller, ed., *Journey into The Self: Being the Letters, Journals and Papers of Leo Stein* (1950) and Alice B. Toklas, *What is Remembered* (1963).

capacity [...] very small', which persuaded Stein that she and Leo must go their separate ways.<sup>8</sup> With the arrival of Alice B. Toklas, in 1907, as lover, friend and amanuensis, Stein found nurturance and praise instead of criticism and disdain. Moreover, the personal break with Leo paralleled an artistic break with the nineteenth century. Throughout her career, she made it clear that her writing was an 'American thing',<sup>9</sup> because 'American literature was ready to go on, because where English literature had ceased to be because it had no further to go, American literature had always had it as the way to go'.<sup>10</sup>

The genealogical and literary break from the past was reflected in a radical aesthetic that frustrated but a few of her early critics, and continued to account for publishers' reluctance to print her work.<sup>11</sup> Despite their refusal to print Stein's works, she continued throughout her life to challenge concepts of gendered identity and representations of female desire. One has only to look at her literary output to understand and appreciate the importance of the relationship between language and identity in her writings and, furthermore, the very specific need to write her marginal status as a woman and lesbian into discourse.<sup>12</sup> Most feminist

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<sup>8</sup> Leo Stein, *Journey into the Self: Being the Letters, Papers and Journals of Leo Stein*, ed. by Edmund Fuller (New York: Crown Publishers, 1950), referred to hereafter as *Journey into the Self*, pp. 52-3.

<sup>9</sup> Gertrude Stein, *The Gradual Making of Americans*, in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, pp. 241-258 (p. 258), referred to hereafter as *GMA* and cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>10</sup> 'What is English Literature' in *Gertrude Stein Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909-45*, ed. by Patricia Meyerowitz (London: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 31-58 (p. 56). References will be made, from this edition, to 'What is English Literature', 'Portraits and Repetition', pp. 99-124, and 'What are Master-pieces And Why Are There So Few of Them' (1936), pp. 148-156. All of these essays will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Kostelanetz writes, 'Though she had been writing steadily from the age of twenty-nine, she was thirty-eight before any editor, on his own volition, accepted her work for publication (and that was Alfred Stieglitz of *Camera Work*)', cited in the introduction to *The Yale Gertrude Stein* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980) p. xxxix.

<sup>12</sup> Whilst I do not wish to undermine the range of Stein's writings, I want to emphasise that in many of her works, representing the personality or identity of a person is fundamental. Moreover, much of her writing is concerned with finding a specific space in which to articulate a lesbian identity, her relationship with Alice or female desire generally. The following works attest to the relationship between writing and sexuality in Stein's oeuvre. 'Ada' written in 1910, published in 1922 in *Geography and Plays* (Boston: Four Seas Company, 1922); the last third of *A Long Gay Book*, written between 1911-12 and published in 1933 in *Matisse, Picasso and Gertrude Stein with Two Shorter Stories* (Paris: Plain Edition, 1933); 'Miss Furr and Miss Skeene', written in 1911 and published in 1922 in *Geography and Plays*. Portraits such as 'A Book Concluding with A Wife Has a Cow A Love Story', written in 1923 and published in 1926 (Paris: Editions de la Galerie Simon); Poems such 'Lifting Belly' (1915-17) and 'Patriarchal Poetry' (1927), published in *Bee Time Vine and Other Pieces* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953). All of these

critics of Stein have commented on this relationship between writing and sexuality,<sup>13</sup> but perhaps Ulla Dydo sums it up best when she writes in her introduction to 'A Book Concluding with A Wife Has A Cow A Love Story', that 'sexuality and writing become one' and 'all Stein's writings become love stories and all her work a single love story' (p. 451).

If Stein's works are grounded in the link between writing and sexuality, then this is nowhere more apparent than in 'Melanctha', the second and longest story of *Three Lives*.<sup>14</sup> I firmly believe that this text, a transitional piece in Stein's oeuvre, is essential to an understanding of her early attempts to approach her own marginality as a woman, and a lesbian, through the figure of a young 'mulatto' woman. Moreover, this representation of female sexual desire, in a text that she calls her 'negro story',<sup>15</sup> involves me in a 'track of revisionist modernism',<sup>16</sup> recently begun by feminist and African-Americanist critics on relationships between men and women of the modernist period.<sup>17</sup>

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works, apart from 'Patriarchal Poetry' and 'Lifting Belly' can be found in *A Stein Reader: Gertrude Stein*, edited and with an introduction by Ulla E. Dydo (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993). The latter two poems can be found in *The Yale Gertrude Stein*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz. The Dydo edition supercedes Kostelanetz's and further references to Dydo's edition will be given after quotations in the text. Future references to 'Lifting Belly' and 'Patriarchal Poetry', in the Kostelanetz edition, will also be given after quotations in the text.

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Burke, for example, agrees that Stein's interest in language is underpinned by the erotic impulses in her life. She argues that Ezra Pound and Stein 'came at the central modernist question of the link between language and representation from different angles and under different psychosexual pressures', cited in 'Getting Spliced: Modernism and Sexual Difference', *American Quarterly*, 39 (1987), 98-121 (p. 100).

<sup>14</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives* (New York and London: Penguin, 1990). Originally published by the Grafton Press, 1909. All references to the Penguin edition will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

<sup>15</sup> 'Composition as Explanation', in *A Stein Reader*, pp. 495-503 (p. 498). All references to this essay will be cited hereafter parenthetically in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Tuzyline Jita Allan, 'The Death of Sex and the Soul in *Mrs Dalloway* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*', in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, ed. by Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 95-113 (p. 96). In this article, Allan explains that the lengthening of modernism's reach into gender, race and sexual interchange, must force us to reassess seemingly dissimilar writers, such as Woolf and Larsen. There are, suggests Allan, a number of shared experiences waiting to be revealed to us.

<sup>17</sup> Bonnie Kime Scott, in her introduction to *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (1990), highlights the fact that the unconscious gendering of modernism had not only excluded the inscriptions of women and mothers, and of issues of gender and sexuality (p. 2), but also excluded black writers of the Harlem Renaissance and writings about the 'New Negro'. Furthermore, what had also been lost in the gendering of modernism was the exploration of race by white women writers such as Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961) and Gertrude Stein, (1874-1946), (pp. 4-5). More recently, parallels have been made between Gertrude Stein and Nella Larsen in Corinne E. Blackmer's article 'African Masks and the Arts of Passing in Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" and

Stein makes two claims for 'Melanctha': that it is modern and that it is a 'negro' story. Most of the criticism from the eighties onwards, which I detail later in this chapter, deals specifically with the story's modernity and Stein's challenge to dominant modes of gendered discourse. For example, Marianne DeKoven, in *A Different Language*, identifies 'Melanctha' as Stein's transitional work, illustrating her development from patriarchal, conventional forms of writing to experimental and anti-patriarchal forms.<sup>18</sup> It was DeKoven who paved the way for more radical interpretations of Stein's texts, and feminists of the last two decades have been keen to show how Stein's challenge to 'patriarchal modes of signification' through 'a rich, complex, open-ended syntactical and semantic polysemy' enabled her to deconstruct the binary oppositions of gender and identity that have plagued women for centuries (DeKoven, *The Gender of Modernism*, p. 480). DeKoven, like Jayne L. Walker and Randa Dubnick, relished Stein's anti-mimetic narrative with its emphasis on the continuous present, its insistent repetition, both as iteration and variation, and its refusal of a teleological beginning, middle and end.<sup>19</sup>

More recently, Ellen E. Berry has suggested that our difficulty with reading Stein is that we have not yet learned to change our abilities as reading subjects; that is, 'cognitively, even ontologically, we would have to become other than we are in order to comprehend fully this discourse of the other'.<sup>20</sup> She adds that Stein

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Nella Larsen's *Passing*', in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 4, (1993), 230-263. Further references to this article will be given after quotations in the text. Tuzyline Jita Allan's article, 'The Death of Sex and the Soul in *Mrs Dalloway* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*' is another example of the links made between women of the Harlem Renaissance and women practitioners of 'traditional modernism'. Finally, Susan Stanford Friedman's article, 'Modernism and the "Scattered Remnant": Race and Politics in H.D.'s *Development*', discusses H.D.'s exploration of race. This article is cited in *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, ed. by Shari Benstock (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 208-231. Individual essays from this edition will be cited by essay title and references made after quotations in the text.

<sup>18</sup> *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1983), p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Randa Dubnick, *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language and Cubism* (1984) and Jayne L. Walker, *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from Three Lives to Tender Buttons* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering: Gertrude Stein's Postmodernism* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 31.

wanted to 'undo common sense logical structures, and to express the "thing" inside her (including her lesbianism)' (p. 13). In addition, Joseph N. Riddel comments on her undoing of 'inherited conventions' and talks confidently about her postmodernism.<sup>21</sup> These critics have suggested that her experiments in language align her more with deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida and French feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.

The issue of Stein's (post)modernity is on-going, as the proliferation of critical works attest to. These critical responses to 'Melanctha' are important for a broadening of a perspective traditionally preoccupied with the text's 'first leap into modernist modes of representation'.<sup>22</sup> Yet, importantly, what they sidestep is the representation of race in 'Melanctha', and, more specifically, the 'exploratory and explanatory uses to which she puts the black woman who holds center stage in that work'.<sup>23</sup>

Stein, as I have said, called 'Melanctha' her 'negro' story and yet it has taken almost a century for any critic to call into question her representation of black life. Can we, as Sonia Saldivar-Hull argues, make a claim for Stein's feminism and her anti-patriarchal writing, when feminist critics have unreservedly sidestepped the issue of Stein's racism?<sup>24</sup> DeKoven, in *A Different Language*, seemed to think so. She explained it quite clearly when she said: 'Our attention is also diverted from the thematic implications of the plots by the characteristically temporal impressionist structure of *Three Lives*' (p. 32). One might forgive DeKoven for her abdication of critical responsibility, if it were not for the fact that Stein's radical aesthetic, in 'Melanctha', depends implicitly on her representation of her

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<sup>21</sup> 'Modern Times: Stein, Bergson, and the Ellipses of "American" Writing', in *The Crisis of Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, ed. by Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 330-367 (p. 330).

<sup>22</sup> Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London and Basingstoke: Picador, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> 'Wrestling Your Ally: Stein, Racism, and Feminist Critical Practice', in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 182-98 (p. 188).



black character. Furthermore, Karin Cope, responding to an MLA call for papers on 'Critiquing Feminist Icons: H.D. and Gertrude Stein', asked the question, 'What does it mean to read Stein ethically, or *not* to divert the question of judgement?'<sup>25</sup> A telling question, I think, and one that needs to be addressed. Stein's use of race is complex and problematic; the representations of race in this story 'projections and displacements of her contradictory desires for both identification with and distance from the category of race'.<sup>26</sup>

The 'negro' story of 'Melanctha' as is well known, transforms the lesbian content of her first novella *Q.E.D. (Quod Erat Demonstrandum)*, written in 1903, into a heterosexual story of the relationship between Jefferson Campbell, a young 'mulatto' doctor, and Melanctha Herbert, a young 'mulatto' girl.<sup>27</sup> The displacement of a lesbian triangle, between Stein (Adele in *Q.E.D.*) and two of her Bryn Mawr college graduates, Mabel Haynes (Sophie Neathe) and May Bookstaver (Helen Thomas), suggests that Stein had not resolved the difficulties of her emerging lesbianism. It is of importance, then, it seems to me, to question the problematic relationship between the stylistically subversive form and style of the novella, outlined by DeKoven, Riddel and Berry, and the way in which issues of race and sex challenge our preconceptions of this story as her first modern piece. I will not, as most critics have done, ignore the question of Stein's use of a black woman in order to address issues of her own marginality and lesbianism. Indeed, I hope to show how a reading of race both from a feminist and deconstructive perspective will open up and help us to challenge our heretofore innocent and politically naive readings of this story.

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<sup>25</sup> "'Moral Deviancy" and Contemporary Feminism', in *Feminism Beside Itself*, ed. by Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 155-178 (p. 159).

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Will, *Gertrude Stein, Modernism and the Problem of "Genius"* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> *Q.E.D.* first published in 1950 as *Things As They Are* (Pawlet, Vermont: Banyan Press, 1950). The title *Things as They Are* was chosen by her literary executors. The novel was reissued by Leon Katz in 1972, as *Fernhurst, Q.E.D., and Other early Writings* (London: Peter Owen, 1972). It was published posthumously and the manuscript, along with Stein's other manuscripts, given by Alice Toklas to Carl Van Vechten, in 1946. Van Vechten deposited them in the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

The dialectic of this thesis, then, sets up a 'bi-focal' approach, using deconstructive and feminist responses in order to acknowledge the different strands through which Stein's text, 'Melanctha' moves, to engage in what Diana Fuss calls 'a complicated process of "bi-translation" – of translating in at least two directions at once'.<sup>28</sup> Whilst Stein's 'Melanctha' is not, as such, an Afro-American text, it does mediate between the nineteenth and twentieth century, between the past and the present, between convention and experimentation. Nestled between 'The Good Anna' and 'The Gentle Lena', in *Three Lives*, 'Melanctha occupies the space "in-between", a space in which the contradictions of the text are played out. These contradictions and complexities, it seems to me, have often been overlooked in an attempt to affirm Stein's place in the modernist canon through an emphasis upon her experimentation, which has, as DeKoven pointed out, pushed thematic concerns, of race, to the sidelines.

The paths of deconstruction and feminism will merge and converge at various points in the thesis and will not, like many critical responses to the form and content of 'Melanctha', remain mutually exclusive. These paths aim to provide an overview of Stein's radical experimentation in and beyond modernism, and to show how issues of gender and identity, through female sexual desire, are challenged, yet problematic. Furthermore, the analysis of Stein's subversion of issues of gender and identity, represented by her radical aesthetic, will take place through specific discussions of 'Composition as Explanation' (1926), 'What is English Literature' (1934), 'Portraits and Repetition' (1934), *Narration: Four Lectures* (1935) and 'What are Master-pieces and Why are There So Few of Them' (1936). These essays, discussed in, and across, most of these chapters, I believe, provide critical evidence of her engagement with aspects of her modernity, in her writing, and the fundamental link between writing and identity. They offer a framework in which to read 'Melanctha', in which to understand

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<sup>28</sup> *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p. 4.

Stein's later works, and in which to appreciate her ongoing concern with representing the modern in literature.

Historically, 'the failure of a critical alliance between feminism and (speaking reductively) "deconstruction" is due to the fact that their relationship has never been one of complicity — of being on the same side.'<sup>29</sup> For many feminist critics, argues Diana Fuss, 'feminism and deconstruction are fundamentally incompatible discourses since deconstruction displaces the essence of the class "women" which feminism needs to articulate its politics' (p. 75). One of the problems we face as critics of Stein's 'Melanctha' is how to reconcile the politics of feminism; that is, Stein's representation of the lives and desires of black women with deconstruction's refusal of all political categories. Marilyn R. Farwell makes this point clear when she writes:

postmodernism's tendency to divorce textuality from experience, its denial of identity in theories either of cultural construction or the textual free play of the signifier, and its refusal of agency, thus the refusal of feminism, ignore the real people who are oppressed by textual constructions.<sup>30</sup>

However, like many feminists engaged in this discussion, I do not feel that the critical impasse between feminism and deconstruction is insurmountable.<sup>31</sup> In light of Stein's writings, and in this case 'Melanctha', the discourses of feminism and deconstruction work well together, shedding light on the tensions in the text. Let me explain.

Firstly, a feminist approach to 'Melanctha' will provide an analysis of Stein's representation of desire and female identity, throwing light on the obvious link

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<sup>29</sup> Nancy K. Miller, 'Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader' in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. by Teresa de Lauretis (Basingstoke and London: MacMillan Press, 1988), pp. 102-120 (p. 105).

<sup>30</sup> *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of these issues, see Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: ms. en abyme* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) and Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism, History, Theory, Practice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988).

between Stein's own marginality as a woman writer, and a lesbian, and Melanctha's sexuality. Added to this, an implicit feminist discussion of 'Melanctha' must take account of her invidious racism and the consequences of this for her modernist project. Whilst we must, as Karin Cope has suggested, read Stein 'ethically,' and engage in an analysis of the way that racist stereotypes inform her writing and her representation of black life, I also believe that the character, Melanctha, as a 'tragic mulatta' functions, in some ways, as a metaphor for Stein's artistic project.

As a figure "in-between", both literally and metaphorically, Melanctha bridges the two centuries. On the one hand, she represents Stein's inability to move away from the stereotypes of the 'tragic mulatta' or fallen woman, as indicated by the ending of the novella; indeed, the wanderings of Melanctha are literally representative of the trope of the 'tragic mulatta' and the *flâneuse*/fallen woman, who is doomed, textually, to social failure. On the other hand, Stein's representation of subversive female desire in order to explore her own sexuality and marginality, in a predominantly patriarchal culture, links her with other female modernist writers.

Secondly, as the figure for Stein's postmodernity, Melanctha, literally, through her wanderings, her sexual encounters and her inability to fit into definitions of appropriate modes of behaviour for women, signals Stein's deconstruction of gendered identity and its impact on sexuality. Moreover, Melanctha's wanderings are never defined, either by Stein nor by Melanctha. By refusing to define what she means, Melanctha, as Stein's Africanist persona, is already engaging in an elliptical game of linguistic masking: she refuses to signify and make her meaning clear; instead, she plays out the meaning "in-between" things.

Through the discourse of deconstruction, I will demonstrate the ways in which Stein's modernism must be read as a radical engagement with epistemological issues of language and meaning, and the subject's relation to language. Stein's literary project undertook the deconstruction of 'Aristotelian principles of identity,

non-contradiction and the excluded middle'.<sup>32</sup> Derrida, like Stein, is, according to Catherine Gallagher, 'a logical extension of a long line of modernist thinkers who have been arguing since the turn-of-the-century for the independence of language from a determining world of objects'.<sup>33</sup> The implicit critique of the relationship between signifier and signified, in 'Melanctha', through the insistent use of repetition-as-variation and repetition-as iteration, calls to mind the very project of deconstruction.<sup>34</sup> Stein's use of the continuous present as a means of suggesting that the ending is also the beginning seems to me reason enough to include the discourse of deconstruction in my analysis. Stein's beginning was also the ending; that is, the end of the twentieth century. In many ways, I believe that Stein's text, 'Melanctha', can be read as a "praefatio" (a saying beforehand) to Derrida's philosophic enterprise. The ending, which is where we are now, is in fact Stein's beginning: the two are conflated, bridged. To pursue the complexities of this text either from a feminist or deconstructive approach would mean that some aspect of the text's meaning would be lost or ignored. Used together, these approaches will generate what I consider to be more fruitful discussions of Stein's literary project and the tensions and contradictions inherent in it.

My job, then, in this enterprise, is to explore the function of Melanctha within the text. Serving as a figure for Stein's modernity, her views on identity and sexuality, and her racism, I want to suggest that she both encompasses Stein's implicit bigotry about race; after all, she represents, in Friedman's words, a 'white [liberal's] adoption of an oppressed people's cause' (p. 227), and yet she becomes the mouthpiece for Stein's radical views about language, representation and identity. Working between these critical discourses, and demonstrating the means

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<sup>32</sup> Judith Still and Michael Worton, eds., *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Gallagher's comment is cited by Benstock in her article 'Beyond the Reaches of Feminist Criticism: A Letter from Paris', in *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, pp. 7-29 (p. 18).

<sup>34</sup> I am referring here, specifically, to the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida refers to himself as one in a long line of philosophers involved in the 'radical reformulation of metaphysics'. Cited in 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1990-97; repr., 1997), referred to hereafter as 'Structure, Sign and Play'.

by which the text can be read fruitfully, from differing perspectives, I will, eventually, bring my readings to closure by demonstrating that her positive inscriptions of female sexuality are problematised by her representation of race.

The first section of this chapter has been concerned with theoretical preliminaries. In the second section of this chapter, before I begin these readings of the text, I think it useful to establish Stein's sources for 'Melanctha', and the process of writing, so that we can more easily recognise how it mediates a space between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the third section, I will provide an overview of critical responses to the story, from its publication to present, in order to demonstrate the proliferation of works on Stein's modernity or postmodernity and the paucity of responses to the story's racism. Finally, in section four, I will outline my approach to readings of the story in each chapter and provide an overview of the thesis.

### Process of writing

Gertrude Stein wrote *Three Lives* during the period 1905-6. During this time, she had been translating Gustave Flaubert's *Trois Contes*, whilst sitting under Cézanne's portrait of his wife, 'Portrait d'une Femme', purchased by Stein in 1905.<sup>35</sup> In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein writes, 'She had begun not long before as an exercise in literature to translate Flaubert's *Trois Contes* and then she had this Cézanne and she looked at it and under its stimulus she wrote *Three Lives*' (p. 31). Later in 1946, in an interview with Robert Bartlett Haas, Stein made it clear that 'everything I have done has been influenced by Flaubert and Cézanne, and this gave me a new feeling about composition' (p. 15). In addition to the influence of these two men, Stein's process of composition involved ruminations on her character, and story, during her sittings for Pablo

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<sup>35</sup> *Trois Contes: Un Coeur Simple, Le Légende de St Julian l'Hospitalier, Herodias* (Paris: Charpentier Collection, 1877). The influence of Flaubert's story of Félicité, the self-sacrificing servant in *Un Coeur Simple*, can be seen in 'The Good Anna' and 'The Gentle Lena' of *Three Lives*.

Picasso, who was painting her portrait.<sup>36</sup> Whilst she walked back and forth between her home, 27 Rue de Fleurus, and Picasso's studio in Rue de Ravignan, in Montmartre, Stein 'wove into the life of Melanctha' incidents that 'she noticed in walking down the hill from the rue Ravignan' (*AABT*, p. 46). Stein's friendship with Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and the influence of Paul Cézanne, all figures at the heart of the modern art movement, affected her work.

Moreover, it was about this time that Picasso, along with Matisse, discovered African sculpture and it is not difficult to assume that this too had an impact on the meditations of this story. Van Wyck Brooks, writing in *The Confident Years, 1885-1915*, states that 'Picasso had just discovered African sculpture, previously interesting only to curio-hunters, and this may have set her mind running on the Negro Melanctha' (p. 255). In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein wrote that it was Matisse who first drew Picasso's attention to African statues. Stein, however, liked African sculpture but was 'not at any time interested in african sculpture' (*AABT*, p. 60). The process of writing, then, influenced by various factors, contributed to the story's 'transitional' status, because in reading Flaubert and in re-imagining her own experiences of forbidden passion, Stein wrote from the nineteenth century; yet, at the same time, the influence of Picasso and Cézanne forged her place in the twentieth century. Etta Cone, a friend of Stein's, and lifelong art collector, typed *Three Lives*. She and her sister, Claribel, were independently wealthy Americans, from Baltimore. Claribel, the elder of the two sisters was a doctor researching and teaching at Johns Hopkins when Gertrude entered as a student at the Johns Hopkins Medical School.<sup>37</sup> Once it was written and presented for publication, Stein had to find a publisher for her work.

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<sup>36</sup> Stein made 90 sittings for Picasso's portrait, which represented, according to Alice/Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Picasso's transition from the Italian period to Cubism (p. 50). In this portrait, Picasso covers Stein's face with an expressionless, angular mask, a mask, according to Michael North, influenced by ancient Iberian reliefs he had seen at the Louvre. This use of the mask can be seen in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) and *Three Dancers* (1925), as well as other paintings.

<sup>37</sup> Claribel Cone (1864-1929) and Etta Cone (1870-1949). Stein produced a portrait of the two sisters, titled 'Two Women' probably in 1912. In it Stein 'hints at intricate personal relations and

## Publication

Written between 1905-6 but not published until 1909, *Three Lives* demonstrates the difficulties Stein had in publishing her work. Originally titled *Three Histories*, Stein sent the typed copy to a friend, Hutchins Hapgood, who feared she would have ‘difficulties with publishers’ but suggested she send the manuscript to Pitts Duffield of Duffield & Company, New York.<sup>38</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, on reading the manuscript in 1906, wrote to Stein on 22<sup>nd</sup> April, stating that she found the stories ‘extremely good—full of reality, truth, unconventionality’ (p. 31).

According to Hapgood, ‘Melanctha’ ‘is the very best thing on the subject of the Negro that I have ever read’ (p. 31). Whilst Hapgood warmed to the subject matter, and Stein’s depiction of the African-American community, she nonetheless found the style of ‘Melanctha’ difficult: ‘And yet somehow you have attained your end without any of the ordinary devices of plot, piquancy, conversation, variety, drama, etc. Your stories are not easy reading, for that reason’ (p. 31).

Hapgood felt that Pitts Duffield would be more likely to publish the story and not pay too much attention to fear of commercial failure (p. 32). However, by August 1906, Duffield had replied to Stein, informing her that the book was ‘too unconventional, for one thing, and if I may say so, too literary’ (p. 32). He suggested Stein turn the manuscript over to Flora M. Holly, a literary agent, for her perusal. In a letter dated January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1907, Flora Holly wrote to Stein telling her that she doubted if she could find a publisher for these stories, which seemed to her ‘more character sketches than anything else’ (p. 38). Holly reinforced the fact that publishers would want to ensure that the book would sell at least three to

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overtones of tender feeling and subdued hostility, loving, liking, listening and remembering’ (Dydo, *A Stein Reader*, p. 105).

<sup>38</sup> Letter to Gertrude Stein from Hutchins Hapgood, April 22<sup>nd</sup> [1906] in *The Flowers of Friendship: Letters Written to Gertrude Stein*, ed. by Donald Gallup (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953), p. 32. The following pages will detail responses to Stein’s ‘Melanctha’ in *Three Lives* and further references to letters in this edition will be given after quotations in the text. The text, where necessary, will be abbreviated to *FF*.



five thousand copies, something that wasn't guaranteed of *Three Histories*. She informed Stein that she would send the manuscript to Viola Rosebora' of McClure's Magazine but Rosebora' was not interested. From there, the manuscript was sent to Mrs Charles Knoblauch in 1908 (formerly May Bookstaver of her Johns Hopkins days, and Gertrude's lover), via Mabel Weeks. Mrs Knoblauch took the manuscript to F.H. Hitchcock at the Grafton Press, a firm that specialised in private printings.

In his response to Stein, Hitchcock, in a letter of January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1909, pointed out that he found 'some pretty bad slips in grammar', and suggested that Stein have the work edited by Alvin F. Sanborn, an editor in Paris (p. 42). Stein refused to see Sanborn, but he paid a visit to her, nonetheless. Sanborn's visit to Rue de Fleurus, recounted in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, tells how Sanborn was told by Stein that 'everything that is written in the manuscript is written with the intention of its being so written' (pp. 63-64). Although Stein refused to make any of the noted corrections, she did take on board Hitchcock's suggestion that she change the title. In a letter dated April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1909, he stated:

In regard to the title I want to suggest "Three Lives" as being much more descriptive for what you have written. I would prefer not to use "Three Histories" for two reasons. The first that it is much too formal and the second that I do not want it to get confused with my real historical publications. Mrs Knoblauch liked "Three Lives" and I hope you will also (p. 43).

Stein changed the title of her book and it was published privately by the Grafton Press in September 1909.<sup>39</sup> Hitchcock had suggested to Stein that her friend, Hutchins Hapgood write an introduction to the first edition because Hapgood's name might attract people to the volume; in the same letter, Hitchcock still considered the volume 'peculiar', a work that many people would find difficult to 'take [...] seriously' (p. 44).

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<sup>39</sup> Grafton Press published a thousand copies of *Three Lives* at a cost of \$660.00 to Stein. Three hundred copies were imported by John Lane for publication in England.

When Stein came to try and publish *Three Lives* in England, the difficulty lay not only in the form of the volume but also the subject matter. She had already sent the manuscript of *Three Lives* to Grant Richards. He wrote back to Stein in September 1911, saying that the 'scene and atmosphere, both in this case so very American', would little interest a British audience (pp. 53-54). Moreover, the fact that this was a volume of short stories made it more difficult to sell.

Stein was determined to find an audience for her volume. She had already sent four copies of the volume to her friend, Emily Dawson, in London, asking that she send copies to certain British authors. Stein had chosen George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy.<sup>40</sup> Despite Dawson's difficulties getting copies to these writers, H.G. Wells did review it, and in his letter of 7th January, 1913, he writes:

I have just read *Three Lives*. At first I was repelled by your extraordinary style, I was busy with a book of my own & I put yours away. It is only in the last week I have read it — I read it with a deepening pleasure & admiration (p. 69).

In March 1913, Roger Fry confirmed for Stein that John Lane of The Bodley Head, London, had a copy of *Three Lives* and would probably publish it. In the same year, Stein's brother, Leo, in a letter to Mabel Weeks, complained of Gertrude's thirst for '*gloire*' and noted that he couldn't 'abide her stuff'. He went on to add that he felt her artistic capacity 'extremely small' and that 'the grammar and vocabulary and sentence structure of three lives might have been different in a dozen ways without loss, provided she had put down all she [knew] about the people concerned' (pp. 52-53). In June 1914, Alice and Gertrude came to

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<sup>40</sup> Herbert George Wells (1866-1946), remembered for his scientific romances, forerunners of what we term science fiction; Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), a writer of fiction dealing with ordinary, provincial life; John Galsworthy (1867-1933), best known for his *The Forsyte Saga* (1922), and George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), known for his socialist beliefs. It is interesting that the very men Stein addressed her work to, were the men that Virginia Woolf considered 'materialists'. Woolf argues that these writers 'write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and enduring'. For Woolf, the works of these men fail to capture 'life or spirit, truth or reality', 'Modern Fiction', *The Common Reader* (London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1925), pp. 207-218, (pp. 209-211).

England to arrange a publishing contract with John Lane of the Bodley Head. By July 31, 1914, Stein had her contract. The Bodley Head published *Three Lives*, in London, in 1915.

In 1920, John Lane agreed to reprint *Three Lives* and sent copies to Israel Zangwill and Frank Swinnerton for their perusal. Swinnerton, in a letter to Stein in September 1920, commented on the 'extraordinary penetration' with which she presented the suffering of Melanctha and others (pp. 135-6). Zangwill, too, appreciated the 'subtlety and originality' of the volume but even by October, 1920, *Three Lives* was still not attracting the attention of the literary world (p. 136). As Henry McBride stated to Stein in his letter of November 13, 1920:

*There is a public for you but no publisher [...]* For all that, a writer who already has so many followers as you have is safe in assuming the expense of publishing [...] Let the books that don't sell at once wait in your trunk and every new book you get helps sell the old ones (p. 137).

However, the turning point for Stein and publication of her work, certainly in London, was her lecture tour at Oxford and Cambridge. It was Edith Sitwell, impressed by Stein's writings, who asked Stein to lecture at Oxford and Cambridge. Harold Acton, president of the Cambridge literary society, sent Stein a formal invitation to lecture in March 1925. In June 1926, Stein visited England and delivered 'Composition as Explanation' to great applause.<sup>41</sup> In February 1927, John Lane expressed his interest in publishing a third edition of *Three Lives* (p. 203).

Also in 1927, Albert and Charles Boni published *Three Lives* in New York. In 1933 Cerf Bennett of Random House, New York, reprinted *Three Lives* for the Modern Library. He wrote to Stein on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1934, telling her that 'THREE LIVES was the best selling book in the Modern Library in November'

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<sup>41</sup> 'Composition as Explanation', published by Leonard Woolf at the Hogarth Press in November 1926. In his autobiography, Acton tells the story of Stein's visit to Oxford and the success of her lecture. He writes, 'Those who had come to scoff were disarmed and charmed' (p. 163), in *Memoirs of an Aesthete* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1948).

and it had 'caused a great deal of comment' (p. 293). Carl Van Vechten was asked to write the introduction for the 1933 publication, which pleased Stein enormously. It was published in translation in Italy, in 1940, by G. Einaudi Torino and translated by Cesare Pavese. *Three Lives* proved to be one of the most accessible of Stein's works and, therefore, one of the most frequently published. Despite its success it has had a mixed critical reception.

### Critical Reception

The following pages will be dedicated to an overview of responses to *Three Lives*, and in particular 'Melanctha'. The main criticism of the text came with the advent of feminist, psychoanalytic and deconstructive theories, where it seems such theories have provided discursive tools by which to read, what still seemed to many, Stein's difficult texts. Whilst such criticism is, in the main, the most varied, my overview will aim to provide a comprehensive, although not complete, review of 'Melanctha'. Firstly I will look at early responses to 'Melanctha' and then move on to feminist and deconstructive responses to the text. I will then discuss recent responses to the text's racism and from this move on to situate myself, and my methodological approach, in response to this criticism. In so doing, my aim is to provide an insight in to responses to one of Stein's most popular works and to suggest how certain deconstructive and feminist responses gloss over serious issues of the text whilst claiming a place for Stein in the canon of modern literature.

Once *Three Lives* was published, reviews were few and far between. The Boston Morning Herald thought it extraordinary and the Kansas City Star considered Stein 'a literary artist of such originality'.<sup>42</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, writing from New Jersey in January 1910, explained to Stein that she had seen no reviews: 'I don't believe your publishers have done at all well by your book. I did

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<sup>42</sup> Diana Souhami, *Gertrude and Alice* (London: Pandora, 1993), p. 136.

not know that it was published until long after it appeared [...] I have seen no reviews and no advertisements' (FF, pp. 48-49).

Responses to *Three Lives*, both prior to, and after, publication are varied. As stated earlier, Hutchins Hapgood, in her letter of April, 1906, thought *Three Lives* a marvellous book, a book in which 'the characters [...] are real and clearly drawn, and the atmosphere and setting is all in tone' (p. 31). Henri-Pierre Roché, a friend of Leo and Gertrude Stein, commented, in a letter June, 1907, on the 'broad narrative manner and the simplicity of style' (p. 40)<sup>43</sup>. Yet, like many of the critics of the volume, Roché was also quick to point out that it became at times boring, and 'the fine narrative sweep became chaotic' (p. 40). Emma Lootz, one of Stein's friends at Johns Hopkins, wrote to her in 1909, stating, 'In Melanctha I get so balled up with my own observation of the drama that I am incapable of seeing it straight, but I'm powerfully interested in the working-out of your theory' (p. 46). Lootz, like many other readers of *Three Lives*, found the subject matter appealing but her attention taken with the form of the volume.

Leo Stein had already made his dislike of his sister's work clear and felt that Stein could only 'express herself by elaborately telling all at full length' (p. 52). In the same year, 1913, Roger Fry, having read *Three Lives*, wrote to Stein, in March 1913, informing her that the difficulty of such a work lay in the problem of its style; an English audience simply wouldn't appreciate its form (FF, p. 76).

Criticism of the book was always varied, ranging from an appreciation of its subject matter to an acknowledgement of Stein as being at the forefront of artistic innovation. Whilst Wyndham Lewis, in *Time and the Western Man*, berated Stein's prose style in his now famous image of 'cold, black suet-pudding, [...] cut it at any point and it is the same thing; the same heavy, sticky, opaque mass all through, and all along', his outrage at Stein's prose was that it contributed to the simple illiterateness of mass democracy.<sup>44</sup> He despised what he saw as Stein's

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<sup>43</sup> Letter to Stein, translated.

<sup>44</sup> *Time and Western Man* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), p. 77.

representation of 'the mass-average of Melancthas and Annas' (p. 78), not in the words of Melanctha herself, but in Stein's own version of Melanctha's dialect (p. 74). Kenneth Macpherson, Bryher's husband [and H.D.'s lover], and editor of *Close Up*, saw in Stein's work, the genesis of a new experimental art, reflecting modern tendencies in film (*FF*, p. 208)

Perhaps the most interesting reviews of *Three Lives*, and 'Melanctha', particularly, in the early years, were those by Nella Larsen and Richard Wright. In May 1927, Carl Van Vechten, Stein's close friend, wrote to Stein telling her of Larsen's delight with the story of 'Melanctha'. According to Van Vechten, Larsen (Mrs. Elmer Imes) considered it 'the best Negro story she [...] ever read'.<sup>45</sup> In her letter to Stein, dated February 1928, Larsen writes,

And always I get from it some new thing — a truly great story. I never cease to wonder how you came to write it and just why you and not some one of us should so accurately have caught the spirit of this race of mine. Carl asked me to send you my poor first book, and I am doing so (*FF*, p. 216).

There are obvious difficulties with this letter, not least the assumption that Stein has greater insight into the life of the African American than Larsen herself. Moreover, as Wyndham Lewis and Leo Stein make quite clear, Stein's attempt to depict the life and language of 'Melanctha' is problematic because of its racist representation of African-American community. Larsen's deference to Stein's reputation is embarrassing, to say the least, and her presentation of her own work as poor, perhaps indicative of Larsen's own conflictual feelings about her race.

In 1931, Edmund Wilson wrote that *Three Lives* had acquired a 'certain reputation' considering that it had been printed privately and, at that time, had attracted little attention, a point Hutchins Hapgood had made clear when she told

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<sup>45</sup> Edward Burns, ed., *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913-1946*, 2 Vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 147.

Stein that very few reviews, if any, had been published.<sup>46</sup> Wilson went on to claim that Stein's story, 'Melanctha', was one of the best attempts by a white American novelist to 'understand the mind of the modern Americanised negro' (p. 190). In fact, he believed Stein's story to be so realistic that 'we quite forget its inhabitants are black' (p. 190). The issue of Stein's treatment of race in 'Melanctha' seems to be one which many critics either praise Stein for, or choose to say nothing about.

Richard Wright, in 1945, declared, in his review of Stein's *Wars I Have Seen*, that 'Miss Stein's struggling words made the speech of the people around me vivid' and that, on reading 'Melanctha' he states: 'I began to hear the speech of my grandmother, who spoke a deep, pure Negro dialect'.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, in a letter to Stein dated May 27<sup>th</sup> 1945, Wright expressed the frustration of his feelings involved in writing about the insecurities and fears of the African American in America. He wrote of their sadness and distress having 'made [...] a very tragic thing in America' (*FF*, pp. 379-80). Finally, for an edition of writers' favourite American authors, Wright chose an extract from 'Melanctha' and added in his introduction, 'This story was the first realistic treatment of Negro life I'd seen [...] and from my first reading of the story I wished I had written that.'<sup>48</sup>

In 1950, Haldeen Braddy, writing in the *New Mexico Quarterly*, suggested that in 'Melanctha', Stein employed 'primitive syntactical devices of narration in the development of a character who is not wholly civilised.'<sup>49</sup> Indeed, according to Braddy, Stein's story is 'nonpareil in its total lack of race-consciousness' (p. 365). Both Wilson and Braddy earnestly believe that 'Melanctha' stands as an example

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<sup>46</sup> *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (London: William Collins Sons and Co Ltd., 1959), p. 190.

<sup>47</sup> Wright's review of *Wars I Have Seen*, published in *PM*, March 11, 1945. This comment can be found in the introduction to 'Melanctha' by Van Vechten in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, p. 338.

<sup>48</sup> 'I Wish I Had Written Early Days of a Woman from MELANCTHA by Gertrude Stein', in *I Wish I'd Written That: Selections Chosen by Favorite American Authors*, ed. by Eugene J. Woods (New York and London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, inc., 1946), pp. 254-269 (p. 254).

<sup>49</sup> 'The Primitive in Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha"', *New Mexico Quarterly*, 20 (1950), 358-365 (p. 358).

of writing by a white American author, which reflects the consciousness of the African-American community even though, according to Braddy, Stein has 'exhibited the vernacular of colored people without once resorting to their dialect' (p. 365). The failure of these two early critics to alert their readers to the inherent racism of Stein's story seems in this day and age outrageous. However, more worrying is the fact that as we trace criticism up to the present day, many critics justify or gloss Stein's use of race in order to champion her as a radical feminist or signal her place at the cutting edge of the Modernist movement.

In 1951, Donald Sutherland produced the first major biography of Stein's works.<sup>50</sup> In it he refers to *Three Lives* as a volume in which

two German women and a Negress, have no connection whatever with the literary past of the language. The words are not used either as the authentic dialect of Baltimore Germans or Negroes; rather a perfunctory dialect convention serves as a pretext for liberating the language from literary convention (pp. 40-41).

Sutherland places his emphasis of the story on Stein's use of language to capture the movement of consciousness, to bring the living personality back to life (p. 40). Francis Russell, writing in 1954, states that '*Three Lives* is a transitional piece',<sup>51</sup> one of the source documents of the twentieth century reaction against form and meaning (p. 73). What is significant, however, is that Russell, no matter how important he feels *Three Lives* is as modernist text, criticises Stein's claim that it is the first serious treatment of African-American community. Indeed, he adds that Gertrude Stein knew nothing about the lives of African Americans and that no young medical doctor would speak in the character of Jeff Campbell.

Finally Tony Tanner, in his book *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* tells us, like Russell and Sutherland, that Stein wanted 'to get the past out of language, cleanse words of their dark history, cut them off from

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<sup>50</sup> *Gertrude Stein: A Biography of Her Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951).

<sup>51</sup> *Three Studies in Twentieth Century Obscurity* (Ashford, Kent: The Hand and Flower Press, 1954).



those roots which anchor and nourish.<sup>52</sup> This emphasis upon Stein's experimentation in language places her firmly with the great modernists of her day: T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, Marianne Moore, Earnest Hemingway and others. Such is the interest in Stein's use of language that much of the criticism from the seventies onwards has concerned itself with her radical experimentation. With the arrival of deconstruction theory, Stein's work has been praised for the way in which her language strategies prefigure much of the theoretical work of Jacques Derrida and other French theorists.

### **Current Criticism: feminism and deconstruction**

The following pages will outline the specific approaches to 'Melanctha', over the last two decades, within the broad spectrum of feminism and deconstruction, as outlined above. This will enable me to situate my own position and to highlight any problems with specific approaches. Once situated, I will then outline my own approach to this text.

With the advent of works by DeKoven, Walker and Dubnick, on Stein's writings, the eighties paved the way for more radical and illuminating discussions of her works. Cyrena N. Pondrom marked the significance of this stage in Steinian criticism by stating,

the day has finally come, as three new books testify, for the metamorphosis of Gertrude Stein from outlaw to classic. Marianne DeKoven's *A Different Language*, Randa Dubnick's *The Structure of Obscurity*, and Jayne L. Walker's *The Making of a Modernist* all draw upon the insights of contemporary criticism and the scholarly fields that undergird it in order to "classify" Stein — that is, in order to analyse her work and explain it in terms of widely accepted, orderly principles which have been described elsewhere.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 200.

<sup>53</sup> 'Gertrude Stein: From Outlaw to Classic', *Contemporary Literature*, 27:1 (1986), 98-114 (p. 98).

The acceptance of Stein into the modernist canon was a long, protracted, one, but the advent of feminist and deconstructive criticism has enabled readers and critics to better understand works once considered too obscure to be published. Much criticism of 'Melanctha' devotes itself to feminist interpretations of Stein's rewriting of her 1903 novel *Q.E.D.*, analysing Stein's desire to renegotiate private experience whilst experimenting with an emerging aesthetic.

Richard Bridgman, one of Stein's earliest critics, suggested that Stein reduced the lesbian relationship to a heterosexual one in order to 'show in greater schematic detail how people in love are inevitably attracted to one another, then equally inevitably separated'.<sup>54</sup> Jayne L. Walker, in *The Making of a Modernist*, supports Bridgman's point. She adds that 'Melanctha' transforms the narrative material of *Q.E.D.* into 'the story of a heterosexual love affair set in a black community, retaining not only the fundamental personality traits of the two lovers [...] Adele becomes Jeff Campbell, a 'negro' doctor, and Helen is re-created as Melanctha' (p. 29).

Similarly, Judith Saunders, writing in 1985, reinforces Walker's claim:

Rephrasing the love affair between Helen and Adele in heterosexual terms, Stein does far more than simply make Adele over into a male character. In addressing her material a second time, she finds a richer subject; she adds a new dimension of meaning to the conflict between her two main characters. For there is no story of a divided self in *Q.E.D.*; all the antagonism is between two separate characters.<sup>55</sup>

Saunders' proposal is that Stein uses the conflict between her two characters to test out different responses to a central dilemma. One character, Jeff, achieves equilibrium through his ability to adapt and change; Melanctha, on the other hand, perishes because she fails to moderate her responses to the responsibilities of her commitment to Jeff and their relationship. But, as Saunders suggests, Stein's

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<sup>54</sup> *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 53.

<sup>55</sup> 'Bipolar Conflict in Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha"', *Modern Language Studies*, 56 (1985), 55-64 (p. 63).

interest is less in the character who achieves success than with the character who fails to achieve integration into the social and emotional structures of heterosexual discourse.

To the issue of conflict and division, Saunders adds the importance of narrative strategy. She suggests that the emotional and intellectual gulf between Jeff and Melanctha, the main protagonists, is about different responses to the fundamental dilemma of living one's life in a particular way:

One dramatized aspect of the self modifies its stance, and survives by adopting some of the antithetical principles with which it is in conflict. A second aspect of the self refuses the opportunity to change [...] finally perishing in its own limitations and its self-defeating, forever unresolved ambivalence (p. 60).

This dilemma is reflected in the narrative structure of the text and the playful tension between a series of oppositions through which Stein seeks to find an answer to the question of human desire and self-fulfilment. Saunders finishes her article by suggesting that such oppositions delineate the problem of male and female role definition and this was, for Stein, an ongoing preoccupation (p. 64).

To this preoccupation with self-fulfillment and female desire, critics Margaret Dunn (1987) and Christopher J. Knight (1988) both acknowledge the fact that Stein's novella attempts to depict the problem of the conventional nineteenth-century romance plot for its female protagonist.<sup>56</sup> Dunn explains that Stein, like H.D., is interested in exploring the ideological assumptions about women's social and sexual behaviour and uses 'groundbreaking structural innovation to "write beyond the ending" of three traditional female plots' (p. 54). A successful narrative plot for the nineteenth-century heroine would involve courtship and marriage; failure to achieve these things, on the other hand, would result in death.

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<sup>56</sup> Christopher J. Knight, 'Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" and Radical Heterosexuality', *Studies in Short Fiction*, 25, (1988), 295-300; Margaret M. Dunn, 'Altered Patterns and New Endings: Reflections of Change in Stein's *Three Lives* and H.D.'s *Palimpsest*', *Frontiers*, 9 (1987), 54-59.

Dunn suggests that Stein writes 'beyond the ending' of the romance plot by refusing to depict Melanctha as a victim.

Christopher J. Knight, on the other hand, argues that it is Jeff Campbell's inability to understand that identity is not monolithic that creates the conflict between himself and Melanctha. Knight provides psychoanalytic commentary, referring to Jane Gallop and Jacques Lacan, in order to propose the view that 'identity understood in monolithic terms is always something "alien and constraining"; it wishes to entrap and freeze rather than to subvert and liberate' (p. 296). Knight's argument is apt and takes 'Melanctha' into feminist and psychoanalytic terrain, suggesting that Melanctha would prefer 'an intermingling of two opposites, a contamination of the opposition, a risking of difference and identity, that risk not being offset by some higher union, the oneness of the homogenous "couple"' (p. 296).

Lisa Ruddick, in her early article on 'Melanctha' and the influence of William James (1982-3), explored the psychological terrain of the novella and the influence of William James on Stein's writing of the story. According to Ruddick, Melanctha's death has less to do with a naturalist representation of life, but with 'a character unfit for the world who is weeded out by a brand of natural selection'.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Ruddick added that 'in the end, "tired with being all the time so much excited"', Melanctha 'succumbs to the social and bodily "suicide," which, as James notes, would be the outcome of any life of wholly unselfish or unselective perception' (p. 556).<sup>58</sup>

In her 1990 critical study, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis*, Ruddick notes that 'Melanctha' is the text in which Stein pays her tribute to James and yet begins her departure from him. She suggests that Stein's aesthetic aims are delivered through the workings of Williams but that thematic issues are

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<sup>57</sup> Lisa Ruddick, "'Melanctha' and the Psychology of William James', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 28 (1982-3), 545-556 (p. 556), abbreviated hereafter to 'Melanctha and James'.

<sup>58</sup> This reading of 'Melanctha' is an earlier version of Chapter One in her book, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis*. In this book she outlines Stein's debt to William James, her psychology tutor at Harvard, and her literary departure from him.

worked out in the margins of the text (p. 12). Ruddick gives an in-depth analysis of the influence of William James on Stein's writing and suggests that "Melanctha," in particular, is so close, in its characterizations, to James's theory of the mind as to approach psychological allegory' (p. 15).

Importantly, her analysis of Stein's departure from James is where Ruddick offers important new material for the understanding of 'Melanctha'. She states that

the style and structure of "Melanctha," then, record a troubled debt to James. James uses the term *mind-wandering* to disparage a relaxed attention. Stein's story, on the other hand, is an unabashed experiment in a kind of mind-wandering; it unsettles expectations of linearity, dramatic emphasis, and moral definition (p. 41).

Stein's departure from James, suggests Ruddick, is evident through the unconscious material of the text; its shape formed by 'what psychoanalysis terms primary process' (p. 41). So how does the unconscious process of the story take shape? Ruddick's analysis of Stein's emerging literary themes in 'Melanctha' brings the story back to two fundamental themes: death, and Melanctha's sexual exploitation at the hands of all the male characters, except for Jeff Campbell. Melanctha's story, then, is one in which abuse is repressed and yet repeated through each relationship that she has.

Janice Doane, in her book *Silence and Narrative* (1986) prefigures Ruddick's argument by suggesting that the story's dynamic is informed by an unnameable desire, a desire for death. She goes on to add that Stein, in her early novels,

ultimately saw the requirements that secure unity and integrity in both narratives and the life they recount as especially oppressive in their formulation of the woman's character, for they insist upon the immobilization of her disruptive desire, her goodness, her passivity, and often, her death.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Silence and Narrative: The Early Novels of Gertrude Stein* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. xxvi.

Such unnameable desire can be related to the critical work of Mark Niemeyer and Lisa Ruddick, who forge ahead with the psychological readings of Stein's text. Niemeyer reads 'Melanctha' as a Steinian study in the difference of personality types: the hysterical and normal personality.<sup>60</sup> Like Lisa Ruddick, Niemeyer is keen to explore the significance of Stein's experiments in the field of psychology in order to assess their impact on her early work. According to Niemeyer, Melanctha is an hysteric, a person whose 'lack of attention makes it difficult for him to concentrate on one thing and impairs his memory, but it makes it relatively easy for his unconscious to surface' (pp. 79-80). Melanctha's problem is that she hovers between two facets of her personality: one is child-like and incapable of acting logically and rationally; the other side of her personality is more adult-like and capable of appropriate adult behaviour.

Like Saunders' account of the bi-polarity of character types in 'Melanctha', Niemeyer and Ruddick also focus on the issue of duality in Jeff and Melanctha's personality types. Niemeyer writes, 'Stein's portrayal of the contrasting dynamics which define the conscious and unconscious in her two main characters, one an hysteric and one normal, gives "Melanctha" both its power and its coherence' (p. 83). Ruddick claims that 'if Melanctha and Jeff represent contrasting character types, they are also personifications of warring principles that clash and merge in *every mind*' ('Melanctha and James', p. 550).

The psychological and feminist aspects of the text have been supplemented by critical works concerned with Stein's relationship to postmodernism. Feminist critics have tried to show the usefulness of discursive tools such as structural linguistics, psychoanalytic theory and deconstructive discourse as means of interpreting Stein's writings. Pondrom, argues that

whole branches of discourse — notably structural linguistics, Lacanian psychology, and deconstructive criticism — have come into being since Gertrude Stein lamented the fate of the creator in "Composition as

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<sup>60</sup> 'Hysteria and the Normal Unconscious: Dual Natures in Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha"', *Journal of American Studies*, 28 (1994), 77-83 (p. 83).

Explanation,” and we finally have the tools to better understand what Stein was telling us (pp. 98-99).

Equally, Margaret Dickie in ‘Recovering the Repression in Stein’s Erotic Poetry’ is at pains to highlight Stein’s role as a major modernist, yet suggests that it is only through the discourses of feminism and postmodernism that we have been able to engage productively with Stein’s artistic experimentation. She adds that ‘feminist and postmodernist readers at the end of the century in which she began to write — perhaps Stein’s first receptive readers — have been particularly alert to her experiments with *l’écriture féminine*, with writing the body, with undoing hierarchical relationships and language — in short, with the expression of her erotic life.’<sup>61</sup> Pondrom and Dickie point out that appreciation of Stein’s place in the modernist debate has come to light due to the development of various discourses that have enabled critics to ‘decode’ or interpret what were seemingly difficult texts.

Marianne DeKoven’s introduction to Stein’s work, in *The Gender of Modernism*, outlines the way in which particular approaches to Stein have allowed critics to move away from biographical studies which focused on her ‘myriad connections with other important modernist and avant-garde artists and writers’ and concentrate ‘on her own remarkable productivity and the diversity and originality of her work’ (pp. 479-80). She goes on to add that it was not until the avant-garde gained currency as precursors of postmodernism and poststructuralism that the revolutionary nature of Stein’s work was exposed (p. 480). It has been through the advent of postmodernist and feminist readings of Stein, over the last decade, that critics have been able to talk of her as a precursor, and it has taken the emergence of these discourses to provide a starting point for wider readings of her work.

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<sup>61</sup> In *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*, ed. by Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 3-25. (p. 20).

Finally, what has been omitted from much criticism, but must be addressed, here, is criticism that deals explicitly with Stein's use of race and extends the tradition of critical thinking begun by Nella Larsen and Richard Wright. In 1984, Milton A. Cohen produced an article on the racism of Stein's story. In this article, 'Black Brutes and Mulatto Saints: The Racial Hierarchy of Stein's "Melanctha"', Cohen assessed Stein's use of racial stereotypes against her theories of measuring the 'bottom nature' in everyone. However, as Cohen was quick to point out, Stein's experiments are marred by the 'chasm dividing upper middle-class, white medical students from the poor blacks they treated'.<sup>62</sup>

Cohen's article is important for its analysis of the racial characteristics assigned to gradations of race, and Stein's inconsistencies when treating racial stereotypes. Cohen highlights the racial generalisations of Stein's formulations: the darker the skin, the less intelligent the character, whereas the whiter the skin, the more decent and intelligent the character. He is right to note the obvious inconsistencies in her racial hierarchy and to show how Stein's racial stereotypes are framed within the attitudes of the nineteenth century, but, naively, Cohen, in his article, fails to address the significance of racial stereotypes and the consequences of this for representations of black female sexuality. I have already stated that it took Toni Morrison's questioning of Stein's use of Melanctha in her story for critics to begin to address the issue of race but not in the way that we might expect.

Marianne DeKoven in a chapter titled, 'Darker and Lower Down: The Eruption of Modernism in "Melanctha" and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*', bears testimony to Cohen's point about Stein's inconsistent racial stereotypes. She goes on to add, however, that 'racial stereotypes and counterstereotypes function in complex, undecidable concatenations throughout the text [...] The [...] characters simultaneously embody and contradict racial stereotypes'.<sup>63</sup> In her 1993 article

<sup>62</sup> *Black American Literature Forum*, 18 (1984), 119-21 (p. 119).

<sup>63</sup> In *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 67-84 (p. 72).



titled 'African Masks and the Arts of Passing in Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" and Nella Larsen's *Passing*', Corinne E. Blackmer moves Stein's text out of an Anglo-American tradition of feminist criticism and into an African-American context. Her analysis of the two stories, through the trope of the African mask, brings together the world of European modernism and the Harlem Renaissance of twenties America, suggesting that parallels between the two writers have been overlooked because it was believed that Stein exerted little influence on other women writers. Blackmer, however, believes that the intersection of race, gender and sexuality through tropes of masking and passing, unite these two writers in their attempt to explore 'binary categories and character typologies into subversive masquerades' (p. 240). Moreover, the fact that Larsen had written to Stein, in 1928, telling her that she felt 'Melanctha' captured 'the spirit of this race of mine' suggests that the two writers had more in common than at first appears (*FF*, p. 216). Blackmer's article is absolutely important to 'the lengthening of modernism's reach into racial, gender and sexual interchange' (Allan, 'The Death of Sex and the Soul', p. 96), both at a textual and biographical level, but still needs to be assessed in its approach to issues of race and sexuality.

More recent criticism by Michael North is found in an article entitled 'Modernism's African Mask: The Stein-Picasso Collaboration'.<sup>64</sup> The book itself is a collection of essays on the "primitive" in modernist writings. Barkan and Bush put it succinctly when they say that 'when the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries re-imagined a "primitive" world, this long-standing trope, with its overtones of lasciviousness, became a highly charged signal of otherness — one that came to signify modernity' (*Prehistories*, p. 3). In his article, North aims to chart the influence of African art on both Stein and Picasso's work. He states that 'in each case, in painting and in literature, the step away from conventional

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<sup>64</sup> Michael North, 'Modernism's African Mask: The Stein-Picasso Collaboration', in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. by Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 270-289. This article will be referred to hereafter as 'Modernism's African Mask' and the text referred to as *Prehistories*.

verisimilitude into abstraction is accomplished by a figurative change of race' (pp. 271-72). Equally, in 'Darker and Lower Down', Marianne DeKoven sees the function of race and class in Stein's text as a 'disruption of traditional narrative form' (p. 67). She adds that race becomes 'a highly ambiguous force of disruptive fascination or fascinating disruption, contributing to the generic indeterminacy [...] of these narratives' (p. 68). Despite acknowledging Stein's racism, DeKoven still diverts her attention from the context of race and female sexuality to concentrate on aspects of form.

My overview is broad but it shows the way in which responses to *Melantha* have concentrated on either aesthetic or feminist aspects of the text. Only recently have critics begun to assess the impact of race, yet even these readings are, I believe, misleading in their attempt to affirm, unproblematically, Stein's place in the canon. Where, then, do I place myself in all of this criticism? Firstly, I do not disagree with critics who find Stein's form both radical and engaging; indeed, I will spend much of this thesis demonstrating this point. Secondly, I find many of these readings of Stein's representation of female sexuality and gender paradigms constructive but want to take them further. Thirdly, I cannot agree with DeKoven, North or Blackmer's innocent readings of Stein's use of race in this story and want to set the record straight by suggesting that we do not divert the issue of judgement. The focus of the chapter will, as I have said, follow various paths which will converge in a final assessment of the problems and contradictions of this text.

### **Synopsis of the Dissertation**

Chapter One takes as its starting point the opposition between two narrative trajectories posited through the characters, Jefferson Campbell and *Melantha* Herbert. These trajectories, one linear and progressive in its emphasis on 'being good and regular in life' ('*Melantha*', p. 81) and the other, circular and 'wandering', with its emphasis on beginning again, reflect, respectively, Jeff and

Melantha's approaches to life. The opposition between these two narratives indicates a dialogue between nineteenth-century paradigms of gender, constructed on patriarchal representations of womanhood and appropriate female behaviour, and Stein's twentieth-century challenge to those paradigms.

Using Farwell's trope of the 'metaphoric lesbian', this chapter will impress upon the reader the way in which Stein's challenge to the dominant discourse through an anti-mimetic narrative, the use of the continuous present, and repetition, reflects Stein's 'attitude toward the reality of the world [she] represents'.<sup>65</sup> This reality is mapped by the racial and sexual marginality of her character, Melantha.

In her work, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* Farwell engages with the problem of finding 'a way to accommodate some of the revolutionary postmodern insights of feminist and lesbian thinking on textuality and at the same time validate both traditional and nontraditional stories as lesbian and as disruptive' (p. 14). The way forward, for Farwell, is through the figure of the 'metaphoric lesbian' (p. 16). She adds,

The lesbian subject functions as a powerful disrupter of the narrative because, particularly in these last twenty-five years, but also since the late nineteenth century, the term "lesbian" has been stretched to mean more than a woman who is sexually attracted to other women; instead the term has acquired larger implications, in some cases functioning as a metaphor for the feminist woman or for an autonomous female sexuality or body and in other situations as a harbinger of the future or as a revised textuality (p. 16).

Farwell's trope of the 'metaphoric lesbian,' and my use of the "in-between-ness" of this text, provide useful tools by which to engage in a fruitful exploration of Stein's feminism and (post)modernism. 'Melantha' as a harbinger for a 'revised textuality', is also the figure for Stein's own emerging sexual identity.

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<sup>65</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. By Willard R. Trask (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 535.

Stein, in the “in-between” of race and sex finds a fictional space in which to explode social constructions of gender and identity ‘thus the rupturing of traditional forms becomes a political act’.<sup>66</sup> A feminist approach to ‘Melanctha’, in Chapter One, provides for an analysis of Stein’s representation of female identity, throwing light on the obvious link between Stein’s own marginality as a woman, Jew and lesbian, and Melanctha’s marginal position. The significance of this narrative rupture, however, can only be gauged by comparing certain of the stylistic and thematic features found in the other two stories of *Three Lives*, ‘The Good Anna’ and ‘The Gentle Lena’.

This reading of Melanctha’s narrative of disruption, however, must be measured against that of Jeff Campbell and Rose Johnson, who embody ideological assumptions about the ways in which women should live their lives. It is this narrative structure that claims Melanctha in the end and suggests that Stein could only express her dissatisfaction with the parameters of heterosexual romance in the “in-between” of this story. The ending of the novella is a capitulation to conventional modes of ‘ending’ for Melanctha, as it is for the other two women in ‘The Good Anna’ and ‘The Gentle Lena’, respectively. Once I have demonstrated the difference between ‘Melanctha’ and ‘The Good Anna’ and ‘The Gentle Lena’, I will confine my discussions to ‘Melanctha’ in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two leads on from Chapter One through an investigation of the ways in which Stein’s challenge to constructs of gender and identity, through the continuous present, an anti-teleological narrative, and repetition-as-iteration and repetition-as-variation, is closer to strategies of deconstruction as practised by Jacques Derrida. Marianne DeKoven and Joseph N. Riddel have already begun an investigation into Stein’s deconstruction politics, but they fail to show the significance of ‘Melanctha’ to later works by Stein, such as ‘Composition as

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<sup>66</sup> *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction*, ed. by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 4 of the introduction.

Explanation', 'What is English Literature', 'Portraits and Repetition' and *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to Human Mind* (1936), where she really does seem to prefigure Derrida's ideas about language and identity. My exploration of these issues in 'Melanctha', and in later works, through strategies of deconstruction, aims to demonstrate that Derrida is simply continuing a tradition of thinking found in Romantic and Modernist writings, but especially in the writings of Gertrude Stein.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, the link between deconstruction and feminism is not, as I have suggested, at a critical impasse. Chapter Two extends the analysis of Stein's radical poetics began in Chapter One and demonstrates that Stein's deconstruction of binary oppositions of gender and sexuality unites deconstruction and feminism together. According to Diane Elam 'deconstruction and feminism warn us about the dangers of becoming comfortable with a politics grounded in stable subjects or normalizing identities' (p. 82). It is necessary, then, to articulate the ways in which 'Melanctha' questions such binary oppositions by positing a middle ground, the "in-between".

Feminist and deconstructive strategies are also deployed in Chapter Three, in an analysis of Melanctha as *flâneuse*. This reading of 'Melanctha' is new, but brings me back to Chapter One and discussions of female sexuality. Firstly, in this chapter, I discuss the ways in which Stein expropriates ideological assumptions about female sexuality, through the figure of the *flâneuse*, yet succumbs to ideological convictions about women's place in social structures of gender. The *flâneuse* exposes Stein's questioning of sexual difference and, through her wanderings, defines identity as elusive, even amorphous. The discussion of Melanctha as a *flâneuse* engages other feminist criticism about women and the city, whilst also showing how Stein's ideas about modernity can be read against those of Charles Baudelaire in his essay 'The Painter of Modern

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<sup>67</sup> See Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 33.

Life' and his discussion of the figure of the *flâneur*.<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Wilson's intelligent book on the prostitute's role as *flâneuse* leads directly to an analysis of Stein's modernity and the *flâneuse* as a locus for disruptive sexuality.

Secondly, the critical trajectory of this chapter will use material from *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* and Elisabeth Bronfen's analysis of death and femininity in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* in order to demonstrate that Melanctha's role as *flâneuse*, which acts as a signifier for sexual and linguistic ambiguity, of *différance*, must be purged from the text.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the death of Melanctha inscribes Stein's story within the domain of traditional nineteenth-century stories about fallen women.

The trajectory of Chapter Four will place Stein's text culturally and historically in relation to two narratives written by African-American women authors in order to understand what it means when we do 'not [...] divert the question of judgement' (Cope, p. 159). In light of Chapters One, Two and Three, in which readings of female sexuality are presented more positively, the reading of race and sexuality together, in this chapter, will demonstrate some serious problems with this text. The presentation of two readings of race is designed to assess how far we can say that Stein really did kill off the nineteenth-century 'quite like a gangster with a mitraillette' (WIHS, p. 59). Furthermore, the movement between feminist and deconstructive interpretations of race is necessary in order to iron out where we place this text ethically.

The first comparison between Stein's 'Melanctha' and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, will highlight the fact that 'Melanctha' is not, as Richard Wright would have had us believe, 'the first realistic treatment of

<sup>68</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), pp. 1-40. Further references to this essay will be given after quotations in the text.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Lacqueur and Catherine Gallagher, eds., *The Making of the Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

Negro life' (*I Wish I'd Written That*, p. 254). Furthermore, the comparison between these two texts will allow for a fruitful exploration of Stein's racial stereotypes and her presentation of black female sexuality. Both Stein and Jacobs use specific narrative strategies in their 'deconstruction' of sexual and racial difference, but a comparison of 'Melanctha' with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* highlights the glaring contradictions in Stein's text and, more importantly, her political conservatism. The equation of Melanctha's sexuality in the context of racial difference becomes extremely problematic. The positive aspects of female sexuality as disruptive and transgressive in Chapters One and Three, is, in the context of race, ideologically racist and politically naïve. The inscription of Melanctha's sexuality as 'primitive' only reinforces an already problematic and unacceptable representation of black female morality in texts by Anglo-American writers.

The second reading, of 'Melanctha' and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), locates textual analysis once more in the realm of deconstruction. The first reading of 'Melanctha' tried to locate Stein's text within a tradition of writing about, and by, black women, allowing for a moment of reflection on the relationship between inscriptions of sexuality and race in an historical context. The deconstructive approach, in the second half of the chapter, is designed to assess Stein's aesthetic use of the mask or masking, and Larsen's use of passing as tropes which enable both writers to examine and subvert, simultaneously, inscriptions of race and gender. Using theoretical discourses about language and masking in the critical works of Henry Gates Louis Jr., and Houston Baker Jr., the second reading in this chapter will demonstrate the similarities and differences of these tropes for Stein and Larsen's modernism.

The final section of this chapter will bring these different readings together in order to explore how we read Stein's use of race 'ethically'; that is, how I challenge my own readings of the race issue in Stein and the consequences of this for her modernism.

Each of these chapters will approach Stein's text from the perspective of feminism or deconstruction, sometimes both. Although broad in their range, they are united by a discussion of Stein's (re)presentation of female desire and identity across sexual and racial boundaries, through her anti-mimetic narrative and uses of repetition and linguistic ambiguity. Chapters One and Two are united in their emphasis upon textual issues of language and narrative, whilst Chapters Three and Four provide a cultural materialist approach to issues of race and sex. This is not to say, however, that the chapters are loosely connected. They are, as I have indicated, driven by an analysis of Stein's interest in gender and identity from feminist and deconstructive perspectives. Moreover, where possible I have endeavoured to establish how this text mediates a space "in-between" convention and experimentation, the past and the present, black and white. In so doing, I feel that the theoretical approaches of deconstruction and feminism have enabled me to offer relevant analyses of the ways in which this story prefigures some of Stein's later works, such as 'A Book Concluding with a Wife Has a Cow A Love Story', 'Lifting Belly' and 'Patriarchal Poetry', and yet is bound by nineteenth-century conventions about race and sex.



## Chapter One: 'Melanctha' and the Trope of the Marginal

This chapter looks at the idea of the “in-between” by charting how Stein’s story, *Melanctha*, reflects her emerging modernism by providing two distinct narrative paths throughout the story. It comes as no surprise that the fictional world in which the stories of *Three Lives* is set, is, according to Blackmer, called ‘Bridgepoint,’ a metaphor, I would argue, for the transitional nature of Stein’s text, taking, as she claimed, her writing out of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth (p. 242). Moreover, although I use the trope of the “in-between” to identify the contradictions and tensions in her work between past and present, convention and experimentation, I want to argue that it is the “in-between” of these stories, where Stein’s experimentation takes place.

It is obvious in reading *Three Lives* that the thematic concern of each novella is the defeat of female agency and desire by a system of patriarchy that insists women have specific cultural and sexual roles to fulfil. In each of the stories, the main character fails to have any control over her life, and the pain and suffering that ensues for the character is remedied in her death. According to Margaret M. Dunn, *Three Lives* tells ‘three typical “female” plots (those of the spinster, the married woman, and the “loose” woman), yet [...] change[s] the traditionally accepted lines of plot development’ (p. 55). Adrienne Kalfopoulou adds to this, arguing that in these stories, Stein ‘takes direct issue with nineteenth century paradigms of proper gender conduct, emphasizing their cultural/linguistic construct as opposed to what, historically, were considered their natural/biological character’.<sup>1</sup> Dunn and Kalfopoulou discuss Stein’s challenge to narrative plot and gender paradigms as given, paying less attention to the ways in which subversive desire is undermined by adherence to nineteenth-century conventional plot endings for women.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Moving Away from Nineteenth-Century Paradigms: Gertrude Stein’s “Melanctha” and the Problem of Female Empowerment’, *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 26 (1994), 79-95 (p. 79).

The trajectory of this chapter, then, will develop the responses outlined by Dunn and Kalfopoulou, but go beyond these critics by demonstrating how, at the heart of the text, lies the 'repressed idea' of lesbian love.<sup>2</sup> I will pursue, teleologically, the narrative paths of the protagonists in this story, relating it to the two other stories, 'The Good Anna' and 'The Gentle Lena' in order to show how, as I believe, this story is central to an understanding of Stein's literary modernism. 'Melanctha' is the place where her modernism, in its early stages, is at its most acute, through the use of narrative structure, repetition, syntax and grammar. What Melanctha says, as much as what she does, is instrumental in detailing for us Stein's challenge to prevailing discourses about female sexuality, and in helping us to understand the radical aesthetics of this challenge in later works such as 'A Book Concluding with A Wife Has a Cow a Love Story' (1923), 'Patriarchal Poetry' (1927) and 'Lifting Belly' (1927).

This challenge to prevailing discourses, noted by so many of Stein's critics, is worked out, through her character, Melanctha, and her position of marginality, in the text. In order to show how the trope of the margin can work fruitfully, I return at this point to Marilyn Farwell's study of lesbian narrative, as well as Susan Rubin Suleiman's discussion of gender and the avant-garde. Suleiman in her discussion of avant-garde female artists, and avant-garde movements, conflates the two by suggesting that they are both situated at, and work from, the margin. She adds that the margin becomes a trope for the space in which both groups can map a place for themselves: 'If, as this trope suggests, culture is "like" a space to be mapped or a printed page, then the place of women, and of avant-garde movements, has traditionally been situated away from the center, "on the fringe," in the margins.'<sup>3</sup> Of course, Suleiman does make the distinction that the 'marginal' position, adopted consciously by avant-garde artists, is very unlike the

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<sup>2</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 14.

marginal position assigned to women: they have no choice in the matter.

However, the potential of the margin is, she adds, a positive one:

In a system in which the marginal, the avant-garde, the subversive, all that disturbs and “undoes the whole” is endowed with positive value, a woman artist who can identify those concepts with her own practice and metaphorically with her own femininity can find in them a source of strength and self-legitimation (p. 17).

Stein was to continuously see the ‘margin’ as a source of self-legitimation for her writing, even if she didn’t consider herself marginal to the modernist movement.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, her comment, ‘that in this epoch the only real literary thinking has been done by a woman’, should not be underestimated.<sup>5</sup> Lisa Ruddick, reading ‘Melanctha’ as representative of Stein’s literary relationship with William James, her college mentor, also suggests that,

“Melanctha” carries on a private conversation with William James [...] 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 (*Reading Gertrude Stein*, p. 12).

The ‘other material’ that Stein begins to work out in the ‘margins’ of the text is an interruption to discourses of gendered identity.

The significance of the margin also engages Marilyn Farwell’s discussion of the term ‘lesbian’, which has, in the last twenty-five years, come to mean more than a woman who is sexually attracted to other women. The ‘metaphoric lesbian’ subject, positioned in the narrative, she adds, enables the writer to ‘reorder both the narrative codes and the values on which the system rests’ (p. 16). From the

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<sup>4</sup> Stein spent most of her writing career talking about her genius and her place at the vanguard of modern writing. The fact that she believed herself to be, along with Alfred Whitehead and Picasso, one of the three geniuses of the twentieth century is important.

<sup>5</sup> *The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 218. First published by Random House, New York, 1926, and referred to hereafter as *GHA* (Vintage edition) and cited parenthetically in the text.

margins, argues Farwell, the 'metaphoric lesbian' contains both utopian and deconstructive gestures, providing the writer with strategies to expand on the "discursive boundaries" of woman (p. 17).

I find Suleiman's trope of the margin, and Farwell's 'metaphoric lesbian,' useful tools for discussing the function of the character, Melanctha, in 'Melanctha.' These two tropes shed light on the uses to which Stein puts the 'margin' in the story and opens up parallels with later steinian texts in which she uses the 'margin' as a means of decentering the centre.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Melanctha, as a 'metaphoric lesbian', and by this I take the term to include both the lesbian subject as autonomous female sexuality, and a revised textuality, enables us to judge just how far Stein's early narrative strategies can fully challenge discourses of female behaviour.

The women in these three stories are marginal figures, unable to assimilate themselves into coherent roles or patterns of behaviour. Anna, in the 'The Good Anna' is a German immigrant servant, who walks a fine line between her own illusion of mastery and the loss of that mastery, which potentially threatens to undo her. Lena, in 'The Gentle Lena' is a self-effacing figure. Like Anna, she too is a German immigrant, and so passive and docile that her fragile identity is dissipated through marriage and childbirth. Melanctha, in 'Melanctha' is a young 'mulatto' woman, whose search for 'wisdom' results, eventually, in her death. These women, argues Janice Doane, are 'incapable of assimilation into a coherent structure capable of explaining the significance of their destinies' (p. 53).

The primary difference, it seems to me, between 'The Good Anna', 'The Gentle Lena', and 'Melanctha', is that the exploration of female desire and sexuality is at its most charged thematically and linguistically in 'Melanctha.' 'The Good Anna' and 'The Gentle Lena' both present women for whom sexual identity, certainly in the case of Anna, is subordinated to a desire for power in her

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<sup>6</sup> I am thinking particularly of 'Patriarchal Poetry' in which Stein centres the sonnet, which is, in fact, not a sonnet, in order to deconstruct it as an adequate structure for female, and same-sex, desire.

relationships or, as in the case of Lena, her sexual identity is decided for her. Both Anna's and Lena's destinies are explained by the nineteenth century 'romance plot' of female devotion and self-sacrifice. Anna devotes herself to her friends and female employers but is eventually worn out by such devotion. Similarly, Lena, the stereotypical figure of female selflessness dies as a result of a marriage she neither has the energy or desire to understand.

Melanchtha, on the other hand, exposes herself to emotional and sexual feelings which disrupt and challenge ideologically inflected patterns of behaviour for women, in the 'romance plot', as well as the structures of language which represent these patterns. Moreover, the character of Anna, in 'The Good Anna', and Lena, in 'The Gentle Lena', are determined by the adjectives 'good' and 'gentle', respectively. These two adjectives function as signifiers of Stein's belief in the 'bottom-nature' of human beings. They are stretched, according to Adrienne Kalfopoulou, to 'proportions of caricature, deflating the traditionally empowering character of these terms and showing Anna and Lena to be absurd constructions of mainstream stereotypes' rather 'than anything real' (p. 82). Melanchtha, on the other hand, is not determined by a specific adjective; instead we are told that she is 'complex with desire'; thus her resistance to character identification is made explicit from the start (p. 61). The language used to describe Melanchtha's experiences represents Stein's challenge to this narrative paradigm of female selflessness. Her desire, as we will see in this story, is complex and ambiguous.

In 'Melanchtha', Jefferson Campbell and Rose Johnson, the two characters who stand in opposition to Melanchtha, represent a monological approach to life and love. Their narrative trajectory is ordered and progressive: a teleological beginning, middle and end. Melanchtha, on the other hand, who can only find 'new ways to be in trouble' (p. 62), speaks from the margins of society; her position in Bridgepoint is never assured and she never 'fits in'. Her narrative trajectory is circular; it constantly loops back on itself, and her 'wanderings' become the

textual irritations which disturb and deconstruct Jeff Campbell's and Rose Johnson's way of knowing the world. At the margins, then, Melanctha represents Stein's attempt to find a narrative space for female desire that exceeds the bounds of social mores, and in doing so, a narrative trajectory that reflects this.

The title *Three Lives* suggests that the thematic structure of the stories will follow the progress of these women's lives in a linear fashion. In each story, there is an insistence on 'doing the right thing'. In 'The Good Anna', Anna 'always had a firm old world sense of what was the right way for a girl to do' (p. 13); in 'The Gentle Lena', Lena tells Mrs Haydon, her aunt, that she will 'do whatever you tell me it's right for me to do' (p. 181). In 'Melanctha', the central story of this thesis, Melanctha desires a 'right position' (p. 60), but can only find ways to 'get excited' (p. 64). In each story, the narrative trajectory implies that there is a 'right way' for the female protagonist to behave but the grain of each story, through Stein's structuring of the plot, her use of repetition, syntax and grammar, resists and challenges this 'right way'.

Instead of writing the lives of these three women in a teleological pattern: beginning, middle and end, which the thematic structure suggests, the temporal framework of each story is circular and subverts nineteenth-century insistence on linearity. How, then, do stylistic strategies of narrative structure, thematic and temporal, the continuous present, and her use of repetition, reflect Stein's modernism? And, how does her modernism, stylistically, work against mainstream nineteenth-century ideologies of representation? These are questions that need to be asked and which I will identify in this chapter. The first section of this chapter, 'Narrative Structure' will concern itself with Stein's use of narrative structure in *Three Lives* in order to delineate her modernism. The second section, 'Melanctha and Subversive Desire' will deal specifically with the continuous present and repetition and how repetition underwrites Stein's 'deconstruction' of language and identity, and, finally, in the last section of the chapter, 'Beyond the

Ending', I will look at Stein's failure to articulate her radical aesthetics by providing an alternate ending, besides death, for her characters.

### Narrative Structure

In her 1926 lecture, 'Composition as Explanation', Gertrude Stein attempted to provide some explanation, as the title suggests, for her work. The emphasis in this lecture is on her departure from the nineteenth century in terms of her representation of 'what is seen' (p. 495). Furthermore, the teleological dependence of beginning, middle and end, reflective of much nineteenth-century literature, is discarded in favour of 'beginning again and again and again' (p. 499). Stein's writing developed out of a belief that life was a succession of repetitive moments of existing. In 'Portraits and Repetition', she uses the analogy of a motor car to describe her writing as a process of capturing the 'essence' of repetition: 'As I say a motor goes inside and the car goes on, but my business my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is of the essence of its going' (p. 117). The analogy serves well in helping us to understand that Stein's composition would offer a radical alternative to the traditional structure of beginning, middle and end because, as she tells us, she's not interested in the end result of the journey.

In her 1935 lectures on narration, she again takes up the question of narration, adding that 'A great deal perhaps of all my writing of *The Making of Americans* was an effort to escape from this thing to escape from inevitably feeling that anything that everything had meaning as beginning and middle and ending'.<sup>7</sup> Her escape from this teleology depended on what she termed the continuous present. In 'Composition as Explanation', she writes,

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<sup>7</sup> Gertrude Stein, Lecture 2 in *Narration: Four Lectures by Gertrude Stein* (Chicago and Illinois: The University of Chicago, 1935), p. 25. References to specific lectures will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

In beginning writing I wrote a book called *Three Lives* this was written in 1905. I wrote a negro story called *Melanchtha*. 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 (p. 498).

It should be noted, in this paragraph, that Stein refers to a 'prolonged present' in the writing of 'Melanchtha.' She goes on to add, a few lines later, that 'I created then a prolonged present naturally I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one' (p. 498). The distinction between a prolonged and continuous present is never made clear by Stein, and critics in their approach to 'Melanchtha' tend, for the most part, to discuss Stein's use of a 'continuous present'.<sup>8</sup> This use of the present tense, denoted by 'now' and the suffix '-ing', concentrates the reader's attention on the here and now: there are few past or future constructs and this becomes increasingly more noticeable in her later works.

The continuous present provides Stein with an aesthetic rationale in which, according to Bridgman, 'living in the present at the front edge of time [...] seemed to her superior to living in historical memory, feeding on the aftermath of an existence of which one was never more than partially aware' (p. 55). Stein's use of the continuous present is what Judith Saunders calls an 'anti-historical view of

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<sup>8</sup> Janice Doane in *Silence and Narrative* refers to Stein's 'immersion into the duration of a dramatically flattened moment the "continuous present" (p. 54). DeKoven states, in *A Different Language*, that 'Stein also manipulates the prose surface in *Three Lives* to render directly what she calls a "continuous present"' (p. 27). Barbara Law Lamberts in *Repeating is in Everyone: A Discourse and Literary Analysis of Repetition in Gertrude Stein's Three Lives* (unpublished doctoral thesis), *Dissertation Abstracts*, (1990), 2054A, shows how Stein's use of the prolonged present begins when Melanchtha separates from Jane Harden: 'Slowly now between them, it was Melanchtha Herbert, who was stronger' (Lamberts, p. 110). She suggests that the word 'now' indicates the progressive tense, conveying time and emotions unfolding as they happen for the character, and the reader. She goes on to add that this use of the progressive tense (the prolonged present), used in Melanchtha, is what Stein would later characterize as the 'continuous present' (pp. 110-111). Donald Sutherland notes that a prolonged present assumes a situation or theme and develops it or keeps it recurring whereas the continuous present takes completely new moments or passages and begins them again (*Gertrude Stein: A Biography of Her Work*, pp. 51-2). Corinne E. Blackmer in 'African Masks and the Arts of Passing' and Judy Grahn in *Really Reading Gertrude Stein: A Selected Anthology with Essays by Judy Grahn* (Freedom, California: The Crossing Press, 1989), also talk about Stein's use of the 'continuous present'.



time' (p. 63), whilst Georgia Johnston suggests that it is Stein's way of writing Modernism out of the nineteenth century: 'Compositionally, many of Stein's texts repeat in a similar way, suggesting that the past upholds and creates the present while continuing to dissolve and become the present.'<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Stein would continue to insist, even more radically in her later writings, on the necessity of the continuous present and an abandonment of beginning, middle and end. One has only to look at works such as *A Book Concluding with A Wife Has a Cow A Love Story*. In this work, the title raises expectations of a narrative love story. Written in a series of headings, which are discrete units or poems, titles such as 'Introduction' or 'A Little Beginning' illustrate Stein's subversive rewriting of narrative structures (Dydo, p. 457). In *The Geographical History of America*, the structure of the work is defined by its meandering quality; a movement between different genres and sections. For example, the title suggests that we might learn something about America's history. What we get, instead, is a playful meditation on questions of memory and identity, a debunking of history, through a series of chapter titles, in no chronological order, and mini-plays and autobiographies.<sup>10</sup> When she writes, 'Nothing should follow something because in this way there will come to be a middle and a beginning and an end and of course that does make identity' (*GHA*, p. 153), she makes it clear that open-ended narrative strategies are the only way to avoid essentialist notions of identity, a practice that she begins in 'Melanctha'.<sup>11</sup> Ulla E. Dydo, in her thorough investigation of Stein's language experiments, tells how 'beginning again and again 'becomes Stein's principal mode of structuring discourse' (p. 21).

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<sup>9</sup> 'Reading Anna Backwards: Gertrude Stein Writing Modernism out of the Nineteenth Century', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 25 (1992), 31-37 (p. 32).

<sup>10</sup> In *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, Stein appears to move chronologically in the opening pages, designated by End of Chapter One, Chapter Two and Chapter Three. Then she returns to Chapter One, Chapter Two and Chapter Three (pp. 53-57). Throughout the work, there are mini-plays (p. 100 and p.107), interspersed with chapter headings. Stein completely redefines what writing and writing structures should be.

<sup>11</sup> The significance of beginning again is articulated in Stein's notes to *The Making of Americans*.

In 'Melanctha', the difference between a teleological narrative and a continuous present is reflected in the opposition between Jeff Campbell and Melanctha Herbert's ways of negotiating the world. Jeff seeks progression: he thinks of life in terms of the past and its impact on the future; Melanctha cannot remember the past and does not look to the future; she remains firmly embedded in the present and in her repeated 'wanderings.' The repetitions of Melanctha's 'wanderings' allow Stein to concentrate on the contradictions of her character in the present, thus narrative style reflects the psychological tendencies of the two characters. Lisa Ruddick makes this clear when she states, in *Reading Gertrude Stein*, that 'Stein divides her manner of narration between two "ways of knowing". One is linear and progressive; the other is circular and rhythmic, and has something in common with the wandering quality of Melanctha's mind' (p. 33).

In 'Melanctha,' like the other two stories, we begin in the present, move to the past and then return to the present and the imminent deaths of the protagonists. Structurally, Stein has rejected the Western literary plot device of 'linear cause and effect progressions' (Grahn, p. 17). By beginning in 'medias res', as it were, Stein seems to suggest that this episode in the character's life will determine the outcome of the novel. The connection between Rose and Melanctha, at the beginning of this story, indicates a future in which Melanctha, who has 'not yet been really married' (p. 59) might, through the progression of the story, manage to get married. The 'romance plot' for women is evident from the start, and through Stein's use of 'yet' suggests that this is what the narrative will move towards. Similarly, in 'The Good Anna,' we expect the story to progress in terms of Anna's life with Miss Mathilda, and Lena's life in 'The Gentle Lena' to reflect her continued existence with her 'unexacting mistress' (p. 171). From the start, cause and effect is implied, but actually undermined by an accretion of episodes, the "in-between" of the narrative, which represents a process of movement and stasis for the character, a 'beginning again and again' in which there is no progression

forward. Stein refuses to 'impose upon life, [...] an order which it does not possess itself' (Auerbach, p. 549).

The opening of 'Melanctha' begins with, 'Rose Johnson made it very hard to bring her baby to its birth' (p. 59). We are told that Rose and Melanctha are good friends and that Melanctha had 'tended' Rose (p. 59). This opening description is in fact an episode that occurs towards the end of the story: 'Rose had a hard time to bring her baby to its birth and Melanctha did everything that any woman could' (p. 159). In 'Melanctha', the ending; that is Rose's subsequent rejection of Melanctha, and Melanctha's death, is conflated with the beginning, so that a circular narrative pattern is created. This structure of starting again and again, intimates that the ending is always the beginning and that each beginning is an image of 'desire taking shape, beginning to seek its objects, beginning to develop textual energetics.'<sup>12</sup> This conflation of life and death, indicated by movement and stasis, is reflected at the macro level of plot and equally at its micro level, in the episodes of each character's life. In effect, then, we have a narrative plot that suggests progression but instead offers a continuous repetition of beginning and ending.

Similarly, in 'The Good Anna', the narrative structure begins in the present, 'Anna managed the whole little house for Miss Mathilda' (p. 3) and then moves back into the past, through a series of flashbacks, designed to highlight how Anna came to be working for Miss Mathilda. The opening of the text is picked up again on page 41 when we are told 'So Anna began a new life taking care of Miss Mathilda.' The "in-between" of her narrative traces her working life through Miss Mary Wadsmith and Dr. Shonjen, and her friendships with Mrs. Lehntman and Mrs. Drehten.

The central section of the tripartite structure of this story concerns itself with Anna's movement, yet the circular logic of her narrative at a macro level is

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 37.

repeated at the micro level of the text. Each episode is simply a formulaic repetition, thematically, of control and loss of control. In the Miss Wadsmith episode, Anna's life begins in control: 'Anna soon had the household altogether in her charge' (p. 14) and ends, 'It was the end of Anna's service with Miss Mary Wadsmith (p. 23). In Dr. Shonjen's service, the episode begins, 'these days were happy days with Anna', and ends, 'Anna bade him a sad farewell and went away' (p. 38). For Anna, her power over weak and ineffectual men or women is essential to her sense of self. She leaves Miss Wadsmith because she cannot bear the thought of having to take orders from Miss Wadsmith's daughter, Jane, and she leaves Dr. Shonjen because she cannot get on with his wife. Anna, already marginalised because of her class and her gender, finds that there is no place for her in Bridgepoint unless she is part of a household. Her narrative trajectory, the reader realises, is circular: a repetition of episodes, all with the same preoccupation and with the same outcome.

In 'The Gentle Lena', the final story in the collection, the narrative trajectory also defines a circular structure. We begin the story, 'She had been a servant for four years and had liked it very well' (p. 171) and pick this back up again on page 177, 'Mrs Haydon got her the good place, with the pleasant unexacting mistress.' Instead of following the lives of these women chronologically, Stein uses the "in-between" of the narrative to suggest that 'the important things written in this generation do not tell a story' (*Portraits and Repetition*, p. 111). The dialectic of movement and stasis, treated in 'The Good Anna' and 'The Gentle Lena', but exploded in 'Melanctha', does not, as Stein insists, tell a story in any conventional sense.

I have tried to show in Section One the way in which Stein subverts Western literature's emphasis upon a traditional plot of beginning, middle and end. The second section of this chapter will continue the assessment of 'beginning again and again', and evaluate Stein's challenge to prevailing discourses about female

desire and agency thematically through the continuous present and the use of repetition.

### **Melanctha and Subversive Desire**

The dialectical opposition between rest and movement, and past and present, operates at the level of form and content and reflects the very “in-between-ness” of this story. On the one hand, we trace, through Rose Johnson and Jeff Campbell, a narrative plot of constancy and absolutes, a plot adhering to nineteenth-century versions of teleology and of the ‘right thing to do’ for women. On the other hand, we trace the circular and ‘wandering’ narrative of Melanctha, which stands in opposition to ideas about appropriate behavioural forms of conduct for women. Melanctha’s relationships, which act as textual digressions, serve to disrupt the movement of the plot forward. Each detour — a new relationship or place of discovery — takes her away from the original path of marriage and proper conduct, providing moments of postponement in which the search for knowledge is never achieved.

The structure of Melanctha’s relationship with Rose begins as a series of wanderings, in which Rose, even before her marriage to Sam Johnson, tells Melanctha ‘the right way she should do when she wandered’ (p. 142). The beginning of Melanctha’s relationship with Rose is identified as she ends her relationship with Jeff Campbell: ‘Melanctha Herbert had just been getting thick in her trouble with Jeff Campbell, when she went to church where she first met Rose’ (p. 141). The transition from one relationship to another, from stasis to movement, is denoted by the lexical shift from ‘just’ to ‘when.’ Beginning and ending are conflated so that Melanctha emerges from and into each new relationship, alone and unloved. There has been no progress in her developmental plot. The relationship with Rose, like that with Jeff, binds Melanctha to a centralised narrative plot of ‘proper conduct,’ against which she constantly strains.

Equally, the circular structure of these 'detours', in Melanctha's narrative, are underpinned by a use of repetition which mimics the process of movement and stasis. Janice Doane explains that 'Stein forces to the surface and makes excessive the implicit function of repetition in conventional narrative. In doing so, the contradictions of the conventional narrative become manifest' (p. 76). Each repetition within the text, whether of a single word, motif, or sentence, adds another dimension to the meaning of the text, implying that meaning is ever-changing and unstable. Graduated changes, whether through the insertion of commas or variations on sentence order, mimic the recurring sameness and difference of language. According to Barbara Law Lamberts, repetition in *Three Lives* occurs at different levels in the text: at a semantic and structural level, a phrase and sentence level and at the level of lexis or grammar (p. 32).

In 'Portraits and Repetition', Stein defines the distinction she makes between repetition and insistence. Repetition, she argues, is 'the repeating that is the same thing' (p. 100). She also goes on to add that 'we have insistence insistence that in its emphasis can never be repeating, because insistence is always alive and if it is alive it is never saying anything in the same way because emphasis can never be the same' (p. 102). Repetition can never be the same: an exact repetition is impossible. According to Stein, it is impossible to repeat the same thing twice because the emphasis is always different each time. She goes on to explain herself: 'If you think anything over and over and eventually in connection with it you are going to succeed or fail, succeeding and failing is repetition [...] but any two moments of thinking it over is not repetition' ('Portraits and Repetition', p. 117). Let me amplify my point.

In the opening episode of the story, that is, Rose's relationship with Melanctha, the narrator asks,

Why did the subtle, intelligent, attractive, half white girl Melanctha Herbert love and do for and demean herself in service to this coarse, decent, sullen, ordinary, black childish Rose (p. 60).<sup>13</sup>

This statement, on page 60 of the text, is repeated on pages 141-2, page 149 and page 151, but each repetition of this statement has a variation in its lexical and grammatical structure. For example, on page 142, Rose is described as a 'lazy, stupid, ordinary, selfish black girl', whom Melanctha would 'demean herself to do for and to flatter and to be scolded.' On page 149, Rose is described as having a 'selfish, decent kind of nature' but Melanctha 'loved to have her scold her.' Finally, on page 151, we are told, 'Melanctha demeaned herself to be like a servant, to wait on and always to be scolded, by this ordinary, sullen, black, stupid, childish woman.'

Firstly, the epithets used to describe Rose reflect Stein's continuation of the racial stereotypes found in literature of the period, prior to 1905 and beyond it.<sup>14</sup> The adjectival qualifiers 'sullen,' 'selfish,' 'coarse' and 'lazy' associate Rose's blackness with a racial and social inferiority, yet the repetition of the word 'decent', twice, serves to destabilize the former adjectival qualifiers. The repetition of 'selfish' three times and 'ordinary' twice, reflects Stein's use of repetition- as-iteration, a repetition that serves to insist on a quality or characteristic of a character.

If we look at the above examples in terms of grammatical repetition, the placing of repeated words serves to shift the emphasis of what they mean. In the first example, taken from the beginning of the story, we are told that Melanctha would 'love and do for and demean herself' for Rose. 'Love' and 'Do for' and 'demean herself' are separate activities, one is not dependent, necessarily, on the other. In the second example, 'demean herself to do for,' the repetition of

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<sup>13</sup> I will address myself briefly to the racist epithets in this episode but Stein's racism will be treated at length in Chapter Four.

<sup>14</sup> See Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman* (1905) and Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) as examples of texts where these stereotypes occur. The first two texts will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Four.

‘demean’ is a prerequisite of ‘do for.’ In the first example, which belongs to the latter stage in their relationship (pages 159-60), the use of the conjunction ‘and’, twice in that sentence, links the causal actions of loving, doing and demeaning, suggesting that Melanctha is in the grip of a complete submission to Rose because she is willing to do all these things. By contrast, the second example, which comes at the beginning of their relationship, suggests that Melanctha’s act of ‘doing’ for Rose is a form of demeaning herself. Repetition- as-variation, as Stein might call it, draws attention to the actions and motivations of the character in a subtly disjunctive way. Meaning is ‘just the difference in emphasis that inevitably exists in the successive moment’ (*Portraits and Repetition*, p. 119). It can only be grasped, if at all, through a close analysis of the way in which words are placed paratactically on the page.

Melanctha ‘demeans’ herself for Rose because she believes that Rose can save her and help her on the way to the ‘right position’. Rose ‘stayed home in her house and sat and bragged to all her friends how nice it was to be married really to a husband’ (p. 62). The repetition of the word ‘really’ in this sentence and in the sentence ‘Melanctha Herbert had not yet been really married’ (p. 59), places emphasis upon the idea that marriage is a significant goal for women. As I’ve already stated, the irony of statements like this, at the beginning of the story, is that marriage is never a viable option for Melanctha.

Unlike Lena, in ‘The Gentle Lena’, Rose sees marriage as a symbol of her position in society. She equates her marriage with ‘proper conduct,’ (p. 61) and suggests that marriage is the next step in a narrative that is progressive and linear. Lena, in ‘The Gentle Lena’, on the other hand, fails to understand the implications of marriage, ‘and yet she did not really know what it was, this that was about to happen to her’ (p. 182). Whereas Rose ‘thought it would be nice and very good in her position to get regularly really married’, Lena had no say in the matter (p. 61).

Later in ‘Melanctha’, at the point where Melanctha has ‘clung to Rose Johnson in the hope that Rose could save her’ (p. 149), Rose rejects Melanctha because she



‘can have no kind of a way to act right’ (p. 165). Rose sees life as a series of simple progressions from birth to death; Melanctha is unable to ‘make her wants and what she had agree’ (p. 62). In order to try and ‘learn the ways that lead to wisdom’ (p. 71), Melanctha embarks on a series of relationships, some fleeting, others established, in order to learn what sexual power is all about. Throughout this story, however, Rose insists that Melanctha conform to ‘the sense of proper conduct’ (p. 61). The words ‘right way to do’ and ‘proper conduct,’ are continually associated with Rose, and Melanctha stands transgressively in contrast to these perceptions of female behaviour.

Melanctha’s initial sexual contact comes in the form of John, the Bishops’ coachman, who ‘really [...] felt very strongly the power in her of a woman’ (p. 65). In spite of her young years, Melanctha’s sexuality attracts men to her and she ‘knew very early how to use her power as a woman, and yet Melanctha with all her inborn intense wisdom was really very ignorant of evil’ (p. 66). It is her awareness of sexual power that rouses Melanctha’s curiosity and her wanderings. The wandering quality of the text is determined by the emphasis on active verbs. Added to this, Stein’s continuous present insists on the process of movement and desire as it happens. For example, the words ‘just beginning’ and ‘felt stirring within her’ (p. 66) use the gerund to capture the fact that ‘Melanctha now really was beginning as a woman’ (p. 67). Melanctha’s ‘search in the streets and in the dark corners to discover men and to learn their natures and their various ways of working’ (p. 67), indicates Melanctha’s narrative coming into being. This beginning distinguishes Melanctha, linguistically and thematically, as a girl who will escape the conventions of female propriety:

Girls who are brought up with care and watching can always find moments to escape into the world, where they may learn the ways that lead to wisdom. For a girl raised like Melanctha Herbert, such escape was always very simple. Often she was alone, sometimes she was with a fellow seeker, and she strayed and stood, sometimes by railroad yards, sometimes on the docks or around new buildings where many men were working (p. 67).

The opposition, here, between Melanctha and girls brought up with care, suggests that Melanctha's fictional freedom is more to do with her position as a black woman, and a woman of the lower classes. Marginalised because of her class and race, Melanctha's position allows her to move more freely in society. The word 'escape' implies that girls brought up with care are confined and trapped by the demands of nineteenth century conventions of propriety, reflected in the narrative space they occupy. Only an escape from this 'space' will help them learn about 'wisdom.' The word 'escape,' which is used indeterminately throughout the text, mirrors Stein's own attempt to 'escape' the nineteenth century, as she writes in *Wars I Have Seen*: 'I belong to the generation who born in the nineteenth century spent all the early part of my life in escaping from it, and the rest of it in being the twentieth century yes of course' (*WIHS*, p. 59). Equally, however, Melanctha's position at the margins of society is no guarantee that she will understand the ways of wisdom. Existing at a tangent to the normative structure of society, Melanctha must 'take on the existing structure, function within some of its parameters, yet question its movement and arrangement of subject positions' (Farwell, p. 62).

She is driven to 'search in the streets and in dark corners to discover men and to learn their natures and their various ways of working' (p. 67). Again, at a lexical level, the use of the words 'search' and 'discover' illustrates the process of movement and activity that drives Melanctha on. In many respects, Melanctha is an epistemophile, a modern woman who has cathected all of her sexual desire onto the drive to know.<sup>15</sup> However, the desire to know, and what Melanctha learns, is always described euphemistically or indeterminately. Stein's language refuses to make explicit exactly what she means. Indeed, the emphasis, certainly in these early wanderings, is on 'ignorance and power and desire' (p. 67). One

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<sup>15</sup> See Linda Williams, *Sex in the Head: Visions of Femininity and Film in D.H. Lawrence*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 24.

might say that this is part of Stein's attempt to render the consciousness and thus the ignorance of her character more realistic, and in many respects this is true.

However, what the language seems to mask is the reality of a disruptive and potentially problematic sexuality. The emphasis upon sentences such as, 'she would begin to learn to know this man or that' (p. 67), 'Melanctha did not know what it was that she so badly wanted' (p. 67), and 'She learned the ways, and dimly in the distance she saw wisdom' (p. 67) demonstrate the slippage between signifier (knowledge) and signified (what knowledge represents); thus referential meaning becomes oblique.

In order to mask sexual detail, Stein uses euphemism: "'Hullo sis, do you want to sit on my engine,'" and, "'Hullo, that's a pretty lookin' yaller girl, do you want to come and see him cookin'" (p. 69). Melanctha moves from the black porters at the railroad yard to 'gentlemanly classes' (p. 70). Again, Stein's class and racial hierarchy needs to be called into question, but at this point I want to focus on the way that Melanctha's wanderings take her across the race and class divide. Her sexual anarchy, part of her positionality in the text, enables her, in part, to transcend sexual, gender, race and class divides, even if, paradoxically, Stein works firmly within them.

The process of movement with, and between, different classes and races of men is brought to a halt in her first significant, and most subversive, relationship with Jane Harden, a relationship which reflects the fact that lesbian desire, sublimated or otherwise, occupies a central place in *Three Lives*. Indeed, the frustration of women's feelings for each other is a theme which traverses all of these stories and one which Kalfopoulou acknowledges, Dunn ignores and DeKoven barely mentions. In each of these stories, women's feelings for each other are made evident: Anna's feelings for Mrs. Lehntman, Melanctha's for Jane Harden, and Rose Johnson, and Lena's for the German cook. The masking of the nature of the relationship does not detract from its significance for Stein; in fact, it only makes

‘subversive perspectives of marginality’ all the more attractive.<sup>16</sup> Such subversion is implicit in these female-female relationships because, according to Terry Castle, ‘female bonding [...] destabilizes the “canonical” triangular arrangement of male desire’.<sup>17</sup> What distinguishes the relationship between Jane and Melanctha is its implicitly lesbian content. Whilst this might also be there in ‘The Good Anna’, although not ‘The Gentle Lena’, the relationship between Anna and Mrs Lehntman in ‘The Good Anna’ is not given the narrative space of ‘Melanctha’ to explore the possibilities of such a relationship.

In ‘The Good Anna,’ Mrs. Lehntman is continuously described as ‘the romance in Anna’s life’ (p. 18). The repetition of this phrase is another example of Stein’s use of repetition-as-iteration and repetition-as-variation. The consistent iteration that Mrs. Lehntman ‘was the romance in Anna’s life’ (pp. 18 and 20) is used to reinforce the significance of Mrs. Lehntman’s presence in Anna’s life. By pages 34-35, however, this has changed to ‘Mrs. Lehntman was the only romance Anna ever knew’ (p. 34) and ‘Remember Mrs. Lehntman was the only romance Anna ever knew’ (p. 35). The introduction of the adjective ‘only’ and the adverb ‘ever’ change the semantics of what it is that Mrs. Lehntman represents. In the first example, it implies that Mrs. Lehntman is the romance in Anna’s life at that time in Anna’s life. The introduction of ‘only’ and ‘ever’, is designed, like the use of repetition in the Rose Johnson and Melanctha scenario, to denote a change in Anna’s situation. In the latter two examples, Mrs. Lehntman represents the only romance Anna has had or is likely to have in her life. The address to the reader to ‘remember’ this fact forces us to reassess the nature of the relationship between the two women. The word ‘romance’ works ironically throughout, and is heightened by the sincerity of the naïve narrative voice. We are told that Anna is ‘subdued by her magnetic, sympathetic charm’ (p. 18). Anna’s seduction is so

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<sup>16</sup> Catherine R. Stimpson, ‘The Somagrams of Gertrude Stein,’ *Poetics Today*, 6:1-2 (1985), 67-80 (p. 69).

<sup>17</sup> ‘Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction,’ in *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing*, ed. by Joseph Bristow, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 128-147 (p. 132).

complete that despite their first falling out, a 'wound' (p. 30), as the narrator calls it, Anna is unable to give Mrs. Lehtman up (p. 34). The narrator tells us, 'A certain magnetic brilliance in person and in manner made Mrs. Lehtman a woman other women loved' (p. 34).

Although not explicit, the very nature of Anna's love for Mrs. Lehtman suggests a sort of lesbian haunting in the story. In *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Terry Castle, talking about lesbian fiction, writes that the lesbian in fiction of the last two centuries, even before, has been 'ghosted'. What she means by this is that the lesbian subject is made invisible by culture because patriarchal culture has always been haunted by a fear of 'women without men' – of 'women indifferent or resistant to male desire' (pp. 4-5). Anna's feelings for Mrs. Lehtman suggest a sublimated sexual desire: 'Anna wanted Mrs. Lehtman very much and Mrs. Lehtman needed Anna' (p. 36). The lexical distinction between 'want' and 'need' serves to mark a difference between the women's feelings. Mrs. Lehtman needs Anna because Anna lends her money; Anna, on the other hand, seems motivated by a desire to be with Mrs. Lehtman. Whatever the case, because it isn't made clear, the words take on a semantic ambiguity; they stretch elastically to incorporate other meanings.

In 'Melanctha,' the 'haunting' of the love of one woman for another is made more explicit semantically and lexically, but it is still coded. Most critics of *Three Lives* have commented on the encoding of lesbian desire in this section of the story. Melanctha's understanding of the nature of sexual power and knowledge doesn't come from the men she meets but from Jane Harden, with whom she stays for two years.

This lesbian relationship, which, cannot be spoken by the text, but which exists 'within the repressive framework of the fiction only as a haunting chimera, as that which, by definition, may be sensed but never *seen*' (Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, p. 45), is central to Stein's challenge to heterosexual patterns of sexual power. Indeed, the relationship begins as one of movement and 'wandering' but

changes to stasis when Jane and Melanctha enter into a same-sex relationship. Although this is never made explicit, as with much in the text, it is alluded to: 'She loved Melanctha hard and made Melanctha feel it very deeply' (p. 74). The words 'hard' and 'deeply' suggest an erotic and passionate relationship, one in which Melanctha learns from Jane. What it is she learns we are never told, but the adverbs suggest an excess of meaning that the text's unconscious hints at. In other words, sexual excess, that which exists at the margins, is transformed into textual excess and spills over into and beyond the literal, conventional expectations of the words.

It is Jane Harden who, despite her reckless ways, initiates Melanctha into a relationship that is physically intimate and non-threatening. Interestingly, it is only now, in her liaisons with men, that Melanctha tries to 'escape.' The term 'escape,' which had been used positively on page p. 67, to suggest transgression of traditional notions of female propriety, is used in the context of her liaisons with men to denote a sort of linguistic and sexual trap. Frequently we hear that Melanctha 'made herself escape' (p. 70) and 'Melanctha would always make herself escape' (p. 70). With Jane Harden, Melanctha has no desire to escape. The movement away from 'wandering' towards 'stasis' is reflected by Melanctha's literal and metaphorical bonding with Jane:

Then they began not to wander, and Melanctha would spend long hours with Jane in her room, sitting at her feet and listening to her stories, and feeling her strength and the power of her affection, and slowly she began to see clear before her one certain way that would be sure to lead to wisdom (p. 73).

I think that Adrienne Kalfopoulou is absolutely right when she argues that the relationship between Jane and Melanctha provides an alternative narrative paradigm to that of heterosexual relationships, and, importantly, a narrative paradigm in which the hierarchies of conventional values are absent (p. 92). I would also draw the reader's attention to the words in the above quotation, where

Stein writes that the relationship is ‘one certain way [... ] to lead to wisdom’ (p. 73). Again, the ambiguity of this sentence provides different interpretations of ‘one way’. Is it one of many ways or simply the only way? I think the adjective ‘certain’, taken in the context of the other relationships Melanctha has, qualifies lesbian desire, in this story, as the locus for wisdom.

The relationship does not last, however. The dialogic of sameness is undermined once Melanctha understands what wisdom means. She moves from position of novice to one of educator: ‘But Melanctha Herbert was ready now herself to do teaching. Melanctha could do anything now that she wanted’ (p. 75). The movement from sameness and equality of power changes to an inequality of power as Melanctha becomes the emotionally stronger of the two women (p. 74). The failure of this relationship is not to do with the failure of lesbian desire, but the failure for Stein, like other women, of finding a narrative space to speak that desire. Kalfopoulou is right when she argues that ‘the subtext of female bonding, or “the effort at reimagining the dynamics in relationships” as an alternative to male paradigms of power’ is present in the text but remains problematic, ‘as the expression of female-identified passions are themselves still defined within the larger structure of cultural values upheld by patriarchy’ (p. 93). Indeed, Melanctha cannot, at this stage in her life, equate her lesbianism with the ‘right position’. Corinne Blackmer makes this point clearer when she tells us that Melanctha cannot imagine a relationship unless it is based on submission or domination; she finds ‘her experiment in an adult lesbian relationship based on the “right position” of sexual and social equality unsatisfactory or confusing’ (p. 247).

Significantly, Stein found the ‘right position’ for herself, expressed in later writings such as ‘Lifting Belly’ and ‘Patriarchal Poetry’. Brief examples from both poems reflect much of the dynamics of textual poetics that we see in ‘Melanctha’. For example, in ‘Patriarchal Poetry’, Stein theorizes upon the nature of language and self-expression. She explains that ‘Patriarchal poetry in regular places largely in regular places placed regularly’ (Kostelanetz, p. 123) insists upon

the 'right way of doing'; its regularity, then, a feature of its homogeneity. Jeff, too, a figure of patriarchal 'regularity' cannot appreciate the ways in which Melanctha, 'in differently undertaking their being there there to them', stands as a figure, for Stein, who will 'reclaim[...] rename[...] replace[...] what patriarchal stands for (Kostelanetz, p. 134).

Stein centres the one symbolic feature of patriarchal poetry at the heart of the poem – a sonnet – in order to undermine and question its value as a vehicle of representation for female desire. In a playfully tongue-in-cheek manner, Stein's sonnet, on close investigation has, in fact, eighteen lines and not fourteen. She employs the language of the courtly blazon in order to subvert it from either side, the margin, the place from which Melanctha also works, too. The language that surrounds the sonnet recreates what Stein calls the 'moving it is being in its way creating its existing' (*Narration*, Lecture One, p. 10). For example, in an erotic touching of itself, language creates from itself: 'Near near near nearly pink near nearly pink nearly near near nearly pink' (Kostelanetz, p.121).

'In the midst of writing there is merriment', writes Stein in 'Lifting Belly', her erotically charged love poem (Kostelanetz, p. 54). The emphasis upon female sexual union is mirrored by lyrical and rhythmic voices, a dialogic union not a hierarchical one: 'Lifting belly and again lifting belly' (p. 19) and 'Lifting belly is a language' (p. 16). In her discussion of this poem, Margaret Dickie believes that the insistent repetition of the phrase 'Lifting Belly' sets it out as a specific signifier. Yet, she moves on to add that the adjectives used to describe the phrase, flatten it out. She writes, 'Called "kind," "dear," "good," and even "my joy," "rich," and "perfect," "lifting belly" is given such a general description that it might refer to any experience. Normalizing "lifting belly" in this way, Stein lifts the taboo on the subject by repeated mention' (p. 17). Stein's lesbianism finds its voice in these later works; it becomes a love that dare speak its name. In returning to the discussion of 'Melanctha' and her transition from Jane Harden to Jeff Campbell, this relationship articulates the main conflict in the text between



narrative trajectories. Moreover, 'Melanctha,' unlike 'The Gentle Lena' or 'The Good Anna,' is determined by a trajectory of sexual desire that is, for the most part, absent from the other two stories. I think the distinction is an important one. In 'The Gentle Lena,' Lena has no sexual desire whatsoever; indeed, marriage, like childbirth, happens to her. She is the nineteenth-century 'angel' in the house. Anna, on the other hand, determines relationships but is also determined by them. Sexual desire is sublimated but never discussed in the openly problematic terms of 'Melanctha', thus my reason for believing that 'The Gentle Lena' and 'The Good Anna' are more representative of traditional nineteenth-century narratives in subject matter. Finally, the language of 'Melanctha' is the most experimental of the three stories and most representative of Stein's modernism.

The opposition between Jefferson Campbell and Melanctha Herbert is not simply about different attitudes to love and life but about ways in which language orders that experience. Most critics of the story have, as I have shown, demonstrated the 'bi-focality' of the text. The lovers, according to Lisa Ruddick, are 'opposed not simply in their sexual attitudes, like the couple in *Q.E.D.*, but also in their manner of focusing the world' (*Reading Gertrude Stein*, p. 15). The relationship is not only repetitive in the nature of sexual learning but the hyperbolic language of the two protagonists reveals the excesses of language where, as Doane argues, "meaning is emptied" (p. 70).

Furthermore, the link Stein makes between repetition and remembering, 'remembering is repetition' ('Portraits and Repetition', p. 108), locates a central feature of 'Melanctha' and highlights its difference from 'The Good Anna' and 'The Gentle Lena'. Melanctha's compulsion to repeat her wanderings is not just an aesthetic or formal characteristic designed to show a perpetual sliding or slippage of the signified from the signifier. It is also about the material Ruddick spoke of, being worked at in the margin of the text. Melanctha's repetitions reflect her desire to 'forget' her past, yet, paradoxically, according to Doane, all she is ever able to do is repeat that past: 'Her forgetfulness, then, allows her the

illusion of “mastery” but it also guarantees that she will be locked in a repetitious pattern of mastery and servitude’ (p. 76). The repetitive stories of Melanctha’s wanderings, which begin again and again, are not only detours away from the ‘master plot’ of beginning, middle and end, but Stein’s way of moving away from the constraints of linearity, which confine women to the rituals of marriage and reproduction.

Because this relationship is the longest of all Melanctha’s relationships, I will identify the main points that separate Jeff and Melanctha, looking specifically at how repetition is foregrounded as a means of destabilizing meaning and allowing Stein, through Melanctha to ‘deconstruct’ notions of identity and desire. Their mutually exclusive ways of representing and understanding the world offer the most insistent expression of the way this story encapsulates Stein’s ideas about the continuous present and repetition as her foremost challenges to literary representation. Firstly, I will discuss their different attitudes to loving and the ways in which language reflects that loving, and, finally, the way in which memory is treated as an issue in the story.

Prior to meeting with Jeff, Melanctha had wandered but her wanderings left her empty and unfulfilled. Melanctha yearned for ‘something realer [...] something that would move her very deeply’ (pp. 75-6). This desire for ‘something’ reflects Melanctha’s inability to define her feelings, to find the right words. The indefinite pronoun, ‘something’ opens up the semantic possibilities of what this wisdom might in fact be.

As in the relationship with Jane Harden, this relationship is determined by the dialectic of movement and stasis. In the episode with Jane Harden, the narrator tells us that ‘Soon they began to wander, more to be together than to see men [...] Then they began not to wander’ (p. 73). In the episode with Jeff, we are told, ‘It was almost a year that she wandered and then she met with a young mulatto’ (p. 76). In each case, the emotional strength of the relationship puts a halt to Melanctha’s wanderings, but unlike the Jane Harden episode, this relationship

suggests that Melanctha is brought back to the narrative plot of heterosexual desire and the rituals that go with it.

The circular structure that defines 'Melanctha' is replicated in the structure of the relationship between Jeff and Melanctha. Barbara Law Lamberts identifies thirteen 'rounds,' in this relationship, moments of movement and stasis which reflect at a micro textual level the structuring of the whole story. In each 'round' the opposition between a fixed period of happiness, intimated by Stein's use of 'now,' is undermined by a period of uncertainty and indecision, on Jeff's part, as to his feelings about the relationship with Melanctha. Lamberts also identifies the fact that although the use of the word 'now' seems to suggest progression in their relationship, this progression is in fact illusory, since each moment of their renewed acquaintance is undercut by Jeff's disillusion with Melanctha (pp. 131-34). In effect, then, the antagonism between illusion and disillusion holds the relationship in an advance and retreat strategy. For example,

Melanctha now never wandered, unless she was with Jeff Campbell (p. 94).

These months had been an uncertain time for Jeff Campbell. He never knew how much he really knew about Melanctha [...] He was beginning always more and more to like her. But he did not seem to himself to know very much about her (p. 95).

In this third 'round' of movement and stasis, between Melanctha and Jeff, the word 'now' indicates the immediacy of the temporal narrative structure, which suggests that the relationship is progressing well. However, the juxtaposition between 'beginning always more and more' and 'But he did not seem to himself to know,' reflects the tension in Jeff's circular logic. In fact the movement from 'beginning' to 'but' is mimetic of the overall dialectic of the stages of movement and stasis in the relationship.

When Melanctha first meets Jeff Campbell, he makes it clear that he regards life as a progressive act of 'working hard,' 'living regular' and having everything

‘good, and quiet’ (p. 85). He sees ‘loving hard’ as ‘getting all the time excited’ and resists this in his relationships (p.85). In fact, Jeff Campbell separates loving into two mutually exclusive patterns:

One kind of loving seems to me, is like one has a good quiet feeling in a family when one does his work, and is always living good and being regular, and then the other way of loving is just like having it like an animal that’s low in the streets together, and that don’t seem to me very good Miss Melanctha (p. 87).

Jeff tries to make it clear to Melanctha that the moral standards he sets for himself, he sees as the standard bearer for his race. Excitement, in Jeff’s eyes, implies the cultural and social values of depravity associated with sexual ‘otherness.’ Jeff refuses to give himself willingly to the friendship until he has a clear understanding of what it is Melanctha represents: “I can’t say things like that right out to everybody till I know really more for certain all about you, and how I like you” (p. 90). Already the distinction between Jeff and Melanctha becomes apparent. Jeff seeks to equate knowledge, ‘know really,’ about somebody, with truth, ‘for certain.’ The problem for Jeff is that Melanctha will defy his ability to categorise her; her otherness will elude him sexually and linguistically.

Very early on in the relationship, Jeff begins to articulate his difficulty in understanding what Melanctha means: “I certainly do wonder, Miss Melanctha, if we know at all really what each other means by what we are always saying” (p. 90). At a semantic level, the variation between ‘know at all’ and ‘know [...] very right’ creates a distinction which suggests that even Jeff cannot articulate what it is he really does know. At a sentence level, the possibilities of meaning are made evident through the lexical difference between ‘at all’ and ‘very right.’ These differences demonstrate the way in which language hovers between an abyss of possible meanings (know at all), and language as moral certainty (very right), reinforced through the words that are spoken. Yet Stein demonstrates the chameleon-like quality of language through the use of repetition. The more she

repeats a word or a phrase, the more she reveals its unreliability. The equation between 'saying and 'meaning' is what Jeff relies on to give his world grounding. He insists in this sentence that language should provide a means of determining reality; that the link between signifier and signified is clear and unproblematic.

Melanctha, however, undermines this meaning semantically and lexically. For Melanctha, saying and meaning are not complementary:

I certainly never did see no man like you, Jeff. You always wanting to have it all clear out in words always, what everybody is always feeling. I certainly don't see a reason, why I should be always explaining to you what I mean by what I am just saying (p. 121).

It is Melanctha who makes it clear, paradoxically, that the sacred relationship between meaning and saying is a redundant one. Stein talked about how words 'began to have within themselves the consciousness of completely moving, they began to detach themselves from the solidity of anything' (*Narration*, Lecture One, p. 10). In Melanctha's words to Jeff, she highlights, through the repetition of 'always,' how he insists on an indestructible bond between language and meaning. 'Always' implies that he has to fix the word to its referent; there is no room for uncertainty or ambiguity. Equally, it is, according to Kalfopoulou, Melanctha's linguistic wandering that depicts Stein's attempt to get beyond "the structures of language," which threaten to trap Melanctha emotionally' (p. 86). She goes on to add that, Stein's lesbianism provided her with a certain distance in respect to the mainstream which freed her to explore the alternative "ways of knowing" personified in Melanctha' (p. 87).

Jeff and Melanctha are unable to articulate their meaning, and exist continuously at cross-purposes.

He was silent, and this struggle lay there, strong, between them. 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 (p108).

The repetition of the word 'struggle' forces to the surface the conflicting perspectives of each character. Again, Stein uses repetition-as-variation and repetition-as-iteration, 'this struggle lay there', 'It was a struggle, sure to be going on' and 'It was a struggle that was as sure' to signal semantic differences. Part of Jeff's struggle, apart from failing to understand what Melanctha says to him, is that he cannot define Melanctha sexually or culturally: "Sometimes you seem like one kind of girl to me, and sometimes you are like a girl that is all different to me, and the two kinds of girls is certainly very different to each other" (p. 97). Jeff seeks an essentialist and metaphysical understanding of life. Melanctha must have a reality for him; she must suggest an integration of the self with life. In other words, she must Be: "I love you those times, Melanctha, like a real religion, and then it comes over me all sudden, I don't know anything real about you Melanctha, dear one" (p. 112). Once more, certainty and uncertainty are linked conjunctionally, through 'and', reflecting at the level of sentence structure that Jeff is unable to resolve his feelings about Melanctha. It is impossible for him to make progress in the relationship. This progress is hampered, because as the word 'real' suggests, Melanctha must represent an intrinsic essentialist definition of self, which is not to be had (Knight, p. 295).

The use of the word 'real' is iterated throughout the text when Jeff seeks to find metaphysical certainties about Melanctha and what she represents. The repetition of this word comes at moments when Jeff is experiencing epistemological doubts about Melanctha's identity and about the reality she seems to embody. On page 98, Jeff tells Melanctha, "I certainly know now really, how I don't know anything sure at all about you". We see again, how, at the level of sentence structure, the repetitive, circular logic of the main frame is repeated through knowing and not knowing. Paradoxically, Jeff's claim to know 'really' is based on not knowing 'at all'. On page, 116, he seeks, as he continuously does throughout their relationship, to determine the essence of Melanctha's feelings for him: 'Now he would often ask her, was she real now to him, in her loving.' The emphasis upon

the present moment, the 'now' in both sentences, is undermined by the semantic impossibility of 'knowing' and the 'real.'

On the one hand, 'real', in the immediate context of the sentence, suggests that Jeff wants to know if Melanctha's feelings are sincere; on the other hand, the word 'real' also implies a predetermined, identifiable category of 'woman', which he can define by some social and cultural ideology. Of course, the relationship between signifier and signified is unknowable and increasingly ambiguous; it is perpetually slipping in Jeff's relationship with Melanctha, and so he has no means of determining what exactly the 'real' represents. "“And then certainly sometimes, Melanctha, you certainly is all a different creature, and sometimes then there comes out in you what is certainly a thing, like a real beauty”" (p. 97). Even in these lines, Jeff requires Melanctha to represent something real, like the idea of 'regular living.' What his words suggest is that she is only, like her desire, an approximation (like real beauty) of the thing itself. The use of the simile 'like real beauty' already distances Melanctha from him by implying that the thing itself — beauty — cannot be known or had.

In seeking to identify and categorize Melanctha, Jeff listens to Jane Harden's stories about Melanctha and becomes physically and emotionally strained by the affair in which 'now at last he was beginning to really have understanding' (p.102). Yet despite this, Jeff still desires Melanctha to tell him 'essentially' what she was when he never knew her (p. 107). Again, 'what she was' refers back to Jeff's insistent use of real, as a way of determining who Melanctha is. Unfortunately for Jeff, Melanctha, 'who was too many for him', (p. 124) causes Jeff to become sick; indeed, he becomes overly anxious about the sexual 'otherness' that Melanctha represents. In his disgust and anxiety, Jeff resorts to the linguistic and cultural signifiers that confine Melanctha within the parameters of heterosexual discourse and definitions of appropriate behaviour for women. He latches onto his notions of 'living regular, and the never wanting to be always having new things' (p. 110). In his attempt to idealize Melanctha as a real

religion, Jeff seeks to control and demarcate the boundaries of their relationship. As Judith P. Saunders argues, 'Jeff understands that to articulate something means to set it at a distance and thus to achieve a certain control over it [...] Part of Jeff's "thinking" includes his preoccupation with moral imperatives [...] and this too stands between him and direct experience' (p. 58).

Stein uses her repetition effectively in order to mirror the progression Jeff makes in coming closer to an understanding of Melanctha's loving:

Every day now, Jeff seemed to be coming nearer, to be really loving. Every day now, Melanctha poured it all out to him, with more freedom. Every day now, they seemed to be having more and more, both together, of this strong right feeling. More and more every day now they seemed to know more really, what it was each other one was always feeling (p. 109).

Stein's use of repetition-as-iteration, 'every day now,' insists on a movement forward, a progression towards knowledge; that is, the 'right feeling.' However, progress is undermined by the use of the word 'seemed'. 'Seemed' hovers tantalisingly between 'really loving' and the failure of that 'really loving.' The variation of 'every day now' as 'more and more every day now' is designed to emphasise the movement forward towards knowledge, which is undercut soon after by, 'What was it that Melanctha did, that made everything get all ugly for them?' (p. 109). Again, Stein's temporal structure, which suggests progress forward, is continually undercut by a temporary suspension of that movement.

On pages 134-5, we are told that 'he was bitter only that he had let himself have a real illusion in him [...] he had lost now, what he had always felt real in the world, that had made it for him always full of beauty.' In this context the word 'real' takes on ambiguous meanings. Firstly, its meaning goes back to Jeff's need, as before, for some essentialist meaning to the idea of illusion. Jeff's bitterness lies in the fact that he dupes himself into believing that Melanctha represents something she isn't. Yet, to have a 'real illusion' is in itself a paradox since illusion already implies something that isn't real, a false reality. Stein's repetition



of the word 'real' constantly serves to dislocate Jeff's words from their intended meaning in order that the reader questions his belief in absolutes concerning language and identity.

It is Melanctha who exposes the sham of such elusive personal and epistemological unity for what it really is, but which Jeff in his rejection of Melanctha chooses to adhere to:

He only had disgust because he never could know really what it was really right to him to be always doing, in the things he had before believed in, the things he before had believed in for himself and for all the colored people, the living regular, and the never wanting to be always having new things, just to keep on, always being in excitements. All the old thinking now came up very strong inside him. He sort of turned away then, and threw Melanctha from him (p. 110).

The conflict in these lines arises from the juxtaposition of 'living regular' and 'could know really what it was right to him to be always doing.' Living regular is undermined by an uncertainty about how one should live one's life. Jeff has life neatly mapped and contextualised; Melanctha disrupts those boundaries. The use of the conditional tense 'could' indicates that knowledge is conditional, not certain, and the adverb 'really' reinforces the arbitrary lure of knowledge or truth.

Not only is Melanctha's sexual 'otherness' problematic for Jeff, but so too is her insistence on forgetting. Stein's use of the continuous present is synonymous with her attempt to represent narrative free from the burden of the past. As she says in 'Portraits and Repetition,' 'We in this period have not lived in remembering, we have living in moving being necessarily so intense that existing is indeed something, is indeed the thing that we are doing' (p. 109). For Jeff, the self in the present can only be articulated through memory, through an understanding of one's origins and one's relationship to the past. He tries to articulate his feelings about this to Melanctha:

I know now no man can ever really hold you because no man can ever be real to trust in you, because you mean right Melanctha, but you never can

remember, and so you certainly never have got any way to be honest (p. 135).

The link between 'honest' and 'trust' is linked explicitly for Jeff to the past and one's memory of the past. Unlike Eliot and Pound's, even Proust's relations to the past, Stein breaks completely from it.<sup>18</sup> If, for Stein, the representation of modern writing is 'existing' without reference to past, present or future, then Melanctha is the embodiment of that belief. She continually opposes Jeff's recourse to the past and to memory of the past. Frequently throughout the story, Jeff refers to Melanctha's inability to remember. He states that "she certainly don't remember right when she says I made her begin" (p. 126) and "you certainly Melanctha, never can remember right, when it comes to what you have done and what you think happens to you" (p. 128). In each of these sentences, Jeff qualifies remembering with 'right' suggesting that memory, like ways of living, follows a logical and coherent path. Melanctha challenges Jeff's comments with, "its real feeling every moment [...] that certainly does seem to me like real remembering" (p. 128). In this sentence, Melanctha defines 'remembering' as 'every moment,' an indication that memory dissolves in and out of each successive moment, leaving no trace behind.

In Stein's writing, the absence of memory, what she terms 'existing,' is represented by her conflation of beginning and ending, and also her use of the continuous present. 'Existing' is replicated in Stein's use of repetition-as-iteration at the level of sentences and paragraphs in the story. In Lecture One of her four lectures in *Narration*, Stein writes, 'And they did this thing and they are doing this thing and punctuation and arranging them and destroying any connection between the words that would that did when the English used them make of them

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<sup>18</sup> Both T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound create a modernism out of the past. Their use of myth, of intertextual references to writers of the past and their reliance upon the past, is very different from Stein's use of the continuous present and her rejection of the past. See Frank Kermode, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) and Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938)

having a beginning and a middle and an ending to them' (pp. 13-14). The beginning, the middle and the ending imply a causal connection and as we have seen in this story, there is really no causal connection between events in Melanctha's life. Progression is implied by the continuous present, but the continual transition between movement (wandering) and stasis (rest) fixes the temporal structure firmly in the present. If we look at specific paragraphs in 'Melanctha' we can see how existing in the present, without recourse to past or future, is a mimetic quality of her writing.

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 (p. 128).

In this section of a long paragraph, we can see how Stein's use of words replicates her insistence on the present, the lack of beginning, middle and end and a lack of punctuation. In this paragraph, the two sentences achieve 'internal balancing' at both a lexical and semantic level (*Narration*, Lecture Two, p. 23). Semantically, each sentence begins with the question of how to 'remember right.' We could join this paragraph at any stage and find the same idea reiterated. Lexically, the vocabulary of each sentence does not vary and a pattern of different ways of thinking about memory is established throughout the paragraph, so, in effect, we hover between the possibilities of what remembering means for each protagonist.

Structurally, in this extract, Jeff's 'remembering right' is countered by Melanctha's 'remembering right', his 'thinking' is countered by her 'not thinking', his thinking everything all over' is countered by Melanctha 'remembering right just when it happens.' However, the main distinction between the two perceptions of memory is reflected in the space between Jeff getting home

and thinking ‘everything all over’ and Melanctha remembering ‘just when it happens.’ Between getting home and thinking everything all over, Jeff’s use of memory is already caught up in the past because of the time delay between the thinking moment and its recollection at a later date; Melanctha’s memory, on the other hand, is instantaneous, there is no time delay.

Stein’s use of semantic and lexical repetition in this paragraph shows how repetition-as-iteration forces a concentration upon the words themselves until they reveal an excess of meaning. Each word in the paragraph is as important as the next, reflecting her use of parataxis, and each sentence ‘needs its own place to make its own balancing’ (*Narration*, Lecture Two, p. 23). Yet despite this, the appreciation of memory is different and this difference is reflected in the grammatical distinction Stein makes between Jeff’s need to ‘remember right’ and Melanctha’s ‘remembering right’. The use of the present participle in order to denote Melanctha’s memory demonstrates how Melanctha’s memory is a product of the moment it happens, unlike Jeff’s ‘remember’, which already implies a link to the past. For Stein and her modernist project, the repetition of words demonstrates that the insistence is different every time. By applying enough pressure to these words by going over and over it, Stein ‘concentrated and took away all excrescences from them’ so she could, she tells us ‘make these same words do what I needed to do with them’ (*Narration*, Lecture One, p.13).

The sort of loving that Melanctha represents brings Jeff to the edge of psychological and emotional paralysis. He is unable to ‘see the beauty that he could not now any more see around him’ (p. 137). In fact, he comes close to believing that his memory of regular living is lost to him: ‘Jeff thought perhaps he really was forgetting [...] his old way of regular and quiet living’ (p. 137). Yet he clings to the past, to his memory of happiness, brought back to him through the spring landscape. Jeff begins ‘to feel a little his old joy inside him’ (p. 138). This renewed hope of past joy is what drives Jeff back to the familiar world of regular living and to a rejection of Melanctha who ‘could not love him the way he needed

she should do it' (145). We return to Jeff's insistence that there is a 'right way' to love and a 'right way' for a woman to behave, emotionally and sexually. Melanctha 'escapes' those definitions and Jeff has no understanding of the linguistic/sexual space that she inhabits.

The ending of the relationship with Jeff is the beginning of Melanctha's relationship with Rose, as I have mentioned. It is also the beginning of her relationship with Jem Richards, a gambler. Jem's economic recklessness is mirrored, emotionally and psychologically by Melanctha's behaviour: 'Poor Melanctha, surely her love had made her mad and foolish' (p.159). As if aware that death is inevitable, Melanctha throws herself into this relationship in one last hope that the right 'romance plot' can still be found. She wants Jem to give her a ring 'like white folks, to show he was engaged to her, and would by and by be married to her' (p. 155). It is Rose who realises that Jem's intentions can never and will never be honourable.

Despite the quirkiness of Jem's character and his impulsive behaviour he, too, is unable to accommodate the needs of Melanctha's desire. The need to be loved, to be assimilated into the propriety of conventional Bridgepoint society is revealed by Melanctha's awareness that she is about to lose Jem's love: 'Melanctha needed so badly to have it, this love which she had always wanted, she did not know what she should do to save it' (p. 157 ). Melanctha is unable to save this love because it has been made clear, right from the start of the story, that the conventional plot of love and marriage is denied her.

I return her to the ending of the story and Melanctha's relationship with Rose. Lisa Ruddick outlines the two events that destroy Melanctha: firstly, her rejection by Rose and, secondly, her sexual exploitation at the hands of Jem Richards (*Reading Gertrude Stein*, p. 42). Melanctha depends on Rose to provide her with a sense of stability, which she has failed to secure throughout the story. I have already discussed the structural significance of this episode as a conflation of beginning and end. However, what I want to now look at is the way in which

Rose, like Jeff, rejects Melanctha, because her behaviour transgresses appropriate female conduct. Melanctha's dizzying descent into emotional frenzy is indicated by her need to cling to Rose Johnson. Treading a fine line between self-survival and self-annihilation, Melanctha, feeling blue, threatens to kill herself. Rose equates this melancholy with Melanctha's inappropriate behaviour: "I expect some day Melanctha kill herself, when she act so bad like she do always, and then she get so awful blue" (p. 167). Somehow, according to Rose, if Melanctha could negotiate the "right way you be acting" (p. 161), then she would not feel so melancholy.

However, Rose's rejection of Melanctha is not simply about her inappropriate behaviour. It stems from an awareness of the erotic 'otherness' that Melanctha represents and which she believes will entice Sam, her husband: 'Rose always sent Melanctha away from her before it was time for Sam to come home to her' (p. 164). Rose is unable to return the support Melanctha has for so long given her because Rose, like Jeff, is a product of the patriarchal conventions about marriage and female selfhood that Melanctha 'escapes.'

There is one other aspect to this final relationship that I would like to look at briefly and it takes me back to the question of 'lesbian' haunting in this text. I have already mentioned the relationship between Jane and Melanctha as a sexual relationship, and the repressed subplot of the text, but I use the term 'lesbian', in this instance, to denote the specifics of a female bonding that Rose is unable to recognise. On page 142, Stein talks about the ways in which Melanctha, in her need for love and support, 'demeans' herself for Rose. At one point she writes, 'This was a queer thing in Melanctha.' I read 'queer' as strange, but given the indeterminacy and semantic instability of most of Stein's writings, I also read 'queer' in this context, as a pun on Melanctha's desire for other women, whether that desire, which cannot speak its name, is sexual or emotional. After all, I have demonstrated that Melanctha's function in the text is to show how language can be opened up to possibilities, possibilities that language cannot be made to signify

monolithically.<sup>19</sup> What kills Melanctha is Rose's rejection of female bonding, of a non-hierarchical relationship, which goes beyond the conventions of heterosexual patterns of love.

Melanctha 'wanted Rose more than she had ever wanted all the others' (p. 166). This desire, reinforced through the repetition of 'want,' throws us back to the statement, at the beginning of the story, and Melanctha's relationship, that she 'had not found it easy with herself to make her wants and what she had agree' (p. 62). At the point where Melanctha can make these things agree, because now she understands what she has —Rose — is what she wants. The knowledge of this fact reduces Melanctha's world to a 'mad weary dance' (p. 166).

### **Beyond the Ending**

From Rose Johnson to Jane Harden, Jeff Campbell to Jem Richards, Melanctha's narrative moves in a circular logic, repeating the experience of deferred satisfaction. Her narrative, which is a series of repetitions, maintains a sort of 'middle tension' a prolonged deviance from the quiescence of the "normal" — which is to say, the unnarratable — until it reaches the terminal quiescence of the end' (Brooks, p. 251). Each repetition of these relationships is, in formal terms, simply a means of deferring the end of the text; the binding of the text into 'bundles', a controlling of desire kept in abeyance until the next movement or detour towards the end.

In what ways, then, do these stories challenge the 'romance plot' for women, and yet fail to 'write beyond' the ending of the traditional 'romance plot'? I have

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<sup>19</sup> I realise that I am perhaps stretching the semantics of this term. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Vol. XII Poise-Quelt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, pp. 1014-1015), the word 'queer' can mean 'eccentric', 'strange', 'odd' or 'questionable'. The first use of 'queer' in a homosexual context was recorded in a paper on 'Practical Value of Scientific Study of Juvenile Delinquents' in the Children's Bureau, U.S. Dept of Labor, 1922. For a fuller discussion of the term 'queer', see *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, edited by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (London and New York: Prentice Hall, 1995; repr; 1999), pp. 178-187. Bennett and Royle make reference to the use of 'queer' in the 1922 US Labor Report, demonstrating the problematic use of the term in relation to delinquency. They go on, however, to develop the semantics of the word up to the present day.

already identified that the very marginality of these women already serves Stein in her attempt to find a narrative space, the “in-between” of beginning and ending, as a place where the tensions and contradictions of female identity and desire can be mapped out. Moreover, the representation of female desire, through Stein’s modernism, is not simply about an emerging aesthetic, concerned with perspectives of time and the modern composition, but about the need to move beyond the tradition that precedes her.

Firstly, the fundamental distinction that I want to make between these stories is the uses to which she puts her characters. It is obvious that Stein’s modernism is a challenge to nineteenth-century conventions in narrative and language, but what distinguishes the extent of this challenge is the use she makes of Anna, Lena and Melanctha. Melanctha operates in a narrative space in which she is free to interrogate the constraints of language, which, ideologically, categorize women. Such an interrogation, through character, is not as explicit in the other two stories. In ‘The Good Anna’ and ‘The Gentle Lena,’ both women work within the narrative space, upholding the status quo; they do not work against it linguistically. Although Stein’s modernism works against the representational requirements of traditional narratives, it is her character, Melanctha, who embodies, through her speech, Stein’s outright challenge to paradigms of heterosexual discourse and her insistence on the value of female love.

The narrator in ‘The Good Anna’ and ‘The Gentle Lena’ speaks mostly for the characters. Lena has very little to say for herself and her selflessness is reflected by the fact that Lena exists in a sort of temporal stasis; she is acted upon by others rather than acting on. For Lena, her narrative plot is that of the ‘romance plot’ and it does, like so many nineteenth-century plots, end in death for the female protagonist. Lena does not want to be married to dull Herman Kreder, who would rather spend his time with his male friends: ‘He liked to be with men and he hated to have women with them’ (p. 180). The repetitive insistence on Herman’s dislike of women and his preference for spending time with men, hints at a latent



homosexuality that is repressed within the text: 'Herman Kreder knew more what it meant to be married and he did not like it very well. He did not like to see girls and he did not want to have one always near him' (p. 182). Both Herman and Lena are forced into a marriage that neither of them really wants or understands. They are both prey to societal forces that determine marriage as the narrative outcome of people's lives, regardless of sexual orientation or disposition.

The ending of Lena's life is marked by a complete dissolution of the self. Her narrative ends not with an assertion of female happiness or desire but with the triumph of male selfhood. Lena dies in childbirth, suggesting that for this woman, at least, the plot of marriage and childbirth is deathly. As Janice Doane points out, 'Lena is not the victim of her husband but a conventional plot and framework' (p. 80). In this respect, Stein works against the narrative tradition but succumbs to the 'romance plot' of the death for her heroine. Whereas 'The Good Anna' is divided into three sections each dealing with an aspect of Anna's life, past and present, in 'The Gentle Lena', only three pages are devoted to her past (pp. 175-77). In these pages we are told very little about her life: 'Lena was not an important daughter in the family' (p. 176). This negation of female selfhood and identity, and of the past, focuses the temporal structure of the novel firmly in the present.

Anna's story, structured into three parts, details her life but not in any progressive or linear manner; in fact, one could say that the story works on a kind of regression backwards: we begin in the present, return to the past and move back to the present and Anna's death. The temporal structure of the story insists on the present moment but the "in-between" — how Anna arrived at this point — represents moments of change or movement for the character. The seeming progression of the narrative in charting Anna's movement from employer to employer is undermined by the fact that each episode recounting this change also reflects a similar pattern.

In part one, the insistent emphasis on ‘Anna led an arduous and troubled life’ (p. 3), sets up at a thematic level, a semantic meaning which the reader expects to follow throughout the story. This initial phrase is again repeated twice more in the opening pages with a direct address to the reader, ‘You see that Anna led an arduous and troubled life’ (pp. 5 and 10). However, on one level, Stein draws our attention to the ironic disparity between the narrator’s perception of Anna’s life and our own. By asking us ‘to see’, she invites us to look closely at where the conflict in the story arises. This self-conscious act on the part of the narrator, forces the reader to question the semantic level of the story, to question just how much we really do see. What I mean by this point is that Anna’s life is arduous not because other people put upon her but because she puts herself upon other people; she cannot abide not being in control.

That death seems to foreground these narrative plots is not surprising. In typically nineteenth century fashion, Anna and Lena represent the female figure of self-sacrifice, whose narrative trajectory must lead, inevitably to death. These two stories, more expressly than ‘Melanctha,’ fit into the nineteenth-century paradigms of plots for women. The “in-between” of their narrative tells the same story of stasis and movement, but they do not attempt, in the same way as ‘Melanctha’, to find a narrative space for female desire and agency.

Melanctha’s oppositional stance to social and cultural constructions of the ‘right thing’ for women to do is the most complete. Anna, as I have mentioned, channels her energies into ensuring that Julia Lehnman understands what is expected of women. Melanctha’s wanderings, at a thematic and textual level, ‘undertake a reassessment of the processes of gendering by inventing narrative strategies [...] that neutralize, minimize, or transcend any oversimplified oedipal drama.’<sup>20</sup> The ‘bisexuality’ of Melanctha’s position in Bridgepoint, another example of her “in-between-ness,” mirrors her oscillation between narrative

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<sup>20</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 37.

trajectories: marriage or death. Her death, however, is indicative of Stein's problem of finding a space which can transcend these outcomes, a resolution for her character that does not result in either death or marriage.

It is symptomatic, I think of the difficulties Stein faced in these early texts of being able to completely abandon the traditional plot endings for her characters. Indeed, the manner in which she writes their deaths is so abrupt that one might be forgiven for thinking that Stein didn't know how else to end. In 'The Good Anna,' Stein devotes a short paragraph to Anna's death, although she does lead up to it with descriptions of Anna's physical and emotional weariness. Anna's death is a result of her self-sacrifice for others: 'Anna with her strong, strained, worn-out body died' (p. 56). Lena's death is a mirror of her life; she is animated by death throughout the story and dies giving birth to a 'lifeless' baby. Melanctha, dies from consumption and this fact is also recounted in a short paragraph. Compared to all three narratives, the descriptions of their deaths occupy a small space. Their deaths aren't sentimental but presented matter-of-factly, an indication, I believe, that Stein saw death within the fictional parameters of a heterosexual and patriarchally constructed world as a natural outcome for subversive female characters. The fact that each woman is abandoned by a woman when she most needs her friendship or love is of no surprise. The ghostly spectre of female friendship and love, which permeates these stories, was a desire that could not speak its name until much later in works such as 'Lifting Belly,' and 'Patriarchal Poetry'.

In conclusion, Stein's 'Melanctha,' I believe, is essential to any understanding of her literary works. In this story, the tensions in the text between past and present, heterosexual and homosexual love, convention and experimentation, reflects a rite of passage to later works where Stein will find a means of writing the difference, lesbian love, that is excluded from patriarchal poetry, which 'is the same' ('Patriarchal Poetry', Kostelanetz, p. 116).

## **Chapter Two: Stein's "Praefatio" of Derrida. 'Melanctha', Language and Identity.**

Chapter Two will extend, through the lens of deconstruction, the claims made, in Chapter One, about Stein's modernism and contemporaneity. Moving on from Chapter One, yet still retaining a trace of it, I want to consider Shari Benstock's statement that Stein's writings need to be considered from beyond the confines of modernism ('A Letter from Paris', p. 4). It has always struck me that Stein's writings push to the extreme, ideologies about gender and identity. This deconstruction, I believe, begins in 'Melanctha', and finds its radical culmination in works such as 'Lifting Belly' (1915-17), 'A Book Concluding with a Wife Has a Cow a Love Story' (1923), 'Patriarchal Poetry' (1927) and *The Geographical History of America* (1936).

My introduction outlined the proliferation of critical works attempting to undertake an analysis of Stein's postmodernism and her deconstruction of categories of identity and gender. These critics, whilst providing stimulating evidence of Stein's postmodernity, do not show, specifically, how Stein 'prefigures' philosophers such as Jacques Derrida in his rigorous deconstruction of metaphysical concepts such as speech, consciousness, presence and truth. Marianne DeKoven, for example, writes of Stein's challenge to patriarchal modes of signification without really extending her analyses into a poetics of the text's deconstruction strategies. Ellen E. Berry provides a stimulating discussion of Stein's postmodernism from the perspective of French theorists such as Julia Kristeva, adding that 'critical identity issues of intimacy with the other woman and differentiation from her are precisely what is at stake in reading Stein' (p. 280). Whilst Berry and DeKoven open up a 'conducting path' from modernism to postmodernism, I want to extend their thinking of Stein's works into, and through, Jacques Derrida's strategy of deconstruction and the term *différance*. Derrida considers himself, along with earlier "names" such as Frederick Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger, to be involved in a radical reformulation of metaphysics. ('Structure, Sign and Play, p. 280). By inserting Stein into this list of philosophers, I hope to demonstrate that Stein's claim, 'in this epoch the only real

literary thinking has been done by a woman' (*GHA*, p. 218), needs serious consideration.

In order to demonstrate that Stein and her early text, 'Melanctha', is a "praefatio" to Derrida's philosophic enterprise, I will discuss, in a section titled 'Derrida and Deconstruction', some of Jacques Derrida's critical thinking about language and identity, through the term *différance*, explaining, as I do, Derrida's uses of *différance*. Then, in the section, 'Stein, Writing and Identity', I will move on to consider Stein's reflections on language and identity in the critical essays and lectures which provide a framework for her ideas about language, writing and identity. These works include 'Composition as Explanation', 'Portraits and Repetition', 'What is English Literature', and *The Geographical History of America* (1936). Once I have established the similarities between the two, I will then move on, in the final section of the chapter, 'Melanctha, Language and Identity', to an analysis of 'Melanctha' in order to demonstrate my belief that this text is where Stein's post(modernism) really begins.

One of the intentions of this chapter is to elaborate on comments by Cyrena Pondrom and Margaret Dickie, that the critical tools of deconstruction, as well as psychoanalysis and feminism, have enabled Stein's critics to interpret what were, and are, for some, still considered deliberately obscure works. The textual reading of 'Melanctha', through '*différance*', will aim to make the text tremble in order that it reveal symptoms in which language and identity are brought into question. In this respect, my understanding of Stein's deconstructive strategies brings me closer to Ellen Berry when she writes,

Rather than consigning these excluded texts to a category called unreadable, thereby bracketing them from consideration, we might value them precisely for their incomprehensibility since we are thus preserving the possibility that something radically different might speak, or is speaking outside our historical ken of readability (p. 27).

Whilst for late twentieth-century readers, 'Melanctha' is nothing like Stein's more experimental texts, it does speak to us, deconstructively, at the beginning of the

twenty first century. If Berry wants to include Stein's excluded texts, in the canon of critical appreciation, in order to make them speak, then it is important that we understand that the voice she talks about finds its genesis in 'Melanctha'.

### **Derrida and Deconstruction**

It would be useful to talk about the analysis of this chapter in terms of 'deconstruction,' but the word itself is a problematic one. Since Derrida first coined the term, its appropriation by various academic circles has, according to Julian Wolfreys, been complete: 'Deconstruction became transformed in — in retrospect — a wholly predictable fashion beginning with the "institutionalisation of this word in academic circles in the Western world [...] especially in the United States."' <sup>1</sup> Wolfreys goes on to add that deconstruction was never intended as a 'system, programme or methodology' (p. 38). Indeed, he convincingly argues that 'deconstruction, as a practice of literary interpretation, may well have come about as a result of commentary on and interpretation of the texts of Jacques Derrida, but that Derrida himself has never practised deconstruction' (p. 47).

Derrida, too, is determined to point out the difficulties of the word 'deconstruction'. In an article titled, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', he states that despite the numerous attempts to define the word, *Différance*, and the 'grammatical, linguistic or rhetorical senses' it implies, the word 'never appeared satisfactory' to him.<sup>2</sup> He rules out deconstruction as analysis or critique, also as method or act (pp. 4-5). Deconstruction, he argues, 'takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness or organisation of a subject, or even of modernity' (p. 5).

The strategy of *différance*, which is neither a word nor a concept, is explicated through the semantic undecidability of the French verb *différer* and the Latin verb *differre*. Derrida tells us that the meaning of *différer* moves between 'to be not

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<sup>1</sup> *Deconstruction. Derrida* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> In *Derrida and Différance*, ed. by David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Warwick: Parousia Press, 1985), pp. 1-8 (pp. 4-5). Further articles in this edition will be cited by individual title and references given after quotations in the text.

identical, discernable', and that which 'suspends the accomplishment of fulfillment of "desire" or "will"'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Latin *differre* suggests the 'action of putting off until later [...] of an operation that implies an economical calculation, a detour, a delay, a relay' (p. 8). The premise of *différance*, then, always presupposes that a certain alterity inhabits and haunts writing. The possibility of meaning lies in the space between the terms and their relations within a chain of signification.

In his discussion of Ferdinand de Saussure's theories of the sign, Derrida states, the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences ('Différance', p. 11).

The significance of this, according to Wolfreys, is that 'the signified can never be present as such; it is always spaced from the signifier (the vocalized sound and the graphic mark are never the things to which we assume they refer)' (pp. 71-2). Thus, 'Derrida's approach to the text proposes a certain duplicity of layers or levels within the same text. One level is the "given," and the second we might call its "conditions of possibility."' <sup>4</sup>

Given that difference and deferral are preconditions of language, what is the impact of this on metaphysical concepts such as consciousness and presence? If, as Derrida points out, in 'Différance', the Latin verb, *differre* (to defer), suggests 'the action of putting off until later' (p. 8), then it seems that Derrida works within a Freudian model, because, according to David Krell, his term *différance* suggests 'a number of enticing hints in the direction of psychoanalysis'.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis upon *différance* as "detour", that which suspends the accomplishment of "desire" or "will", reveals how *différance* displaces desire and works within the Freudian economy of

<sup>3</sup> 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Prentice Hall, 1982), pp. 1-27 (p. 8). Further references to this text will be given after quotations in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Irene Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> 'Engorged Philosophy: A Note on Freud, Derrida and Différance', in *Derrida and Difference*, pp. 11-16, (p. 11).

*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which displaced desire, deferral, is in fact the death instinct at work.

The displacement of desire, through repetition as an organising principle of *différance*, demonstrates how life, in the effort to protect itself from a dangerous cathexis, defers that cathexis 'by constituting a reserve (*Vorrat*)', which takes place through 'breaching or repetition'.<sup>6</sup> *Différance*, as deferral and repetition, highlights the problematic assumption that presence is possible:

For Aristotle, as for the entire history of metaphysics, as we have shown, the time of evidence and of truth is the time of the present [...] This is expressed in the form of the third-person present indicative of the verb to be: *is*. However, Derrida insists that the *now* is fundamentally non-existent, it is a constituted moment of time which essentially is non-temporal (Harvey, p. 120).

As Derrida himself states, 'temporization is also temporalization and spacing, the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time' ('*Différance*', p 8). Thus *différance* produces signification in which each moment contains both a trace of its past and its relation to the future and in which the present is divided in itself. If *différance* produces writing which has no implicit meaning, it is simply an infinite redoubling and repetition of differences, a chain of signification without closure, what does this tell us about the speaking subject?

Derrida has always been interested in the question of identity — being or presence and he insists that *différance* resists ontological certainty:

It is the domination of beings that *différance* everywhere comes to solicit, in the sense that *sollicitare*, in old Latin, means to shake as a whole, to make tremble in entirety. Therefore, it is the determination of Being as presence or as beingness that is interrogated by the thought of *différance* ('*Différance*', p. 21).

Language as a play of differences; identity as an effect of these differences; presence as a movement between past and possible future; meaning as a process of signification without end. How, then, might Derrida's theories of language and

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', in *Writing and Difference*, pp. 196-231 (p. 203).



identity suggest a parallel with Stein's ideas found in her lectures and in *The Geographical History of America*?

### **Stein, Writing and Identity**

Stein gave a series of lectures between 1926 and 1935. The most significant of these, 'Composition as Explanation' (1926), 'What is English Literature' (1934) and 'Portraits and Repetition' (1934), outline Stein's ideas about language, writing and identity. Although written later in her career, these lectures deal with ideas that Stein was working through right from the inception of *Three Lives*. In 'Composition as Explanation', which I discussed in Chapter One, she published her thoughts about narrative and time, and the use of the continuous present as a way of abandoning what had until then been traditional narrative structures. Yet, despite its place in Stein's literary corpus, 'Composition as Explanation', like Derrida's term deconstruction, is also not a methodology or a concept. According to Joseph N. Riddel, it is 'a critical intervention; a self-interfering word-concept' (p. 349).

So what is it that makes Stein's writing so 'contemporary'? Obviously Stein's continuous present problematises the teleological narrative of nineteenth century fiction by suggesting that composition; that is, the act of writing, is not about closure, beginning, middle and end but about 'an open field [...] of multiplicities' (Riddel, p. 348). In a Derridean context, the continuous present implies, like Derrida's *différance*, a moment in which language is subject to undecidability. Language becomes an endless play of traces in which writing is 'autobiographical, not in the sense of recounting a unified life or history, but as a form of self-generating repetition' (Riddel, p. 353). This form of self-generating repetition is evident in *Melanchtha* through the structural repetition of Melanchtha's wanderings, as well as Stein's use of repetition-as-iteration and repetition-as variation.

In later works such as 'Lifting Belly' and 'Patriarchal Poetry', autobiography becomes a 'gap created when words and voices (including our own) call and respond, are coming and going' (Berry, p. 21), as demonstrated by the lyrical intensity of lines

such as ‘said lifting belly/you didn’t say it/I said it I mean lifting belly’ (Kostelanetz, ‘Lifting Belly’, p. 5) and ‘To be we to be to be we to be to be to be we’ (Kostelanetz, ‘Patriarchal Poetry’, p. 114), where the dialogic rapport between self and other, culminates in a ‘we’ that deconstructs heterosexual paradigms of subject and other. This gap, “in-between”, is limitless and plentiful. Furthermore, if the continuous present is the mainstay of language, then there is no ending, no closure, simply, as Derrida would argue, a play of differences. Clive Bush suggests that Stein’s language defers representation, suspends judgement and recognises the absence of content in textual representation.<sup>7</sup> In ‘Melanctha’, we are always aware of the ways in which textual representation is denied us, as readers. For example, we are constantly told that Melanctha wanders but each experience is described obliquely and Melanctha never gains any knowledge from it. The absence of a contextual representation is designed to demonstrate that meaning lies in the space “in-between” her movements from one place to another.

Interestingly enough, Stein’s continuous present with its emphasis on the becoming again and again of language and its deferral of representation echoes Derrida’s *différance*: ‘Oblige me by not beginning. Also by not ending’ (*GHA*, p. 193). Furthermore, Stein’s insistence on the use and necessity of repetition in her writing also takes us back to Derrida and Freud. Both men depict repetition as a form of deferral; a textual and psychical feature which protects the organism from a dangerous cathexis. And Samuel Weber, writing of Derrida’s discussion of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, suggests that

behind the seeming stability and unicity of an apparently proper name, Derrida unravels — or rather, *weaves* — a network of threads (*fil*s) within which each place is the overdetermined knot or scene of multiple scenarios: [...] One result of such “demultiplication” would be to unleash a power of repetition that no stable structure could ever hope to comprehend, contain, or amortize in the

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<sup>7</sup> *Halfway to Revolution: Investigation and Crisis in the Work of Henry Adams, William James and Gertrude Stein* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 375.

name of truth. In short, the Freudian master-key, the Oedipus complex, would appear as only *one* figure among *others*.<sup>8</sup>

Stein's use of repetition, which is never referred to psychologically, but which is the means by which multiple scenarios are produced within the text, destabilizes her narrative structure and emphasises her break from the past.

In an attempt to articulate why there must be a new sense of the contemporary, Stein insists that writing and identity are interconnected. In her thinking, writing teleologically not only incurs a view of identity antipathetic to modern writing, to composition, but it also refuses a break with the past. When Stein writes, 'Nothing should follow something because in this way there will come to be a middle and a beginning and an end and of course that does make identity' (*GHA*, p. 153), she is resisting the genealogical imperative of the nineteenth century. Indeed, in 'Patriarchal Poetry', she writes of her need to 'reform the past and not the future this is what the past can teach her' (Kostelanetz, p. 131).

Just as Derrida makes it clear that deconstruction is the tension between 'memory, fidelity, the preservation of something that has been given to us, and, at the same time, heterogeneity, something absolutely new, and a break',<sup>9</sup> Stein, too, is aware that her writing, which is a 'step away from the nineteenth century' (*AABT*, p. 50), opens up a path. Stein intimates that her break with the past is a clean one, but the process of realising this break took time in her evolving aesthetic. She maps the evolution of her development of this aesthetic in 'Composition as Explanation'. Her 'groping for using everything' and 'of beginning again and again and again' is eventually replaced by 'I did not begin again I just began' (p. 499).

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Weber, 'The Debts of Deconstruction and Other, Related Assumptions', in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature*, ed. by Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 33-65 (p. 37).

<sup>9</sup> *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. by John Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 6.

The culmination of her use of the continuous present and her break with nineteenth-century narrative finds its realisation in the momentous volume *The Making of Americans*<sup>10</sup>. In *The Gradual Making of Americans*, Stein writes,

I made a continuous effort to create this thing in every paragraph that I made in *The Making of Americans*. And that is why after all this book is an American book an essentially American book, because this thing is an essentially American thing this sense of a space of time.<sup>11</sup>

In this extract alone, Stein's reference to a 'space of time' seems infinitely Derridean. Joseph N. Riddel in his article on Stein and Bergson, sees *The Making of Americans* as an 'undoing of the idea of genealogy itself' which 'involved a generic intervention, a kind of "genrecide"' (p. 330). The undoing of genealogy is already evident in 'Melanctha', in its circular structure, its dialectic of stasis and movement and its challenge to gender paradigms. At the point of writing 'Melanctha', however, she had yet to make the break with her brother Leo and the other forefathers who might insist on her position and commitment to a genealogical literary tradition.

Stein's break with the past and her attempt to solicit old texts is most evident in her lecture 'What is English Literature.' In this lecture she writes about the development of English literature through the ages and the way in which English literature is separated from its American counterpart by 'the daily life the complete daily life and the things shut in with that complete daily life' (p. 35). Her distinction between the two countries, aesthetically and culturally, is discussed in *Wars I Have Seen*, where she makes the differences between the two clearer. She states that 'England still believes in the nineteenth century yes she does, she almost wishes that she did not but yes she does' (p. 69) but America, by contrast, is 'not connecting with the daily anything, ('What is English Literature', p. 58). Moreover, for Stein, because English literature is informed by its island life, external and internal disturbances, such as

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<sup>10</sup> *The Making of the Americans being a History of a Family's Progress* (New York: Something Else Press, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> In *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, p. 258.

invasion or civil war, affect the style of English writing. In the eighteenth century English literature was 'clear and so there was a choice and the choice was a completed thing and what is a completed thing. A sentence is a completed thing' ('What is English Literature', p. 50).

In the nineteenth century the style of English writing changed because 'if you have to explain the inside to the inside and the owning of the outside to the inside that has to be explained to the inside life and and the owning of the outside has to be explained to the outside it absolutely is not possible that it is to be done in completed sentences' ('What is English Literature', p. 51). In the nineteenth century, then, the English wrote in phrases because explanation became part of the intention of writing. By the twentieth century complete sentences or phrases were no longer sufficient for expressing or explaining daily island life: 'Paragraphs then having in them the quality of registering as well as limiting an emotion were the natural expression of the end of the nineteenth century of English literature' ('What is English Literature', p. 54).

Although the use of the paragraph continued in English literature, its use was very different in American writing. Stein names Henry James as the writer who departs from Algernon Swinburne and George Meredith in his use of paragraphs. She makes it clear that James's use of the paragraph had a distinctly modern feel to it: 'His whole paragraph was detached what it said from what it did, what it was from what it held, and over it all something floated not floated away but just floated, floated up there. You can see how that was not true of Swinburne and Browning and Meredith but that it was true of Henry James' ('What is English Literature' p. 57).

Stein, through the model of Henry James, separates American writing from that of English writing because its exemplary feature is its detachedness: it lacks attachment to any history or daily island life. In her genealogy of English literature, Stein names six centuries, the twentieth being the sixth. In this century, American literature has its beginning and it has a different relationship with words compared to the literature of the past five centuries:

Some say that it is repression but no it is not repression it is a lack of connection, of there being no connection with living and daily living because there is none, that makes American writing what it always has been and what it will continue to become ('What is English Literature', p. 57).

In the space of separation, the American writer makes obvious their 'need for originality and their lack of history. They cannot be nostalgic' (Riddel, p. 352). America, without a history, has no connection to anything; its time, like Stein's writing, is just beginning. Stein's break with the past, reflected in all her works, is what Rachel Blau DuPlessis, calls 'breaking "the sequence", a 'rupture with the internalization of the authorities and voices of dominance' (p. 34).

This rupture is not just denoted by Stein's structural departure from traditional narrative evolution and resolution but by her use of language. The lack of connection to anything, in writing, is reflected in the way that American writers choose their words. With its 'disembodied way of disconnecting something from anything and anything from something' ('What is English Literature', p. 57), the American use of language separates the word from its referent: the space "in-between" is opened up and a play of differences is possible. The sign, like America, 'cannot be taken as a homogeneous unit bridging an origin (referent) and an ending (meaning) [...] The sign must be studied "under erasure," always already inhabited by the trace of another sign which never appears as such.'<sup>12</sup> Take, for example, Melanctha's point, when she tells Jeff that she 'certainly don't know' when he asks her to explain what she means (p. 122). To admit that she cannot explain her intention or meaning demonstrates that language has no referents to which she can articulate a fixed meaning. Through disconnection and repetition, Stein can indicate the way in which words are interchangeable and that repetition is not simply an economy of the same but a dissemination of deferred meanings, which must have consequences for the speaking subject.

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976; corrected edition 1997), p. xxxix.

In order to understand how Stein's theories of language and identity perhaps underwrite Derrida's ideas, we need to return to *The Geographical History of America*. In this text Stein makes it clear that her interest is in the relationship between language and identity. As I have already noted, the text is opaque to say the least, but certain threads (*films*) do appear to find their way to the end: the relationship between human mind and human nature and the impact they have on identity, landscape and death.<sup>13</sup> Stein's *Geographical History of America* makes a very explicit connection between the American landscape, and its sheer expansiveness, and issues of history and identity. Elliott L. Vanskike explains the distinction when he writes:

It was this vision of an undivided flatness that, when looking forward, crystallized her thoughts for *Geographical History* and, when reflecting backward, confirmed the notions of landscape she had posited in *Useful Knowledge*. In both books, landscape serves the same function for Stein. It represents an unsegmented, flat expanse that utterly resists being historicized or labeled with a static identity. As such, landscape is one of the most powerful metaphors Stein uses to keep herself and her writing from becoming mired in history and shackled to a destructive sense of identity.<sup>14</sup>

It would seem that Stein's views on identity are as radical as those proposed by Derrida and that both writers work within and against a tradition whose structures they want to expose. Elliott Vanskike links Stein's ideas on identity to the modern American landscape and America's position as a relatively new country without an ingrained past:

Here, then, was the appeal of landscape as metaphor for Stein. Its vast, unbroken expanse exists in space, not in time. And despite the efforts of geographers and cartographers to identify the landscape by imposing names and the grid of longitude and latitude on it, to render it temporal by supplying an

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<sup>13</sup> In his introduction to *The Geographical History of America*, William H. Gass capitalizes human nature and human mind; however, I will follow Stein's use of the terms and not capitalize. I will only capitalize as such if quoting Gass or other critics.

<sup>14</sup> "'Seeing Everything as Flat': Landscape in Gertrude Stein's *Useful Knowledge* and *The Geographical History of America*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 35 (Summer 1993), 151-167 (p. 152).

origin and a destination, the landscape continually points up the inadequacy of these attempts at description (pp. 152-53).

Like the American landscape, Stein's views of identity, based on the human mind, will serve to reflect a fluid identity which cannot be pigeonholed. Identity, in a Derridean sense, exists in the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time. American identity, like that espoused in *The Making of Americans*, does not exist in time; it is ahistorical and without origin. Moreover, for Stein, at least, the question of identity is shown to be fraught with 'paradoxes, contradictions and other disjointing movements which make the unity of identity impossible' (Wolfreys, p. 61).

In *The Geographical History of America*, the path to Stein's concerns about identity, landscape and death takes many detours around the subject of human nature and the human mind. For Stein, the distinction seemed pretty clear, and on a basic level suggested the difference between an identity steeped in time and history and an identity needed for creation, which could transcend those limits. Whilst fraught with problems, the distinction is still necessary for Stein. In its simplest terms, human nature represents the traditional, metaphysical sense of self: a self denoted by time, history, memory and consciousness, to state just a few points:

Human Nature clings to identity, its insistence on itself as personality, and to do this it must employ memory and the sense of an audience. By memory it is reassured of its existence through consciousness of itself in time-succession. By audience it is reassured of itself through its effect on another (Wilder, *GHA*, pp. 43-44).

Stein's distinction between identity informed by history and identity free from historical definition is an important one: 'Now identity remembers and so it has an audience and as it has an audience it is history and as it is history it has nothing to do with the human mind' (*GHA*, p. 147). If human nature is bound up with remembering and identity, then it is also the 'stuff' that narrative is made of. Human nature, identity and remembering create writing which is a series of causes and effects, which



is teleology. Vanskike writes: 'The difference between writing from human nature and from human mind is precisely the difference between seeing landscape unveiled in sequence as you travel on a train and taking in the whole of the landscape as you look out the window of a plane' (p. 162).

The sequential nature of writing composed out of human nature is for Stein writing which shares in the trajectory of beginning, middle and end. These devices are a means of transcribing the human landscape, locating it in time. They are, according to Vanskike, 'the compositional equivalent of the cartographer's ruled lines that mark off borders and distances, thus imposing identity and temporality on the landscape' (p. 162). If human nature is 'viciously anthropocentric' (Gass, *GHA*, p. 38), then its opposite and where Stein perhaps comes closer to Derrida's understanding of identity, is in her definition of human mind.

Human mind, associated for Stein with the writing of masterpieces, is a writing of the self in which time, memory and identity do not exist. Like the American landscape, which is a metaphor for the human mind, it exists in space and 'has none of the lines and locations that identify points of departure and destinations. The very notions of origin and terminus entail the identity and temporality that Stein was convinced could not coexist with a masterpiece' (Vanskike, p. 161). In effect, human mind has no memory, therefore no history. It has no awareness of self and cannot be present to itself: 'In its highest expression it is not even an audience to itself' (Wilder, *GHA*, p. 44).

Furthermore, in his introduction to *The Geographical History of America*, William H. Gass also explains that 'the human mind neither forgets nor remembers; it neither sorrows nor longs; it never experiences fear or disappointment. In the table headed Human Nature there is, therefore, time and memory, with all their beginnings, their middles, and their ends; there is habit and identity' (*GHA*, p. 38). Although Stein's view of human mind is a working model for the idea of genius, it does touch upon an aspect of selfhood which, in many respects, illustrates Derrida's speaking subject through *différance*. Stein's vision of identity, through human mind, resists

ontological pigeonholing, she sees identity, instead, as fluid: who/what is the real self?

Which one is there I am I or another one  
 Who is one and one or one is one  
 I like a play of acting so and so  
 Leho Leho (*GHA*, p. 107).

In these lines, Stein clearly locates identity as a play of and in writing, where the movement from 'one and one' to 'one is one' opens up the possibility of multiple selves, something Jeff berates about Melanctha's identity. This movement opens up the possibility that identity may in fact be a series of acts, a repetition of the self through language, both alike and yet different. Furthermore, if self-presence for Derrida is always deferred and we can never truly 'know' ourselves, Stein, too, suggests that self-presence is not assured:

I am I because my little dog knows me, even if the little dog is a big one, and yet the little dog knowing me does not really make me be I no not really because after all being I I am I has really nothing to do with the little dog knowing me, he is my audience, but an audience never does prove to you that you are you (*GHA*, pp. 112-3).

The connection between the self and an audience was a problematic one for Stein because an audience implied a social relationship and, in so doing, human nature. In this context, identity becomes fixed and the creation of masterpieces impossible. In the same way that an audience is problematic, so too is the relationship of the self to the past: 'What is the use of being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man' (*GHA*, p. 58). If identity belongs to the present and future moment, what use is the past when writing and identity exist in the becoming space of time. Vanskike explains it thus: 'In Stein's parlance, the human mind has no need of because or become in that it writes in the simultaneity of be' (p. 162).

Stein's human mind, according to Riddel, finds its 'anterior in "human nature," overcoming or effacing the dualisms that have haunted Western humanism in the form of thinking oneself' (p. 331). Moreover, if identity is the product of a continuous present in which the infinite repetition of the moment generates new moments and new selves, Stein seems to suggest that the human mind exists in a Derridean space between terms. She states quite categorically that 'it carefully comes about that there is no identity and no time and therefore no human nature when words are apart' (*GHA*, p. 204). Language is, then, spacing and so, therefore, is the self. Stein's vision of identity is created by the human mind because the human mind 'is not substantive or a *cogito*, but an energy that incessantly displaces itself, like writing' (Riddel, p. 331). While there are problems with Stein's model of the human mind, it is interesting to note how her views on subjectivity echo some of those articulated by Derrida and his term *différance*.<sup>15</sup>

In effect, then, Stein's human mind problematises and deconstructs traditional notions of identity. Tied into such a 'deconstruction' is a rejection of Aristotelian narrative form and a sense of historical time which locates and fixes the self. Stein's views of identity are ahistorical and paradoxical, since without an audience, fixed in historical time, she could not and would not know of her success as a writer. On the other hand, identity was clearly a problem for Stein and she engaged with it throughout her writing career and it is in her early text, 'Melanctha', that we find the beginnings of her exploration of the relationship between language and identity.

### **Melanctha, Language and Identity**

In this section of the chapter, I want to move on from Chapter One and the suggestion that Stein's narrative structure simply challenges the teleology of beginning, middle and end. Instead, I want to argue that, deconstructively, the structure of 'Melanctha'

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<sup>15</sup> See Bob Perelman, *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 140-156, in which he argues that Stein's model of human mind despite its insistent detachment from history and society, cannot, in fact, escape it (p. 156).

explodes all notions of narrative and language as ‘an effect, a result, a product, an a *posteriori*’ (Harvey, p. 159). In ‘Melanctha’, Stein questions the written structures which inform and perform an identity, ‘whether these are the structures of what we too hastily describe as a literary text or the human subject’ (Wolfreys, p. 60). In order to better understand Stein’s subversion of literary and ‘human’ structures, I will trace the effects of *différance* through her use of the continuous present and repetition.

In Chapter One, I argued that the structure of *Three Lives* indicates a narrative trajectory forwards; the stories of Anna, Melanctha and Lena should follow a teleological pattern. This pattern is undermined by Stein’s use of the continuous present, the ‘now’ of the text, which subverts and resists formative patterns of trajectory. In ‘The Good Anna’, ‘life went on very smoothly now in these few months’ (p. 8); and in ‘The Gentle Lena’, ‘She knew better now than to meddle’ (p. 183). Whilst Stein makes use of the ‘now’ in these two stories, to determine their temporal structure, in ‘Melanctha’, the use of the continuous present is overloaded structurally and thematically, unlike the other two stories. For example,

Always now he liked it better when he was detained when he had to go and see her. Always now he never liked to go to be with her, although he never wanted really, not to be always with her. Always now he never felt really at ease with her, even when they were good friends together (p. 117).

Structurally, the word ‘now’ serves two purposes: firstly, it insists on the immediacy of Jeff’s feelings; secondly, the incremental repetition of ‘now’ produces an overdetermined scene of multiple feelings that make it impossible to really know what Jeff is feeling. Thematically, Jeff’s disillusion with Melanctha, reproduced, here, by ‘Always now’, illustrates for the reader Jeff’s gratuitous attempts to understand and articulate his feelings for Melanctha. Each sentence, replicates, as a variant, the next, demonstrating lexically and stylistically, an endless process of deferral and difference. To begin each sentence with ‘Always now’ shows that the exact words cannot be found. ‘Always now’ simply defers what Jeff wants to say but can’t; language is *toujours déjà*. Furthermore, the use of repetition-as-iteration and-

as-variation, demonstrates how writing is a process of differences between ‘he liked it better’ and ‘he never liked to go to be with her’.

Whilst Stein is clear about her intention to break with the teleology of nineteenth-century narratives, her use of the continuous present, establishes a movement of signification in which the “present” element is related to something other than itself, but keeps ‘within itself the mark of the past element, and already allows itself to be ‘vitiating by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past’ (Derrida, ‘Différance’, p. 13).

We are told on the first page of the story and again on page 159, the ending of the story, that

The child though it was healthy after it was born, did not live long. Rose Johnson was careless and negligent and selfish, and when Melanctha had to leave for a few days, the baby died. Rose Johnson liked the baby well enough and perhaps she just forgot it for awhile, any way the child was dead.

To repeat exactly, word for word, the ending at the beginning, and vice-versa, shows how Stein makes it difficult for the reader to locate the temporal structure of the story. Furthermore, the signification of this passage, written at the beginning of the story, contains within it the mark of the past, literally its repetition on page 159, and the mark of the future; written at the beginning, it sets up the promise of narrative progression.

Added to this, the repetition of the story’s ending, at the beginning, is simply a means of deferring the ending. Narrative progress is undermined by the series of Melanctha’s relationships, which act as detours away from the narrative plot of marriage. Deconstructively, the temporal structure of ‘Melanctha’ and its insistence on the ‘now’ of the continuous present, takes ‘recourse, of a detour that suspends the accomplishment of fulfillment’, which it is suggested is marriage (Différance’, p. 8). The genesis of a path away from the romance plot for women is illustrated, as I demonstrated in Chapter One, in the dialectic of stasis and movement. Temporally,

Melanctha exists in a middle space “in-between” desire and stasis. Each detour is only a mirror image of the next; there is no progression in the narrative. The dialectic of movement and stasis reflects, however, other structural and thematic oppositions in the text.

The series of oppositions and differences set up in the story, enable Stein to question and problematise them. Through these Stein challenges metaphysical assumptions about signification and identity. The differences between thinking and feeling; between past and present; between origin and non-origin; reality and pleasure, create a space in which *différance* comes into play. As Derrida outlines in ‘Différance’:

Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same (p. 17).

The deferral and difference of these oppositions can only come about through Melanctha, who is the signifier for that play of *différance*; she embodies textual desire yet resists meaning at every opportunity.

The space between need and demand, between beginning one relationship and commencing another, signifies a space in which *différance* suspends the accomplishment of satisfaction. The gap at the heart of Melanctha’s story is one of temporizing and spacing: “in-between” need and demand is simply a play of differences which delay the return to death. In an ever continuing chain of deferred desire, the signifier (desire) moves along an axis of need and demand, one fulfilling and becoming the other as the process of signification slips and turns on itself: need is never satisfied; demand is never fulfilled.

Deferred desire, the play of *différance* is represented by Melanctha’s relationships. Let me take her early wanderings as examples. The conflict between desire, and fulfilment of desire, in her transitory alliances with men, is illustrated in her early

wanderings. We are told that Melanctha ‘talked and stood and walked with many kinds of men’ (p. 68). She also ‘strayed and stood’ (p. 67) and ‘she would advance, they would respond, and then she would withdraw’ (p. 67). Temporally, the experience of wandering is the same; the dialectic between movement and stasis, mirrored in the opposition of ‘strayed and stood’ ‘stood and walked’ and ‘advance [...] respond’. The opposition between movement and stasis opens up a textual space in which one movement merges into the other, but the satisfaction of desire is never achieved. We are told that when she advanced and they would respond, ‘she did not know what it was that really held her’ (p. 67); when she ‘strayed and stood’ she ‘did not learn to know any of them very deeply’ (p. 68), and in all of these experiences, ‘she was not getting what she so badly wanted’ (p. 68). The meaning of these encounters is denied Melanctha, because as Stein reveals, there is ‘no connection with living and daily living because there is none’ (‘What is English Literature’, p. 57).

Moreover, this dialectic of movement, subtly conveyed by Stein’s use of repetition-as-iteration and as-variation – stood is often repeated; ‘strayed’, ‘walked’ and ‘advance[d]’— all variations on her wanderings — produce what Derrida calls a play of differences. If we are to understand from ‘Différance’ that ‘the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself [...] it refers to the other, to other concepts by means of the systematic play of differences’, then we understand Stein’s use of repetition (p. 11). The chain of signification, in which endless differences occur, because ‘if there is anything alive in the telling the emphasis is different’ (‘Portraits and Repetition’, p. 100) is reproduced in Stein’s subtle changes of verb movement, ‘strayed’, ‘walked’ and ‘advanced’. This play of differences, of deferred satisfaction, highlights the inability of Melanctha to articulate her meaning: if desire is never satisfied, but endlessly deferred, then language, too, can only ever acknowledge that deferral: ‘Melanctha did not know what it was that she so badly wanted’ (p. 67).

Melanctha’s father’s need to force from her the truth about her relationship with John, the coachman to the rich Bishops family, signifies one of the central problems

of the text. Melanctha's father 'tried to make her say a thing she did not really know' (p. 66). Both Stein's allusive 'a thing' and Melanctha's inability to articulate what she in fact does not know, throws light on two things. Firstly, Melanctha will be continuously asked to clarify her meaning — to make clear, in a coherent and conventional manner, what she means by sexual wisdom. By asking her to determine 'a thing' Melanctha's father demonstrates the importance placed on the spoken word and the way in which speech, as an expression of consciousness, will somehow bring her meaning closer to some form of truth or origin. Melanctha's father, in Derrida's terms, seeks to privilege consciousness and therefore presence; Melanctha, on the other hand, because she cannot and will not clarify her meaning, attempts to de-limit the lexicon of consciousness ('Différance', p. 17).

Secondly, and more problematically, Melanctha cannot articulate her meaning because, as Derrida and Stein both show, words do not refer to a transcendent signified. Melanctha's silence is not just a case of ignorance or a refusal to express transgressive desire, but about Stein's refusal to intimate that there is a singular and fixed meaning to all knowledge. If, at this stage in her life, Melanctha does not know what it is she has experienced or how to express it, then it is because meaning is elusive and epistemologically uncertain.

After the affair with the Bishops' coachman, Melanctha's desire to wander takes her to the streets and dockyards. Although not the conventional location for women, these sites of desire stimulate Melanctha's understanding that knowledge is illusory: 'She did not know what it was that she so badly wanted' (p. 70). Although the narrator adds that 'Railroad yards are a ceaseless fascination. They satisfy every kind of nature'; ironically, they fail to satisfy Melanctha's needs (p. 68). She might come closer to understanding how sexual power works and find a 'free and whirling future' (p. 69), but the nature of the euphemistic language undermines the power of that knowledge: "Hi, there, you yaller girl, come here and we'll take you sailin'" (p. 71).

Melanctha's teenage years, spent wandering, are ones in which wisdom remains vague. Indeed, the movement from John, the Bishops' coachman, to dockyard



workers, and then Jane Harden, outlines the fact that each new relationship is simply a variation of the last: 'for though it was always the same thing that happened it had a different flavor' (p. 73). The emphasis upon the same but different is significant. Stein has made clear in all of her attempts to explicate her work that repetition is a signature of writing. The fact that each of Melanctha's relationships is the same, yet different, is reflective of the point that Stein makes in 'Portraits and Repetition'. She argues that 'the composition we live in changes but essentially what happens does not change. We inside us do not change but our emphasis and the moment in which we live changes. That is it is never the same moment it is never the same emphasis at any successive moment of existing' (p. 117). Repetition, which is the flavour of something different, is without beginning and ending; it is, according to Riddel, 'heterogeneous rather than homogeneous, multiple rather than singular, equivocal rather than univocal, and thus not continuous in any determinate sense' (p. 336). I have already shown, at the level of lexis, in Melanctha's early wanderings, the ways in which Stein's language produces a proliferation of differences, but let me take Riddel's comment and demonstrate its significance in the context of Melanctha's main relationships.

Firstly, homogeneity is replaced by heterogeneity at the level of structure and content. Structurally, the progression from beginning to end, and closure, is undercut by the emphasis in the story on Melanctha's continual detours from the plot of marriage. Thematically, Melanctha's relationships are not connected coherently, but arbitrarily. Apart from the connection between Jane Harden and Jeff Campbell, all of Melanctha's liaisons are fleeting, contingent. Furthermore, the arbitrary nature of her relationships is represented through her consistent wanderings across race 'Jane began to tell all about the different men, white ones and blacks' (p. 101), and class, 'She spent the last hours of the daylight with the porters' (pp. 69-70) and with the 'gentlemanly classes' (p. 70). Wandering becomes a means for Stein of defining the chain of signification not signification itself. She would make this fact clear in her Lectures on Narration: 'These words that the Englishman had settled into having as a

steady and unchangeable something, they the Americans did not care for the particular use these later Englishmen had come to have for them' (Lecture One, p. 13). I draw attention at this point to Stein's use of the word 'settled' and Derrida's term *solliciter*. Derrida will make the text 'tremble'; he will seek to reveal the symptoms of language, like Stein who will not accept the 'settled' face of language.

Secondly, the key relationships in Melanctha's narrative reinforce the continuous but indeterminate nature of experience. With Jane Harden, she 'certainly did begin to really understand' (p. 74); in the relationship with Jeff, Melanctha tells him "I am never meaning anything real by what I just been saying" (p. 119), and with Jem Richards, we are told 'Melanctha sometimes was really trusting, and sometimes she was all sick inside her with doubting' (p. 159). The above sentences outline the uncertainty of meaning in each relationship. The present tense 'did begin to' shows how understanding is in process but not complete; to not mean 'anything real' suggests that Melanctha understands the disjunction between signifier and signified; and, finally, the opposition between 'really trusting' and 'doubting' calls into question the possibility of ever securing knowledge.

The self-doubting and uncertainty of Melanctha's experiences has been considered by many critics as a consequence of her position as a 'tragic mulatta' or divided self. The mainstay of critical commentary on the polarization of Melanctha's self into irreconcilable opposites has concentrated on her racial and psychological duality. Saunders, for example, in 'Bipolar Conflict', demonstrates that the literary device of the *alter ego* enabled women writers to depict 'quandaries peculiar to female characters living in a male-centered social world' (p. 55). Lisa Ruddick suggests that Melanctha's divided self has more to do with 'the dynamic of "struggle" and "compromise" that unites the divergent energies of the Jamesian mind' ('Melanctha and James', p. 550). The attention to Melanctha's cultural, social and psychological self-division has been given extensive coverage, but most critics have failed to understand the significance of the figure of the divided self from the perspective of

Stein's radical ideas about identity, thus failing to understand the significance of this text as central to the genesis of her writing on language and identity.

The space between the racial differences of Melanctha's 'pale, yellow [...] wandering and mysterious' mother and her 'black father' (pp. 62-63), submits her to a system of subjectivity in which her identity consists of the trace of the 'wandering and mysterious' nature of her mother and the 'robust power of her father' (pp. 62-3). This trace of difference is measured, on the one hand, by the consistent references to Melanctha's feeling toward her 'virile and unendurable black father' (63), her 'strong interest in the power she now knew she had within her' (p. 66), and the 'mysterious' ways of her mother that help her to learn wisdom (p. 76). The difference between black and white (pale yellow) provides a space in which the subject is only ever a play of differences; identity cannot be assured.

The problem of identity is most obvious in Melanctha's relationship with Jeff Campbell. In Chapter One, the central conflict between Melanctha Herbert and Jeff Campbell represented Stein's most consistent challenge to modes of representation and signification. In this chapter, Melanctha's opposition to Jeff Campbell, allows her to interrogate concepts of identity and presence through *Différance*, which shakes up the metaphysical certainty of presence or Being and exposes the essential fragility of the speaking subject. Jeff seeks a metaphysical and ontological certainty about life in which Melanctha must be fully present to him socially, culturally and linguistically; she is, of course, none of these things. Like Melanctha's father, Jeff believes speech to be 'self-signifying'; therefore, a sign of presence. Her father, who 'tried to make her say a thing she did not really know' (p. 66) and Jeff, who wants 'to know really' what it is she means (p. 103), both acknowledge their implicit belief in the link between the signifier and the signified; that language confirms an unalterable meaning. The father's 'a thing', like Jeff's 'really meaning', demonstrates their need to fix words, to have them 'settled', but Stein, like Derrida, demonstrates that you must 'define what you do by what you see never by what you know because you do not know that this is so' (*GHA*, p. 170). If language is always a play of differences,

then the speaking subject must also be an effect of language, unable to be present to him or herself:

It confirms that the subject, and first of all the conscious and speaking subject, depends upon the system of differences and the movement of *différance*, that the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral; and it confirms that, as Saussure said "language [which consists only of differences] is not a function of the speaking subject".<sup>16</sup>

Melanctha, for example, always verbally attacks Jeff for his insistence that she represent a coherent self. Jeff articulates the difficulty of understanding identity as difference: "Sometimes you seem like one kind of girl to me, and sometimes you are like a girl that is all different to me" (p. 97). Comprehension of Melanctha's difference is problematic because Jeff cannot appreciate that identity is never homogenous, but is marked by the trace or alterity of otherness, an alterity which cannot always be accounted for. When he asks Melanctha to "Tell me honest which is the way that is you really, when you are all alone, and real" (p. 98), Jeff expresses, unconsciously, through the words, 'you really', the trace of difference that inhabits identity, which he cannot understand. To ask Melanctha to articulate her real self, knowable only in some private context, reflects the fact that identity is a fractured, heterogeneous thing. Melanctha's divided self proves not so much a consequence of the inability to be assimilated into society, but a subversion of categories of gender and identity that become totalizing. *Différance*, then, determined by Melanctha and resisted by Jeff, is, according to Gayle Ormiston, the possibility and impossibility of conceptualization, idealization and comprehension<sup>17</sup>. But, most importantly, she adds, it breaches the ideology of identity and the myth of clarity and communication (p. 72). If *différance* shakes and lays open the foundations of identity, then writing is the place where its fractures are exposed. Writing, according to Wolfreys, becomes a term for Derrida

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology". Interview with Julia Kristeva', in *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Economy of Duplicity: Difference', in *Derrida and Difference*, pp. 61-74 (p.72).

which announces both the structured ('written') condition of all forms of text, including human identity, and also the idea that all such writings are never completely logically coherent or homogeneous, but are in some way marked or traced by what we term alterity or otherness: moments which subvert, contradict the logic, figures, traces [...] for which we cannot account (p. 66).

What Melanctha's speech actually reveals and what Stein's writing affirms is that

[My] speech is an act, though, not of presentation, but of *representation*: I *represent* myself to myself through articulation and enunciation, both of which are marked — or, rather *remarked* — spatially and temporally. Precisely because the speaking subject — I — does represent itself to itself, because the fundamental or 'primordial' structure behind *representation* lies in that emphasized prefix, identity is always marked, not by unity or presence [...] (which are illusions fostered by the idea of full speech), but by spacing and deferral which are the conditions of all writing (Wolfreys, p. 68).

Melanctha's speech (Stein's writing) confirms the impossibility of presence and the multiplicity of identity: the self is enunciated each moment in the space between 're' and 'presentation'. In the relationship between Melanctha and Jeff, Stein uses Jeff as a vehicle for the articulation of identity as spacing and deferral. Insistently, Jeff suggests that Melanctha's identity is marked by a trace of something else that he cannot define: "you certainly is all a different creature" (p. 97), "I don't know anything real about you" (p. 112) and 'Melanctha was too many for him' (p. 124). In all of these sentences, Melanctha's identity is not present to itself; rather, it is enunciated by its difference 'different', its spacing, 'too many for him' and its deferral, 'real about you'. Identity, resistant to the word 'real', is always *representing* itself in its difference through multiple selves, thus Melanctha and Jeff's approach to language and identity exists in a deadlock: 'It is evident — and this is the evident itself — that the economical and the noneconomical, the same and the entirely other, etc., cannot be thought *together*' ('Différance', p. 19).

Melanctha and Jeff remain poles apart not because they are simply different, but because Melanctha, as an effect of *différance*, is a speaking subject who exists in the present moment and cannot relate to Jeff's teleological musing of life and family:

Yes Miss Melanctha, I certainly do like everything to be good, and quiet, and I certainly do think that is the best way for all of us colored people [...] I ain't got any other meaning Miss Melanctha, and it's that what I mean when I am saying about being really good. It ain't Miss Melanctha to be pious and not liking every kind of people, [...] What I mean Miss Melanctha by what I am always saying is, you shouldn't try to know everybody just to run around and get excited. It's that kind of way of doing [...] that is so bad for all us colored people. (p. 84).

In this passage, Jeff's attempt to articulate what it is he really means folds in on itself, as he strains to emphasise that he has no other meaning. In Chapter One, I drew attention to the ways in which, at a structural and lexical level, Stein's sentence structure imitated the process of stasis and movement peculiar to the structure of Melanctha's plot: Jeff's certainties were always followed by his uncertainties. In the above quotation, the movement from certainty to uncertainty is designed to tease out the spatial and temporal differences in language, and undo the semantics of that knowledge.

The insistent use of the adverb, 'certainly', is an attempt by Jeff to define the parameters of regular living. However, the repetition of the word explodes its meaning, forcing the reader to understand that the adverb becomes Jeff's means of holding onto some sort of epistemological grounding. This grounding folds as he attempts to explain, without success, what he means by 'good and quiet'. The movement of the speech to a space where meaning collapses is denoted by the opposition between "I certainly do like" and "I ain't got any other meaning", at the beginning of the speech, and between, "It ain't [...] to be pious" and "What I mean [...] by what I am always saying", by the end. Jeff begins by affirming his ability to define his meaning, but ends by approximating poor behaviour as the indeterminate 'that kind of way of doing'. What kind is he exactly talking about? Jeff's belief that there is no other meaning, through the repetition of 'I ain't' and 'certainly', forces language into conflict with itself; in doing so, Jeff actually exposes the traces of alterity common to all language. 'That kind' already implies that there is (an)other

kind of meaning: that other meaning is Melanctha's. Adrienne Kalfopoulou explains it thus,

Jeff attempts to make Melanctha 'legible' within a cultural discourse which finds in unarticulated, less predictable emotion the doubtful shades of what cannot be made immediately legible. In Melanctha's emotional and linguistic dodging of Jeff's effort to make her legible within a social context familiar to him, Stein creates a linguistic 'space' for what remains unnamed by the established value system (p. 87).

The space created by Stein for Melanctha's 'dodging' of traditional narrative value systems, is the place where *différance* comes into play. Melanctha signifies a textual disruption of conventional narrative codes and gender roles assigned to women and through her, Kalfopoulou argues, 'Stein attempts linguistically to get "beyond the structures of law in language," which threaten to trap Melanctha emotionally' (p. 86).

Melanctha's need for excitement and emotional fulfillment is a cultural and textual signifier for the disruption that she exerts on the text and on Jeff's life. To become excited is to betray the order and logic of Jeff's perception of the world: order and meaning go hand in hand. What Jeff hates to see disrupted is his genealogical and historical teleology. His existence is determined by his relationship to his family and community and the fact that he wants 'to live regular and work hard and understand things' (p. 82). His view that one's genealogical line is definitive in understanding one's place in the world is not something that Melanctha shares. She understands Jeff's need to delineate his identity through a racial and cultural past, but 'it did not mean much to her, and she was sure some day he would find out, that it was not all, of real wisdom' (p. 82).

Like the landscape of Stein's human mind, Melanctha is unable to define her existence; it is simply a vast landscape before her, without beginning or end. Jeff consistently tries to explain that there is no language with which to define or understand what Melanctha represents, just as *différance* cannot be known: 'Now he found that really he knew nothing. He did not know the least bit about Melanctha. He did not know what it was right that he should do about it. He wondered if it was

just a little play that they were doing' (pp. 90-91). The fact that her presence represents a play of different selves, demonstrates how Melanctha 'deconstructs' identity throughout the text. Riddel suggests that Stein's sense of identity ' "begins" with an "I" who writes, but is in turn written, an "I" who is many and whose "identity" is already distributed through the words it maneuvers, separates and rejoins' (p. 332).

As we know, history and memory define Jeff's definition of life: the past is implicit to his understanding of identity. Jeff's narrative landscape has a beginning, 'the free abandoned laughter that gives the warm broad glow to negro sunshine' (p. 77); a middle, 'living regular and quiet and with my family' (p. 82); and an ending, 'to help all his own colored people' (p. 78). His trajectory of life is linear and socially bound: life is a series of progressions and completions.

If, as Vanskike rightly points out, Stein, in *The Geographical History of America*, uses landscape as a metaphor for identity, then Jeff's landscape has been defined and subjected to the cartographer's ruler. Marked by temporality, Jeff's landscape imposes markers on experience in order to understand one's place in the larger scale of things. He makes it clear that 'he early wanted to be a doctor, and he was always very interested in the life of the colored people' (p. 78). Melanctha, on the other hand, attempts to negotiate Stein's belief in the human mind but is not always successful. Bob Perelman's point that Stein continued to pursue the concept of human mind, despite the fact that she could never be free from the shackles of history and society, should be noted in relation to 'Melanctha' (p. 156). Melanctha's pursuit of pleasure is one in which she attempts to disassociate herself from memory and identity finding that 'the pleasures that are soothing all have to do with identity and the pleasures that are exciting all have to do with identity' ('What are Master-pieces', p. 153).

Melanctha's identity is determined by her fractious relationship with her parents. Her wanderings take her away from family, yet her search for wisdom determines her social interactions and her relationship with her family. In the early years of her



youth, Melanctha lives with her mother, even though her father did not come very often to the house where his wife lived and Melanctha' (p. 77). It is only later, when her mother dies, that Melanctha is able to live beyond the parameters of family and history. Despite her desire to forget 'to hate her father' (p. 66), Melanctha is driven to repeat, through the repressed unconscious, the very nature of that social relationship in all of her relationships. No matter how hard she tries not to, she *represents* in each of her relationships the desire to return, unconsciously, to the 'pleasure or the presence that [has] been deferred'; that is, the relationship to the father and sexual power. However, she finds that the relation to that presence is impossible; that the play of *différance* through repetition, leads to the 'irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy' ('Différance', p. 19).

Jeff will lament the nature of Melanctha's otherness by questioning if, in fact, the whole relationship is only a play: 'If it was a play he did not want to go on playing' (p. 91). The word 'play', iterated on page 92 and repeated as a variation, 'acting', on page 126, indicates how Jeff finds it difficult to interpret the epistemological grounding of the relationship. The slippage between signifier and signified demonstrates the undecidability of language: play is substituted for other signifiers within the context of this relationship.

Jeff does not know what he means by play and neither does the reader. Obviously 'play' hints that the relationship is some sort of game for Melanctha. The very fact that the sentence is introduced by the conjunction 'If', suggests that Jeff is uncertain as to what his relationship is, or that it hasn't yet fulfilled its function as play: 'If it was a play'. As a signifier for the play of *différance* within the text, Melanctha's relationship with Jeff undoes the logic and conventions of heterosexual discourse and the binary opposition of male and female that accompanies it (as in Melanctha's relationship with Jane Harden). For Jeff, to carry on playing would be tantamount to admitting that there is no truth, no absolute in terms of wisdom, but simply differences. Such an acknowledgement takes not only courage, but suggests that Jeff would have to abandon himself to Stein's expanse of land in which there are no

temporal directions, no indications of identity or history, just space in which to play with the freedom that identity, through language, can provide.

The freedom that Jeff is reluctant to celebrate is mirrored by the elusive nature of Melanctha's character: 'These months had been an uncertain time for Jeff Campbell. He never knew how much he really knew about Melanctha. He saw her now for long times and very often. He was beginning always more and more to like her. But he did not seem to himself to know very much about her' (p. 95). Jeff is constantly at cross-purposes with Melanctha: "I certainly do wonder, if we know very right, you and me, what each other is really thinking. I certainly do wonder, Miss Melanctha, if we know at all really what each other means by what we are always saying'" (p. 373). Jeff's lament at the lack of meaning and comprehension in his relationship with Melanctha is mirrored in the opposition between 'mean' and 'saying'. The "in-between" of the signifier 'saying' and the signified 'mean', demonstrates that there is always a irreducible doubleness to language, leaving the reader, like Jeff, suspended between truth and non-truth.

Jeff struggles to find the words to represent Melanctha but this is because she cannot be present[ed] only *re* present[ed]. For Jeff, Melanctha's reality is defined by her difference, a difference he finds outside the constraints of his own metaphysical logic. Kalfopoulou explains it thus: 'Finding himself overwhelmed with uncertainty about Melanctha's "true" nature, Jeff becomes alienated [...] The anxiety implicit in Jeff's confrontation with "the essences of [Melanctha's] otherness," returns him to binary definitions of "good [familiar]" and "bad [unfamiliar]" gendered behavior' (p. 88).

Interestingly, this emphasis upon Melanctha's 'otherness' highlights the way in which she 'marks' the alterity of the text; she subverts and contradicts everything Jeff wants to know and cannot. Furthermore, Melanctha's resistance to meaning and explanation suggests that, as a speaking subject, she is the product of those differences at play in language: 'Melanctha was too many for him. He was helpless to find out the way she really felt now for him' (p. 124). If, as Ormiston argues,

*différance* breaches the ideology of identity, then Melanctha is the figure for this breach in Stein's text (p. 72).

Melanctha's identity resists ontological and epistemological certainty, and this is buttressed by her desire. Her desire drives the text in a circular fashion and then closes in upon itself. Jeff, on the other hand, is the principle of constancy in the text, and Melanctha interrupts, through her desire, this economy of constancy with a desire which is entirely unnameable and other: 'It was now something realer that Melanctha wanted, something that would move her very deeply, something that would fill her fully with the wisdom that was planted now within her' (pp. 75-76).

Epistemologically 'something' cannot be defined. Stein's repetition of the word forces the ambiguity of 'something' to the surface and demonstrates that throughout this text, Melanctha's meaning is always somewhere else and something else. The alterity that inhabits language is explained to Jeff by Melanctha:

I certainly never did see no man like you, Jeff. You always wanting to have it all clear out in words always, what everybody is always feeling. I certainly don't see a reason, why I should always be explaining to you what I mean by what I am just saying (p. 121).

In these lines, Melanctha repeats her claim that she should not have to explain her meaning; there are no words, at least no clear words for Melanctha. Furthermore, the word, 'just' illustrates the way in which meaning slips from our grasp, just as we think we have its meaning. She resists explanation and reason as the parameters of meaning, arguing for an epistemological view of the world as flux and uncertainty. Jeff focuses on the 'Aristotelian certainties of memory, empirical knowledge and continuity' whilst Melanctha reinforces "'forgetting' absence of knowing and discontinuity' (Bush, p. 351).

Jeff is bound by the traditions of human nature; he is tied by the exigencies of family and day-to-day living and cannot see beyond that. Melanctha, on the other hand, is able to see beyond that and transcend the connections of family and friends.

According to Kalfopoulou, citing Kristeva, the subject's exposure to multiple drives, as happens in Melanctha's case, allows her to break away from the constraints of a linearity that confines her to the rituals of reproduction, generation, life and death by the traditional family structure' (p. 81).

In refusing to articulate her meaning, because she can't remember, Melanctha frustrates Jeff, who wants explanations for the things she says. Melanctha cannot understand Jeff's need for clarification : "“And then you come and ask me what I mean by what I was just saying to you”" (p. 122). Like the daily island life of nineteenth century England, Jeff's language is tied to explanation and remembering. Melanctha, on the other hand, is never confused because she can never remember. She simply doesn't see the point in explanation: her words are always disassociated from her meaning: "“I certainly don't know, Jeff, when you ask me”" (p. 122).

Stein articulates the difference between memory and forgetting in 'Portraits and Repetition'. She distinguishes between the act of remembering, which causes confusion and repetition, and a time of 'the talking being listening and the listening being talking' (p.108). The distinction needs to be clarified. Jeff's need to remember a certain Melanctha is tied up with remembering an historical past. Melanctha's inability to remember is because she does not 'live [...] in remembering, we have living in moving being necessarily so intense that existing is indeed something, is indeed that thing that we are doing' ('Portraits and Repetition', p. 109). Jeff's questions and actions always have the same theme; they are caught up and invested in the past and in a genealogy of the Afro-American community. He therefore repeats the past because his insistence is never any different.

Melanctha, who exists in the present, in the movement of the moment, repeats the moment but each repetition has a different insistence. Stein explains, 'When I first really realized the inevitable repetition in human expression that was not repetition but insistence' (p. 101). She goes on to add, and this is where the distinction between Jeff and Melanctha becomes clearer: 'So we have now, a movement lively enough to be a thing in itself moving, it does not have to move against anything to know that it

is moving, it does not need that there are generations existing' (p. 102). Stein refutes genealogy; Jeff lives by it; Melanctha can't remember it.

While memory is essential to Jeff's way of engaging with the world, Melanctha is unable to remember. Memory as a form of psychic deferral is taken up by Derrida in his article, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', in which he looks closely at Freud's hypothesis of memory. Freud, 'rejecting a distinction, which was common in his day, between "sense cells" and "memory cells," [...] forges the hypothesis of "contact barriers" and "breaching," (Bahnung, lit. pathbreaking), of the breaking open of a path (Bahn)' (p. 200). His model of breaching is a metaphorical and not a neurological one and thus aligns itself with Derrida's *différance*: 'Breaching, the tracing of a trail, opens up a conducting path' (p. 200). So, for Derrida, memory is the difference between breaches; and psychic life the difference within the exertion of forces. Furthermore, the memory of an experience depends upon the magnitude of the impression and the frequency with which it is repeated (p. 200).

How then does the issue of memory work within this text? Firstly, Jeff's teleological adherence to a path of regular living finds its basis in a need for memory and historical knowledge. His identity, racial and personal, is determined by his knowledge of the past and its impact on the future. His desire for the racial uplift of his race is buttressed by his desire 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' (p. 82). Jeff inserts his narrative trajectory about life into a specific historical category. Origins are, for Jeff, the basis for a social and cultural membership which guarantees one's genealogical line. Melanctha's failure to remember destroys the link between past and present, between one's experience and the representation of that experience:

For Melanctha all her life did not know how to tell a story wholly. She always, and yet not with intention, managed to leave out big pieces which make a story very different, for when it came to what had happened and what she had said and what it was that she had really done, Melanctha never could remember right (p. 70).

In these lines, a 'conducting path' is opened up between the story told and what is left out. Melanctha's incomplete story depends, for its signification, on both the presence of what she has to tell and the absence of what is left out. In other words, Melanctha's inability to tell a story wholly, demonstrates that the story told is in a way present, but not wholly so, because what is left out is carried as a trace in what is told, but can only signify through its necessary absence. The incomplete story and its trace, bring about a structural undecidability, a play of presence and absence at the origin of meaning. This undecidability is reflected in the narrator's comment that what's left out in a story makes it 'very different'.

Because Melanctha misses out large chunks of the story, neither the experience nor the representation of the story comes to mean the same thing: the two are arbitrarily connected. Moreover, Melanctha's 'forgetfulness' demonstrates Stein's point about the past made in *The Geographical History of America*: 'What is the use of being a little boy if you are to grow up to be a man' (p. 58). The past becomes inconsequential, and if genealogy and history are unimportant, then what is the use of a complete story? Melanctha, as a realisation of the thoughts in *The Geographical History of America*, suggests that memory has no place in the aesthetics of identity and selfhood Stein is proposing: 'And so the human mind is like not being in danger but being killed, there is no remembering, no there is no remembering and no forgetting because you have to remember to forget no there is none in any human mind' (*GHA*, p. 64).

Melanctha's moments of forgetting, her oblivion of the past prevent her, suggests Jeff, from being honest with him; their relationship has no epistemological grounding: "I know now no man can ever really hold you because no man can ever be real to trust in you, because you mean right Melanctha, but you never can remember, and so you certainly never have got any way to be honest" (p. 135). Moreover, in the same way that Rose Johnson argues that Melanctha should understand the right way to behave, Jeff insists that the 'right way' depends upon the ability to 'remember right'

(p. 128). He articulates his frustrations with Melanctha when he tells her, ““You [...] never can remember right, when it comes what you have done and what you think happens to you”” (p. 128). The conjunction ‘and’, in this sentence, marks a spacing, in which the difference between doing and remembering reveals a breaching in the text. Kalfopoulou argues that Melanctha’s inability to remember reflects ‘Stein’s wariness of allowing her heroine to “settle” into linguistic patterns associated with conventional behaviour’. In so doing, ‘Stein manages to sidestep the danger of her entrapment in the established, gendered contexts of mainstream culture’ (p. 84).

It could also be argued that Stein’s use of an unsettled linguistic register is the moment of spacing in the text which reflects *différance* at work. Melanctha’s ‘forgetting’ relates to Derrida’s use of spacing and temporization as a process of *différance*:

It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called “present” element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past, or a future as a modified present (‘Différance’, p. 13).

The most obvious connection between Derrida’s *différance* and Stein’s text, then, is her use of the continuous present. I have already shown how the conflation of the beginning and ending, and how the repetitive nature of Melanctha’s relationships, through movement and stasis, foreshadow *différance*. Derrida formulates the present moment as that which is divided in and of itself; it is a moment of spacing, the becoming space of time which never refers to one specific link in the chain of meaning. On the other hand, it is the becoming time of space (temporization) — a moment in the present which contains the marks of the past and the future to come, but which has no original relation to them.

This is not just evident at the level of relationships but in the language that Stein uses, which in its paratactical structure insists, like the narrative structure, of the space “in-between” words and meanings. In Lecture Two of *Narration*, Stein writes, ‘A sentence is inside itself by its internal balancing, think how a sentence is made by its parts of speech and you will see that it is not dependent upon a beginning a middle and an ending but by each part needing its own place’ (p. 23). For example, in *Melantha*, repetition-as-iteration marks the trace of the word in its absence and presence in the words prior to it and beyond it:

Jeff always loved to watch everything as it was growing, and he loved all the colors in the trees [...] and in the grass he loved to lie [...]. Jeff loved everything that moved [...] Jeff loved very much this day (p. 105).

In these lines, the motivating word is loved. It works within and across each sentence or phrase, containing within it its relation in and beyond it. Yet, in each case, each sentence can be taken separately, existing in a sort of vacuum.

Thus, *Melantha*’s ‘stories’, and the language of the text, are an effect of *différance*: her experience is always removed from the original moment and, therefore, becomes devoid of an originating point: the difference between ‘what had happened,’ ‘what she says’ and ‘what she had really done’ is the process of *différance*; there is only an arbitrary connection between any of these points which are, as Derrida shows, neither a relation to the past, to the future or to the present. *Melantha*’s story confuses Jeff because he cannot locate it in time, and place markers on it so that it signifies a moment in *Melantha*’s genealogy. Derrida’s *différance*, like *Melantha*’s story subverts any epistemological ground or first points.

Similarly, *Melantha* omits from her story information that we might call ‘repressed’, information which returns in her repetition of her stories, but which is never completed. *Melantha*’s desire and her articulation of it is differed and deferred at various points in the text: each new relationship, each new experience delays the fulfillment of desire: ‘*Melantha* needed so badly to have it, this love which she had



always wanted, she did not know what she should do to save it' (p. 157). How then is Melanctha's deferral of wisdom (meaning) related to *différance*? Coming back to Derrida's text 'Freud and the Scene of Writing,' Derrida suggests that memory is 'not a psychical property among others; it is the very essence of the psyche: resistance, and precisely, thereby, an opening to the effraction of the trace' (p. 201).

He goes on to add that memory, and the repetition of impressions, is related to the deferral of a dangerous cathexis; breaching is the process by which forces within the psyche seek to find satisfaction: 'Even assuming that his affirmation does not lead us little by little to the problem of phylogenesis and of hereditary breaches, we may still maintain that in the *first time* of the contact between *two* forces, repetition has begun. Life is already threatened by the origin of the memory which constitutes it, and by the breaching which it resists, the effraction which it can contain only by repeating it' (p. 202). The model of memory proposed by Freud, argues Derrida, in 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', with its repetition and breaching, becomes another model for *différance*:

The rest of the *Project* will depend in its entirety upon an incessant and increasingly radical invocation of the principle of difference. Beneath an indicial neurology, which plays the representational role of an artificial model, we repeatedly find a persistent attempt to account for the psyche in terms of spacing, a topography of traces, a map of breaches (p. 205).

In effect, Freud's psychological model of repetition, which acts as a method of deferral, identifies itself as *différance* in which pain, like death, must be avoided. In this instance, repetition becomes linked to *différance* as the site in which *différance* as 'the element of the same always aims at either finding again the pleasure or the presence that had been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation' ('Différance', p. 19). In this case, the element of the same is Melanctha's desire, which aims at finding pleasure, which seeks to satisfy an unconscious desire in the text, but is unable to, except in death. Like the 'theoretical fictions' produced by the effect of *différance*, Melanctha's stories are simply this: they have no place of origin,

suggest no relation to social or historical teleology and represent the means by which Melanctha defers a dangerous cathexis, death. The inability to remember identifies the conflict within Melanctha's psyche of the forces of the memory to *represent* themselves, and the breaches in her story show how Melanctha can never be present to herself or others. This inability to be present to oneself or others would tie in nicely with Stein's idea of identity in respect of the human mind as an effect of identity which cannot be known and is ever changing:

So I was not I because my little dog did not love me. But I had a family. They can be a nuisance in identity but there is no doubt no shadow of doubt that that identity the family identity we can do without.

It has nothing to do with anything if there is no time and identity. But it has to do oh yes it has to do with how do you do you do do what you do.

The human mind lives alone (*GHA*, p. 196).

Family identity for Melanctha is problematic: she identifies with the power of her father, as Stein identifies with the power of masculinity to engender genius, but there is no place in Melanctha's 'history' for genealogy, whereas this is what propels Jeff's narrative. Jeff continually praises identity in terms of family; Melanctha's relationships are less tangential. Family and identity are what Melanctha attempts to omit from her story: 'Melanctha, who finds her mother's example lacking for what it is she herself wants, and her father's example admirable but problematic, is overwhelmed by contradictions' (Kalfopoulou, p. 81). This quotation identifies Stein's own contradictions in terms of her association of genius with male power and yet her need to find an alternative model of aesthetic and sexual power which reflected her evolving identity.

Furthermore, by getting rid of the family (Leo), what Riddel calls her 'genrecide', Stein challenges a discourse which constructs female identity framed by filial attention and attempts to delineate her own structure of female relations. The fact that she fails, to some extent, in 'Melanctha' suggests Stein's early ambivalence about transgressive desire. To place such desire in the body of Melanctha, allows her to

express the space “in-between”; Freud’s “between-ness”. This space, neither that of the mother or the father, is a space of *différance*, a space without genealogical origins, without a past, which would enable Stein to concentrate on the present and forge her own identity and aesthetic model in the future.

Melantha, without any originary past, because she refuses to remember, and without a future because, she keeps deferring it, symbolises the moment of spacing where she is both conscious of being present to herself but is unable to comprehend that presence. Her presence is the product of a divided moment in which desire and knowledge are always deferred, like the subjectivity of the self. Whereas Jeff seeks an essentialist and metaphysical assurance of Melantha’s selfhood, she herself can never explain this to Jeff. Divided in her identity, Melantha understands an alienation of presence; indeed, her genealogical line, which is neither black nor white, suggests the space in between. She is a character free from memory and identity who problematizes the issue of memory, desire and identity in her relationship with Jeff.

Thus, ‘Melantha’ represents the future-becoming of American writing and Stein’s commitment to alternative models of sexual freedom for women. The fact that she has yet to define an appropriate sexual and textual models, such as those found in ‘Patriarchal Poetry’, ‘Lifting Belly’ and ‘A Book Concluding with A Wife Has a Cow A Love Story’ is significant. This early text reflects her attempts to emancipate herself from the Law-of-the-Father, and from literary structures of evolution and resolution. Stein’s desire is to go ‘beyond’ the father’s heterosexual and racial models of behaviour for women, is proffered but remains unresolved in this early text.

### Chapter Three: 'Melanctha' and Streetwalking

I move on from Chapter Two, and deconstruction, and return to the trope of the marginal outlined in Chapter One. That is not to say, however, that I do not retain a trace of Chapter Two, in this chapter, through the subject of Stein's concerns about issues of identity and gender. In Chapter Three, I want to consider the trope of the *flâneuse*. Although many critics have paid attention to Melanctha's wanderings as a metaphor for the lure of sexual knowledge, little attention has been paid to the literal wanderings of Melanctha in and around the public and private spaces that she occupies. Haldeen Braddy considers Melanctha's wanderings a euphemism for sex (p. 362), and Judith B. Saunders also believes that the term 'wanderings' is an oblique reference to Melanctha's desire for sexual experimentation (p. 57).

Whilst I do not disagree with these assumptions by Braddy and Saunders, their failure to demonstrate, textually, the connection between Melanctha's wanderings and her promiscuity needs addressing. Moreover, and this is where my reading moves on from Braddy and Saunders, I want to suggest that the figure of the *flâneuse* provides evidence of Stein's insistence that modernity is "*untimely*". Stein's version of modernity 'rests not on the fullness of meaning, of a unified, perfectly intelligible history, but on a loss, an emptiness, a lack: the power of an absence, in relation to the "actual" immediate, that links signification and death'.<sup>1</sup> Stein's play of signification, increasingly complex and ludic in her later works, refutes what Gluckmann calls a perfectly intelligible history (227). Stein's writings, like those of Virginia Woolf, Hilda Doolittle, and Nella Larsen, for example, provide alternative readings of what Griselda Pollock calls a 'selective tradition which normalizes, as the *only* modernism,

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Buci-Gluckmann, 'Catastrophic Utopia: The Feminine as Allegory of the Modern', in *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Lacqueur, pp. 220-229 (p. 223).

a particular and gendered set of practices'.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, there have been many excellent studies on the figures of the *flâneur* and *flâneuse*. Yet, the analyses of women in urban spaces, spaces traditionally associated with men, alters, much like the gendering of modernism, the perspectives by which we read literature of the period. Added to this, the development of the social and cultural experiences of women in urban spaces calls for, according to Janet Wolff, 'a feminist revision of sociology'.<sup>3</sup>

Stein's alternative vision of modernity, already addressed in Chapters One and Two, through her modernist challenge to the teleology, language and characterisation of the nineteenth-century novel, is moved forward in this chapter through the figure of the streetwalker or *flâneuse*. In her article on the urban peripatetic, Deborah Epstein Nord, writes,

In order to write her own subjectivity into a discourse in which she is already figured as object, the woman writer must first work through her own implicit identification with sexual taint and either confront her own sexuality as it is constructed by men or hide her sexuality by dressing as a man (p. 374).

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<sup>2</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 50. I am thinking here of Woolf's meditations on gender and writing in *A Room of One's Own* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929) and her exploration of the modern in pieces such as 'Modern Fiction' in *The Common Reader* (London: Harcourt and Brace Company, 1925), pp. 209-214. Woolf's desire to 're-present [...] the truth of subjective consciousness' is part of her challenge to that intelligible history according to Suzette Henke in *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, pp. 622-628 (p. 624). Susan Stanford Friedman writes that H.D.'s avant-garde texts 'explore heterosexual and lesbian love' and 'the transformation of the self from the object of man's desire to the subject of her own', pp. 85-92 (p. 86), in *The Gender of Modernism*. Finally, Nella Larsen's two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing* are discourses on female desire and repression (*The Gender of Modernism*, pp. 209-214 (p. 211)). Each one of these women, like Stein, refigures a tradition of modernism from the position of outsider in order to challenge and explore issues of race, class and gender.

<sup>3</sup> Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity', in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays, Theories and Texts*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 141-56. For other literature on women and urban spaces, and the role of the street-walker/prostitute, see *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (London: Virago Press, 1991); Deborah Epstein Nord, 'The Urban Peripatetic: Spectator, Streetwalker, Woman Writer', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 46 (1991), 351-375, and Helen Taylor, 'Walking Through New Orleans: Kate Chopin and the Female Flâneur', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 1.1 (1997), 69-84.

Although not literally dressing as a man, Stein watches and is arrested by the manner in which her protagonist, Melanctha, explores the possibilities of sexual power and deviancy for women. This reading of the *flâneuse* will take steps in two directions: firstly, forward into the twentieth century and Stein's modernity; secondly, backwards into the nineteenth century to demonstrate the difficulties of locating a cultural space for subversive female desire.

The first reading of 'Melanctha' is informed by Elizabeth Wilson's intelligent analysis of women and urban spaces. Her thesis rests on the equation that 'if prostitutes were women of the streets, the poet in his guise as *flâneur* or dandy also walked the streets' (p. 55). So where does this leave women who dared to insert themselves into the public domain? According to Wilson, 'Just as the flâneur was a prostitute, perhaps also the prostitute could be said to be a female flâneur' (p. 55). As if to add support to this theory, Judith Walkowitz, in her discussion of late Victorian London, writes about the way in which the urbanization of London brought with it 'new entrants to the urban scene'; these entrants 'produced new stories of the city that competed, intersected with, appropriated and revised the dominative mappings of London'.<sup>4</sup> Whilst it is not my intention to suggest that Melanctha provides a remapping of the social realities of Baltimore for the reader — although there are oblique references to the materialist conditions of work in the Baltimore black community — I do believe that the figure of the *flâneuse* embodies, aesthetically and figuratively, Stein's modernity. Aesthetically, Melanctha's wanderings are reflected in the repetitive quality of the narrative at a structural and thematic level; figuratively these wanderings define her sexual behaviour as transgressive and in so doing ensure her marginalisation is complete.

This exploration of Stein's modernity, in the section 'Baudelaire, Stein and the Modern', takes as its starting point a comparison between Stein's 1926 lecture 'Composition as Explanation', and Charles Baudelaire's essay 'The Painter of

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<sup>4</sup> *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 18. Walkowitz identifies 'gents' of the working classes, female philanthropists, Salvation Army lasses and match girls as new entrants to public space.

Modern Life', written between 1859-1860.<sup>5</sup> Stein's lecture is central to an understanding of her work and her modernity; Baudelaire's essay stands as a seminal piece in the development of ideas about modernity and the figure of the *flâneur* in that modernity. These two essays will help us to identify the similarities between Baudelaire and Stein, demonstrating their preconceptions and understanding of the modern in art and literature. Furthermore, Baudelaire's essay, 'The Painter of Modern Life', will provide a specific male perspective on the positioning of men and women in urban spaces.

I will then move on in the second section of the chapter, 'Melanctha and Streetwalking', to discuss the ways in which Stein's use of repetition, and the continuous present, mirror the perambulatory nature of Melanctha's wanderings. The representation of Melanctha as a *flâneuse*, a woman whose exploration of public and private spaces subverts the cultural division of gendered spaces for men and for women at the turn-of-the-century, allows us to understand her challenge to gender and identity. Finally, in the section, 'The Fallen Woman and Nineteenth-Century Endings', I will address the ways in which the representation of Melanctha's social, sexual and cultural transgression, through the figure of the *flâneuse*, inserts Stein's story into the domain of nineteenth-century literature. The image of the 'fallen woman', as the other extreme of a femininity, which is purely good, virtuous and helpless, becomes the site of anxiety about forms of sexual power. The preservation, therefore, of existing cultural norms can only be maintained by her death. This representation of 'Melanctha' is informed by a reading of Elisabeth Bronfen's analysis of death and femininity. As a public symbol of vice, the *flâneuse* provides a stark contrast to domesticated feminine virtue, acting as a conduit for the infection of respectable society. Her desire acts as a locus for the castration of male desire and links her symbolically to images of death and destruction. Moving in and around the margins of society, the *flâneuse*/prostitute traverses class and sex divisions, a

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<sup>5</sup> 'The Painter of Modern Life' was written between 1859-1860 and published in the *Figaro* in installments on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> November and 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1863.

figurative site of transgressive sexuality, which must be exorcised from the social and textual body.

On the one hand, then, the figure of the *flâneuse* reflects Stein's modernity, because, as Stein argues in 'Composition as Explanation, 'If everyone were not so indolent they would realize that beauty is beauty even when it is irritating and stimulating not only when it is accepted and classic' (p. 497). Stein's irritatingly innovative ideas would lead her into the modern in aesthetic terms; her experiments both in prose and poetry refused to reveal a 'fullness of meaning', offering, instead, a vision of history whose significance rested on an emptiness of the relation between signifier and signified (Gluckmann, 223). On the other hand, her representations of sexual otherness had to be purged from the text in order to leave the textual body intact and to ensure fulfilled closure. How, then, do Stein's ideas of modernity relate to Baudelaire's and his understanding of the figure of the *flâneur*?

### **Baudelaire, Stein and the Modern**

I explained briefly in Chapter One that Stein's 1926 lecture, 'Composition as Explanation,' was an attempt to set forth a statement about the processes of writing. Preoccupied with questions of modernity (what it means to be modern), with questions of composition (how to write in the modern period), and with time (how is time relevant to the act of composition, and how is time represented in the act of composition), 'Composition as Explanation' provides an insight into Stein's thinking on modernity and modern writing. Although seemingly straightforward, these ideas involve a complex illustration of Stein's appreciation of the modern composition and her aesthetic concerns.

Her insistence upon the present, both historically and compositionally, reflected her belief that the text is the product of the moment in which it is written: 'Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition' (p. 494). Moreover, she goes on to add that 'No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his



contemporaries who are also creating their own time refuse to accept' (p. 495).

Stein's distinction between different forms of modern composition (modernism) and the factors influencing that composition (modernity) are determined by the writer's use of time. Although not clear, Stein implies that the innovative and radical aspect of her composition, as opposed to that of her contemporaries (even though she doesn't name them), is her use of narrative time.

The insistence on the continuous present moves Stein's writing away from a preoccupation with the past and with tradition. Stein is aware of the way in which 'the creator of the new composition in the arts is an outlaw until he is a classic' (p. 496). The general public and the literary establishment, living in the contemporary moment, cannot see the value of an artist's work until the criterion of the modern is superseded:

It is really too bad very much too bad naturally for the creator but also very much too bad for the enjoyer, they all really would enjoy the created so much better just after it has been made than when it is already a classic, but it is perfectly simple that there is no reason why the contemporary should see, because it would not make any difference as they lead their lives in the new composition anyway, and [...] they don't see (p. 496).

She goes on to argue that a modern work of composition, once it has become a classic, seems to lose its original vitality in the time lapse between its state as 'outlaw' and its acceptance as 'classic.' Traditionally beauty, as the defining aesthetic factor of a work of art, becomes, for Stein, the passively accepted value of what constitutes writing or art. Challenging dominant cultural and literary norms by opening up the definition of literature, Stein offers another quality of writing or art as that which is 'irritating and stimulating not only when it is accepted and classic' (p. 496). Stein impresses upon her reader the validity of all compositions, not just a select few.

If Stein's sense of the contemporary is marked by the way in which individuals live the present moment, then this is bound up with her ideas about composition. As her title suggests, composition is about explanation, an attempt to articulate the lived

moment. In fact, she argues that it isn't the subject matter that is so different in the new composition but the way it is composed in writing:

Each generation has something different at which they are all looking. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the difference which makes each and all of them then different from other generations and this is what makes everything different otherwise they are all alike and everybody knows it because everybody says it (p. 495).

Composition is, as outlined in Chapter Two, the act of sameness differing. The living subject may be the same from age to age, yet its difference is the endless discourses that produce it: 'Each period of living differs from any other period of living not in the way life is but in the way life is conducted and that authentically speaking is composition' (p. 498). Composition, then, is the act of capturing the activity of living in the becoming of the present moment. What, then, are the consequences of this approach to modern writing for Stein's representations of modern life? One of the ways to better understand Stein's radical views about the modern is to examine the aesthetic similarities of Baudelaire and Stein's approach to the modern.

In 'The Painter of Modern Life', Baudelaire turns his attention to the ways in which painters, particularly Constantin Guys, capture the ephemerality of urban spaces.<sup>6</sup> Stein, too, in 'Composition as Explanation', places emphasis on the visual impact of the new composition: 'The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything' (p. 497). The act of composition reflects the act of painting: the writer, like the painter, approaches the modern composition by focusing on the present and capturing the fleeting moment. As Baudelaire articulates in his essay: 'The pleasure we derive from the representation of the present is due, not only to the beauty it can be clothed in, but also to its essential quality of being the present' (p. 1). Baudelaire's vision of the modern is 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art

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<sup>6</sup> As most critics have noted, Constantin Guys was a Dutch painter, 1802-1892, famous for his illustrated 'The French Scene'.

whose other half is the eternal and the immutable' (p. 13). Stein also presents modernity as an awareness of a 'neo-classical ideal of unchanging beauty [...] complicated [...] by a vivid sense of the flux and movement of life in the present'.<sup>7</sup>

For Baudelaire, the bifurcation of beauty into separate spheres is determined by an essential duality in art and in human nature. He writes, 'The duality of art is a fatal consequence of the duality of man. Consider, if you will, the eternally subsisting portion as the soul of art, and the variable element as its body' (p. 3). He makes a clear distinction between two aspects of beauty in the modern: 'Beauty is made up of an eternal element [...] and, of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like [...] the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions' (p. 3).

This understanding of the oppositional value of beauty in a work of art is also detailed by Stein in 'Composition as Explanation'. Stein writes:

The characteristic quality of a classic is that it is beautiful. Now of course it is perfectly true that a more or less first rate work of art is beautiful but the trouble is that when the first rate work of art becomes a classic because it is accepted the only thing that is important from then on to the majority of acceptors the enormous majority [...] is that it is so wonderfully beautiful (p. 496).

Baudelaire remarks that the past is interesting for the artist, not only for the beauty that it represents but also for its historical value (p. 1). Stein would agree that 'once the beauty is accepted the beauty never fails anyone' (p. 497). The permanence of beauty in a work of art reveals its historical significance and durability. However, the conflict between past and present, and an aesthetics of value, is clearly indicated by Stein when she explains that

the creator of the new composition in the arts is an outlaw until he is a classic [...] and it is really too bad very much too bad naturally for the creator but also very much too bad for the enjoyer, they all really would enjoy the created so much better just after it has been made than when it is already a classic ('Composition', p. 496).

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (London: MacMillan, 1995), p. 5.

Although writing years after Baudelaire, it is interesting that Stein's early text, 'Melanctha', reflects much of what Baudelaire defines as modernity. In his vision of the modern, in 'The Painter of Modern Life', the central figure is the *flâneur*. Despite the proliferation of critical work on this subject, for the purposes of this chapter, I will briefly highlight what the figure of the *flâneur* stands for in Baudelaire's urban spaces, and identify the implications of this for the female modernist writer. Baudelaire's essay 'The Painter of Modern Life' is an attempt to articulate and document the originality of the paintings of Constantin Guys 'a lover of crowds and incognitos' (p. 5).

Baudelaire's *flâneur* was the passionate observer of life; the *flâneur*'s goal was to 'hurl himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of an unknown, half-glimpsed countenance' (p. 5). As I have already suggested, the symbol of the *flâneur* in the literature of modernity describes the experience of men: it is, according to Janet Wolff, essentially a literature about transformations in the public world and its associated consciousness (p. 141). The *flâneur*, central to Baudelaire's concept of modernity, represents a fundamentally male experience. This experience is outlined by Walter Benjamin in his essays on Baudelaire and Paris in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

The *flâneur* is the modern hero; his experience, like that of Constantin Guys, is of a freedom to move about in the city, observing and being observed, but never interacting with others (Wolff, p. 146). Able to surrender to the fecundity of the urban experience, the *flâneur* grasps the transitory nature of modern consciousness. In Georg Simmel's account of 'The Stranger' Simmel provides a picture of the wanderer as essentially a figure who is free to come and go as he pleases, and who is fixed within a certain spatial circle — or within a group whose boundaries are analogous to spatial boundaries — but his position within it is fundamentally

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973). Benjamin talks of Baudelaire as someone who sees himself as a *flâneur*, especially in his poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it.<sup>9</sup>

As in all of these accounts, the *flâneur* is quintessentially a representative of male experience.

In her analysis of what this meant for women in the nineteenth century, Wolff argues that the increasing rise of public and private spheres for men and women, respectively, meant that women were clearly confined to the private; any advance into the public sphere was closely scrutinised. Griselda Pollock supports this view, adding,

The *flâneur* is an exclusively masculine type which functions within the matrix of bourgeois ideology through which all spaces of the city were reconstructed by the overlaying of the doctrine of separate spheres on to the division of public and private which became as a result a gendered division (p. 67).

Even Simmel, not talking specifically about public and private gendered spaces, did outline the way in which spatial boundaries were used in order to determine psychological and social relations. His point is apt: 'A society is characterized as inwardly homogenous because its sphere of existence is enclosed in acutely conscious boundaries' (p. 143). Moreover, he goes on to add that 'perhaps in the majority of all relationships between individuals as well as between groups, the concept of the boundary becomes in some way important' (p. 143). Indeed, the concept of boundary becomes totalizing: a way of keeping clear demarcations between the places and roles of men and women in society.

In 'The Painter of Modern Life', Baudelaire charts a hierarchical list of women found in his urban environment. Categorising these women according to status and position, Baudelaire's attitude and language reflect the extremes of delight and disgust at the women he finds there. On the one hand, we see, 'bathed in the diffused

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<sup>9</sup> Georg Simmel, 'The Stranger' in *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings of Georg Simmel*, ed. by Donald N. Levine (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 143-149 (p. 143).

brightness of an auditorium, it is young women of the most fashionable society receiving and reflecting the light with their eyes'. On the other hand, we see the mistress, 'a great lady — that "practically nothing" being in fact "practically everything", for it is *distinction*'; and, finally, 'the protean image of wanton beauty. Now she is majestic, nor playful [...] now cyclopean [...]. These reflections concerning the courtesan are applicable within certain limits to the actress also; for she too is a creature of show, an object of public pleasure' (pp. 34-36).

The hierarchical distinction, so pointedly painted by Baudelaire, and informed by his consciousness of class, differentiates respectable from loose women. Baudelaire's representation of Paris as a city of women 'constructs a sexualised journey, which can be correlated with impressionist practice' (Pollock, p. 73). Baudelaire's journey and description of Parisian women, and his gaze, as the *flâneur*, is both covetous and erotic. While he looks detachedly and affectionately at the white middle-class women, his gaze is arrested by the women of the lower classes and the prostitutes, whose 'show' of public spectacle reveals the artist's own delight in addressing and undressing a latent sexuality which is both morally dangerous, yet seductive. The hellish delights of cyclopean sexuality and the brightness of the young women reveal another dual vision at the heart of the male gaze. The distinction between the eternal feminine and its hellish opposite takes us back to the duality of Baudelaire's vision of art as either neo-classical and eternal or transient and contingent.

The young women of the middle-classes are equated with a natural order that is safe and representable, in other words, his neo-classical ideal. The courtesan, on the other hand, is the non-representable, the figure of contagion and desire who incarnates the malaise of modern society and who threatens to pervert the 'most cleverly contrived patrimonial strategies'.<sup>10</sup> Like art, the eternal feminine is associated with the delights of the middle-class body. This body, as Baudelaire writes, is 'a divinity, a star which presides at all the conceptions of the brain of man' (p. 30). Compare her

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<sup>10</sup> Alain Corbin, 'Commercial Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century France: A System of Images and Regulations', in *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 209-219 (p. 209).

with the courtesan who ‘aspires, with more or less success, towards the simplicity which is customary in a better world [...] She is a perfect image of the savagery that lurks in the midst of civilisation. She has her own sort of beauty, which comes to her from Evil; devoid of spirituality, sometimes tinged with a weariness which imitates true melancholy’ (p. 36). In these lines, Baudelaire outlines the sexuality of the courtesan as the other side of the eternal feminine. Her beauty is hollow, a superficial imitation of something, for the poet, more real; a beauty associated with the transient. The moral threat of the courtesan exposed the dangers for middle-class women of walking out and finding their virtue threatened. Wilson shows that ‘the public spaces thus construed were where one risked losing one’s virtue, dirtying oneself; going out in public and the idea of disgrace were closely allied’ (p. 69).

I have shown that at the heart of Baudelaire’s regard of the women who people the city of Paris is the traditional dichotomy of virgin and whore. Yet, interestingly, Baudelaire’s gaze lies not with the virtuous bourgeois woman, but with the vision of the courtesan and her publicly tantalising sexuality. In her book *The Sphinx in the City*, Wilson acknowledges, like Janet Wolff, Griselda Pollock and Walter Benjamin, that the experience of the city was a male one, and that sexual unease, such as that revealed by Baudelaire, was determined by the consequences and effects of sexuality for sale, outside the constraints of the family (p. 15).

In an extensive analysis, Wilson demonstrates how the gendered division of space: public/male and private/female was increasingly brought about due to a middle-class fear of contagion both physically and morally by the lower classes. Judith Walkowitz, writing in *City of Dreadful Delight*, also adds that, ‘The public symbol of female vice, the prostitute, established a stark contrast to domesticated feminine virtue as well as to male bourgeois identity’ (p. 21). The freedom to walk out for middle-class Victorians was always overshadowed by an uneasy knowledge that urbanity brought with it ‘the promiscuous mingling of classes in close proximity on the street’ (Wilson, p. 29). Whilst for men like Baudelaire and Guys, argues Benjamin, the crowd brought ‘to the city dweller the figure that fascinates’ (*A Lyric Poet*, p. 125),

enabling them to succumb to 'the experience of giant cities, of the intersecting of their myriad relations' (p. 119), for many women, not part of a kin group or family, to walk in the city, was to become a public woman — a prostitute. For the Victorian middle-class woman, to find herself alone on the streets was, according to Wilson, tantamount to finding her virtue in danger: 'The possibility that a virtuous woman could be mistaken for one who was "fallen" made the barriers of convention and respectability seem fragile indeed. No wonder that women began to withdraw from the street' (p. 30). Why, then, did some women withdraw from the street and others choose to walk the streets?

In many of the sociological tracts and data about prostitution in both Europe and America, one fact is increasingly obvious: prostitution was a product and consequence of the new urban environment. In a series of papers published in 1850, prostitution, although seen as a serious moral problem was, nonetheless, recognised as a condition of poverty. Both William Sanger and Alexandre, Jean-Baptiste Parent Duchatelet discovered that prostitution was often an effect of destitution, parental abuse, seduction and abandonment, tied in with a desire for economic improvement.<sup>11</sup> Keith Nield, in his examination of documentary debates on the subject, explains the problem thus: 'At these levels, prostitution was part of the collective life of the urban poor, victims of an uncertain cash economy, frequently unemployed and always underpaid, continuously disadvantaged in a social system which equated profit with virtue and poverty with personal inadequacy.'<sup>12</sup> In William Sanger's New York report of 1858, the main cause of prostitution was economic — an involuntary step into a life of shame (p. 454).

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<sup>11</sup> William Sanger, *History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects Throughout the World (Being an Official Report of Alms House Governors of the City of New York)* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1859). Alexandre, Jean-Baptiste Parent Duchatelet, *De La Prostitution dans la Ville de Paris sous le rapport de l'hygiène de la morale et de l'administration*, ed. by A. Trébuchet and Poirot-Duval, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2 vols. (Paris: J.B. Baillière, 1836; repr, 1857). References to Duchatelet's text will be cited from the translation, *On Prostitution in the City of Paris, from the French of M. Parent Duchatelet*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Haymarket: T. Burgess, 1840), referred to hereafter as *On Prostitution*.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Nield, *Prostitution in the Victorian Age: Debates on the Issue, Nineteenth-Century Critical Journals* (London: Gregg International Publishers, Ltd., 1973), introduction. References to this text will be given by individual essay after quotations in the text.



The consequences of poverty, because of, and in spite of, urbanization, meant that for varying reasons, many women entered a life of prostitution as a means of improving their economic position. Working in factories for long hours, many women saw prostitution as a release from the terrible conditions and poor wages of the job. With the prevailing assumption that men were the main wage earners in a family, women sought prostitution as a means of increasing wages, which were paid simply to supplement family incomes, or provide money for luxuries. For many immigrant women, prostitution was a source of income, enabling them to send money back to their families. In the 1859 report of the Alms House Governors of New York City, William Sanger, in a survey of 1238 prostitutes, found that 411 of them were immigrants, who had either come or been sent to the United States in order to improve their social and economic conditions (p. 465).<sup>13</sup> For other women, prostitution was an escape from terrible family relations: parental abuse and incest among them.<sup>14</sup>

Barbara Meil Hobson highlights the difficulties of identifying the complexities of the lives of prostitutes, since for most Victorians, 'the outcast or the fallen woman, the images Victorians gave to prostitutes, implied a fixed status or caste. They totally misrepresented the social reality of prostitution' (p. 109). Indeed, prostitution was not simply about an aberrant female role, but about the economic and social position of women.

In the mid-to late nineteenth century, in response to the growth of prostitution, public health reforms and the medical profession were preoccupied with the

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<sup>13</sup> Sanger cites improvement of conditions, abuse by parents, joining relatives and being sent abroad by family as causes for the link between immigration and prostitution.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of prostitution, its causes and responses to it, see the following. Vern L. Bullough, *The History of Prostitution* (New York: University Books, 1964); Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and The American Reform Tradition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987). *Prostitution in the Victorian Age: Debates on the Issue, Nineteenth-Century Critical Journals*, introduced by Keith Nield; *The Mamie Papers*, ed. by Ruth Rosen (historical editor) and Sue Davidson (textual editor), published by The Feminist Press in co-operation with the Schlesinger Library and Radcliffe College, New York, 1977, and Virago Press, London, 1979. Also, Judith R. Walkowitz's *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge, London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980) and *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (1992). The articles on women and the city also provide information on prostitution, as well as Elizabeth Wilson's book, *The Sphinx in the City*.

elimination of sexually transmitted diseases. At the heart of this period of reform was the figure of the prostitute, because, explains Walkowitz, 'as the permeable and the transgressed border between classes and sexes,' she was the carrier of pollution (*City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 22). This equation of the prostitute with contagion and disease was detailed in Duchatelet's anthropological study of prostitution as early as 1836, and was continuously written into representations of the prostitute in the nineteenth century. In his report Duchatelet provides a physiological description of types of prostitutes, reducing prostitution to a transitional occupation for young women of the labouring classes (*On Prostitution*, p. 11). Furthermore he made an implicit link between prostitution and the prostitute's role as one bringing contagion and disease into the social realm. In his report, Duchatelet talks of the physiological corruption of the prostitute's body, with a tendency to tumorous labia, cancer and lunacy (*On Prostitution*, p. 54).

The introduction of the Contagion Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 in London (such acts were also common in Paris), and the introduction of similar laws in Baltimore in the United States, in order to curb the spread of disease was, according to debates at the time, intended to aid soldiers and sailors. An article in the *Westminster Review* of 1850, titled 'Prostitution and How to Deal with it', made it clear that the Contagion Acts were a strategy designed to help soldiers and sailors, whose health and strength were 'gravely impaired by the ravages of venereal disease' (Nield, pp. 491).<sup>15</sup> Venereal disease was seen as a threat to the moral and physical fabric of the nation: if the individual failed to achieve a vigorous sexual purity and a fully vigorous life, then the nation, too, was at risk. Through the Contagion Acts, the Metropolitan Police had the power to submit any woman to medical examination but tended, more importantly, to subject women of the working class to continual harassment, since it

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<sup>15</sup> For information on regulation of prostitution in the United States, see Howard B. Woolston, *Prostitution in the United States, Vol 1 (Prior to Entrance of United States into the World War)* (New York: The Century Co., 1921). Woolston highlights the difficulty of passing laws to regulate prostitution in the north-eastern states of America, such as Chicago, Baltimore and Cincinnati. The General Federation for the Abolition of Government Regulation of Prostitution, using evidence of the experience of regulation in Britain and Europe, argued that regulation had been unsuccessful.

was presumed that due to economic hardship, working-class women were the chief source of prostitution. The figure of the prostitute embodied fears about 'individuals in private life who are infected through the sin of others; we must take into account the happiness of many families thus irretrievably destroyed' (Nield, 'Prostitution', p. 477). Because of the growth of the city 'and in the number of its transients it was not possible to control private, discreet liaisons. The city, according to Hobson, provided couples having illicit affairs with a veil of protection from both informal and formal systems of control' (p. 32).

Besides being forced into such a life, because of economic factors, many women suggested that the life of the prostitute was one that they were inclined to. William Sanger in his study of prostitution discounted this theory because it suggested that women might have specific sexual desires. His acknowledgement of such a fact is determined by his belief that women could not possibly enjoy sexual relations. Like Duchatelet, Sanger talked of prostitutes lacking in 'true womanly feeling', because the 'full force of sexual desire is seldom known to a virtuous woman' (p. 489). Moreover, both Sanger and Duchatelet, made a clear link between prostitution and an innate depravity brought on by a need to satisfy sexual passion and economic need.<sup>16</sup>

In *The Mamie Papers*, the letters of Mamie Pinzer (1885-?), a former prostitute, writing to Fanny Quincy Howe, a Philadelphia social worker, in December 1910, demonstrate that prostitution was an occupation freely chosen by some women. Mamie acknowledges that, after the death of her father, and the resultant financial difficulties for her mother, prostitution was a more desirable option than the drudgery and hardship of other jobs. In one letter, Mamie writes that she had the easy life that immoral living brings because 'I just cannot be moral enough to see where drudgery is better' (p. 4).<sup>17</sup> Despite Mamie's letters, it is difficult to determine the specific reasons why women chose to enter into prostitution, because of the lack of

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<sup>16</sup> *History of Prostitution*, pp. 500-505, and *On Prostitution*, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> The correspondence between Mamie and Fanny spanned the years 1910-1922, during which Mamie provided a unique insight to the 'underside' of American culture and society, and to the obstacles which faced working-class women in their struggle for survival.

documentary evidence. Prostitution did, it seems, provide many women with a sort of sexual and physical freedom. Indeed, the predominant figure of the prostitute is that of the streetwalker, a mobile figure who haunted the streets and alleyways of cities.

If, in London and Paris, the prostitute was the form and centre of sexual deviancy, then like Baudelaire's courtesan, she represented a sexuality that both horrified and mesmerised. The prostitute was the spectacle, the commodity par excellence, and her body the site of a pleasure both disruptive and deviatory. The sexual disorder associated with the figure of the prostitute was, according to Alain Corbin, associated with dis-ease and death. He writes, 'Of course, the prostitute symbolises, and even incarnates, the ailment that testifies, more than a disgusting smell, to the infection of the social structure: *syphilis*, the only malady where one dare not deny the power of contagion' (p. 212).

As women of the streets, streetwalkers, Wilson suggests that rather than simply providing the prostitute with the role of sexual deviant, there might yet be another role assigned to her. Baudelaire was insistent that the *flâneur* was a male figure, a man whose presence in the public sphere was perfectly legitimate. Yet, argues Wilson, if the *flâneur* was the figure who, in the name of freedom and experience, prostituted himself into the crowd, could we not argue equally that the prostitute, as a public woman, was a female *flâneur*?

Although Wilson aligns the prostitute with the symbol of the female *flâneur*, there were bourgeois women who did explore the streets of London and Paris, most often in the guise of philanthropists.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, other feminist critics have noted how the city was not always 'out of bounds' to many women and the experience of the city could offer many women, according to Helen Taylor, 'the spectacle, thrills and excesses of the city, even when they feel somewhat excluded' (p. 73).

Furthermore, and returning to Wilson's argument, the prostitute figure is used as a trope in the development of the concept of the urban. According to Deborah Epstein

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson cites the case of Octavia Hill, Josephine Butler in London, and Georges Sand, Collette and American female ex-patriates in Paris, who walked the streets, p. 31.

Nord, the prostitute, as trope, represents the ultimate transience and disposability of urban life (p. 354). The link between the prostitute and her client conceptualises Baudelaire's belief in the ephemeral and fleeting nature of modern life. As the prostitute walks the streets, the performative aspect of her identity enables her to explore the lack of boundaries and the freedom of the city in the same manner as that of the male *flâneur*. One of the differences for the *flâneuse*, and a fundamental one at that, is that her street walking is associated with moral laxity and social disorder.

Epstein Nord explains that the prostitute often became 'the isolated repository of social ills, assuring the middle and upper classes of their own safety and protectedness within urban society' (p. 362). In literal terms, the attempts to bind and harbour the prostitute's sexual contagion was mirrored by the need to surveille and control female sexuality. At a social level, prostitution, as a social evil, needed to be regulated; at a textual level, in literature of the period, representations of wayward sexuality and 'fallen women' insisted on her death or demise.<sup>19</sup> Exile and death became the fallen woman's destiny: 'In life as in fiction, exile seemed the only means both to the redemption for the fallen woman and to renewal for the society that her presence defiled' (Epstein-Nord, p. 358).

To add support to this theory, Karl S. Guthke's enlightening discussion of death's symbolism in art and literature through the ages highlights the link between the prostitute and death both literally and metaphorically. Such an analysis is not new, but it is important to realise that the personification of death as female comes to the fore in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> He suggests that death is personified as two women: the angel of death and the seductress (p. 186). Furthermore, as a sort of literary spin-off from the Renaissance, love and death are once more fused so that love and death become interchangeable. Why, asks Guthke did the emergence of this female form return at this point and not dissipate? Obviously the answers are complex and many; however, one point is significant.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, *Jane Eyre* (1847); *Madame Bovary* (1857) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891).

<sup>20</sup> *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 173-228.

Guthke highlights the distinction made about the nature/culture dichotomy: 'The manifest subjection of woman to the biological processes reminds man of his own creatureliness, of his own biological origin and of his own, no less biological death' (p. 190). Woman as a potent symbol of life also becomes the very symbol of death. If woman is the symbol of life and death, what figure more appropriately encompasses these two extremes than the prostitute? Guthke goes on to explain that the figure of the prostitute, and fear of sexual contagion, haunted the art and literature of the period. He writes, 'The idea that death might take the shape of an erotic seductress [...] reappeared no less sporadically [...] in some of the early or mid nineteenth-century Dances of Death.' In Grandeville's *Journey to Eternity* 'one of the impersonations of death was the fashionably dressed masked prostitute offering herself to a couple of flâneurs' (p. 209).

The female 'street-walker', like those women in Baudelaire's Paris, becomes both an object of lust and fascination, and an instrument of depravity. She is both seductress and yet the literal figure of death. Allured by what she offers, the male gaze — Baudelaire offers himself as example — is stricken and yet charmed by the splendour of the prostitute figure and, as Epstein and Bronfen have noted, such temptation must be purged in order to leave the social body intact and safe.

Melantha is Stein's *flâneuse*; her euphemistic wanderings in search of sexual knowledge designate her a 'street-walker'. The fleeting and transitory quality of Melantha's relationships reflects the urban experience outlined by Wilson and others. Feeling 'blue', Melantha never understands, but only feels, what many critics would term the 'ennui' of modern life, or what Epstein Nord would call the impersonal encounter of modern relations. She transgresses the boundaries of public and private spheres in pursuit of pleasure. Like the male *flâneur*, she is seduced by the 'otherness' of the city and by the potential of the 'forbidden'. If the city and its urban spaces offer untrammelled sexual experience, then Melantha is only too ready to taste its pleasures.

## Melanctha and Streetwalking

Living in Paris in 1905, when she began writing *Three Lives*, Stein as an ex-patriate bohemian, was aware of the nature of the city and urban experience. She chose to base her story on the lives of three Baltimore women and this suggests that Stein had a clear knowledge of Paris and Baltimore, even prior to 1903, as industrialised cities in which the gender of spaces was still in operation.<sup>21</sup> The narrative of 'Melanctha' reflects the experience of modernity, in its refusal to adhere to a linear path and cumulative time; her narrative loops back on itself, digresses and regresses until it moves towards closure. Melanctha wanders in urban spaces in order to reveal the emptiness and meaninglessness of those very experiences.

The opening page of 'Melanctha' reveals an indirect reference to its urban habitat. Rose Johnson has just recently married to Sam Johnson, a 'deck hand on a coasting steamer' (p. 59). While this might be any river or coast in the United States, it is, in fact, the Ohio River and the link for Baltimore's trade. Sam's employment on a coastal steamer suggests that the shipping yard was one source of employment for the working classes in Baltimore at the turn-of-the-century.<sup>22</sup> Rose, like most women, including Melanctha, shares a house with other women and moves from house to house as the occasion arises. Stein's fiction hints at the perambulatory nature of women's lives: 'Rose now in the easy fashion of the poor lived with one woman in her house, and then for no reason went and lived with some other woman in her house' (p. 61). The obvious class stereotyping of Stein's story leaves much to be desired as she equates poverty with an itinerant mobility, yet Drake and Cayton, in their extensive research into life for black people in northern cities, through the

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<sup>21</sup> For information on the industrialization and urbanization of Baltimore, see the following. Alan D. Anderson, *The Origin and Resolution of an Urban Crisis: Baltimore 1890-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972) and Terry D. Bilhartz, *Urban Religion and the Second Great Awakening Church and Society in Early National Baltimore* (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> In his analysis of the growth of Baltimore, Alan D. Anderson states that by 1883 Baltimore boasted an efficient railway system, by 1885 it had the Eire Canal, which provided direct water access to other major cities. Furthermore, situated on the Chesapeake Bay, Baltimore had the largest fleet of coastal vessels and was thought to be the gateway to the South, *The Origin and Resolution of an Urban Crisis: Baltimore 1890-1930*, p. 17.

nineteenth and into the twentieth century, suggest that transitory alliances between families and friends was common: 'Fragments of families, young bachelors, girls and young women living together would, due to lack of money, barter their services.'<sup>23</sup>

The relationship between Sam and Rose reflects the gendered practice of occupying space. Whilst Sam works as a deck hand, Rose 'stayed at home in her house and sat and bragged to all her friends how nice it was to be married really to a husband' (p. 62). The public/private dichotomy, whilst represented as a bourgeois ideology, is mirrored, in the text, by the working classes. Rose is always aware of her status as a woman within the black community. She defines herself and her social practices in terms of white mores. Having been raised by white people, Rose seeks to espouse their values: "'No Melanctha, I 'ain't no common nigger to do so, for I was raised by white folks'" (p. 60). Rose's life is regulated by the private space of female domestic virtue. Even after the death of her baby, Rose's reaction is to return to the private space of her home.

Unlike Rose, Melanctha, despite her racial and class origins, does not seek to appropriate and vindicate white values: 'And so her feeling was really closer to her black coarse father, than her feeling had ever been toward her pale yellow, sweet-appearing mother' (p. 63). Melanctha's sense of power and identity comes through her father and not her mother, through the male figure as a locus for the public, the sexual and the dominant in the working classes of Baltimore. The fact that Melanctha's father is almost a stranger to her, reveals the nature of their relationship. Always away, and rarely at home, Melanctha's father illustrates, indirectly, the limitations of finding work. Drake and Cayton point out the difficulties: 'Negro men have never been able [...] to obtain good jobs long enough to build a solid economic base for family support' (pp. 582-3).

At the same time, despite the limitations of work available to men, both black and white, such opportunities afforded them a freedom of movement denied to women.

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<sup>23</sup> St Clair Drake and Horace A. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.576.



Melanctha does not share Rose's belief in the structure and stability of family life in Bridgepoint; rather, she 'had not loved her father and her mother' (p. 63). Her detachment from familial and kinship structures shows that she chooses her means of survival from a position of socially structured powerlessness. Her struggle for survival leads Melanctha towards an affiliation with alternative kinship groups, such as her relationships with Jane Harden and Rose Johnson.

Melanctha's wanderings are constructed around a textual and thematic dialectic of stasis and movement, outlined in Chapter One. The 'wandering' quality of the text is mirrored in the insistent use of verbs of movement. For example, after the incident with John, the Bishop's coachman (p. 64), we are told that 'this life was too quiet and accustomed and no longer stirred her to any interest or excitement' (p. 67). The word 'stirred' suggests a sort of intendant mobility, a coming-into-being of Melanctha's desire for 'excitement'.

Stein's use of the continuous present and repetition-as-iteration, in the following passage, illustrates Melanctha's wanderings sexually and textually:

For a girl raised like Melanctha Herbert, such escape was always very simple. Often she was alone, sometimes she was with a fellow seeker, and she strayed and stood, sometimes by railroad yards, sometimes on the docks [...] Then when the darkness covered everything all over, she would begin to learn to know this man or that. She would advance, they would respond, and then she would withdraw a little (p. 67)

The use of the adverb 'often' in 'Often she was alone' qualifies the fact that Melanctha's wanderings are frequent and solitary. The repetition of the adverb 'sometimes', three times within one sentence, acts as a 'hammer' word, mirroring the frequency of her wanderings and the variety of her wanderings; for example, sometimes alone or sometimes with a fellow seeker. In the space of this short passage, we are told that she moves in and around the docks, the railroad yards and new buildings. Furthermore, the literal transition from day to night, through 'Often she was alone' to 'Then when the darkness covered everything' illustrates the fact that

her wanderings are continuous. Her 'illicit' desire of men, 'this man or that', hints at the casual nature of her experiences, and the reference to 'darkness covered everything' suggests, metaphorically, that her sexual experiences, which are described obliquely, cannot be acted out in public spaces in a conventional manner.

Furthermore, the strategy of advancing and retreating from these men is mirrored at the level of plot in her frequent advances towards sexual knowledge and then her retreat into the stability of one relationship. In each encounter, 'the anonymity of the crowd provides an asylum for the person on the margins of society' (Wolff, p. 146).

It is not only her father, James Herbert, who rails against her sorties into urban spaces, but the other characters such as Rose Johnson, Jane Harden and Jeff Campbell. Yet her wanderings into these spaces provide a vision of life that is active and engaging. Stein, in the early stages of Melanctha's wanderings, repeats the experiences of the railroad and shipyards. Between pages 67-71, we are told that Melanctha's wanderings begin at twelve and carry on until she is sixteen, just before she meets Jane Harden. In the space of these pages, Stein repeats her description of the railroad and docks in order to reinforce the frequency of Melanctha's wanderings. The 'ceaseless fascination' of the railroad yards is a fascination with a world of energy: physical and sexual (p. 68). Melanctha's attraction towards, and yearning for, the railroads and dockyards, implies that urbanity and forbidden sexuality go hand in hand. This idea of forbidden and transgressive sexuality is mirrored in Stein's use of language. She writes, 'It is very nice to get the swelling in the throat, and the fullness, and the heart beats, and all the flutter of excitement that comes as one watches the people come and go, and hears the engine pound and give a long drawn whistle' (p. 68). The language of the narrator, which serves to highlight Melanctha's desire for these urban spaces, reflects Stein's fascination with sexual power. The 'fullness and swelling' of the steam engines, exposes a language that overflows with desire and excitement. In order to delineate Melanctha's wandering, Stein insistently repeats the adverb 'often' when describing Melanctha's sorties into urban spaces, and in order to insist on this point, she qualifies the phrase, at times, with 'very often'. Without

having to repeat every episode, Stein allows the adverb to carry the textual significance of Melanctha's movement.

The space, the crowd, and the vision of the spectacle, locate Melanctha as a *flâneuse* providing a female perspective on the fascination with all things modern, and the urban as a place for sexual consciousness and liberation. In 'The Painter of Modern Life' Baudelaire would define urban consciousness and the beauty of the city in its 'Otherness', not in the eternal classicism of a city but in the 'fugitive, fleeting beauty of present day life' and the 'acrid or heady bouquet of the wine of life' (p. 40). Adding emphasis to this point, Elisabeth Wilson argues that 'extremes of wealth and poverty, of enjoyment and misery, made an essential contribution to this perception of the city. It was just those things that were shoddy and awful about city life that constituted its seduction, its peculiar beauty' (p. 5). The seduction of city life is detailed in the romanticised stories told to Melanctha by the 'colored' porters (p. 69). These stories, about near-death incidents on the railroad, are an attempt, however vague, to depict some of the social realities of the new urban experience at the level of class and race. The porters tell Melanctha that 'there was no air to breathe, and then out and winding around edges of great canyons on thin high spindling trestles, and sometimes cars, and sometimes whole trains fell from the narrow bridges' (p. 69).

Such stories are reinforced by those of the 'big, serious, melancholy, light brown porter', who would tell Melanctha about the realities of racial conflict in the South, where the black man faced death for the slightest injury, verbal or physical, towards a white man or woman (p. 69). In another context, these stories would take on social and historical weight. Indeed, the last of these two stories should make explicit the social history of the black man in and beyond the institution and abolition of slavery, Reconstruction and Jim Crowism, but it does not, it only hints at it. Instead, the story is used as a means of adding 'excitement' to the spaces that Melanctha inhabits. The social actuality of these stories is reinforced through a language that refuses to expose the image of death and violence that surrounded black lives. Whilst Melanctha learns of the larger problems of her fellow man's existence, her focus is always on the

interaction with various classes and races of men in order to gain sexual knowledge. The issue of Stein's subordination of race to sexuality is something I treat in Chapter Four.

If one of Melanctha's sought after spaces for the experience is the railroad yard, then the other space that she frequents is the shipping docks. Both of these spaces are associated with the freedom of sexual movement, thus enabling Melanctha's to cross class divisions. How does Stein's text reflect this movement? Stein writes:

Then Melanctha would find herself with the, for her, gentlemanly classes. A clerk or a young express agent would begin to know her [...]

Melanctha and some man would stand in the evening and would talk together [...]

But when Melanctha was alone, and she was so, very often, she would sometimes come very near to making a long step on the road that leads to wisdom. Some man would learn a great deal about her (p. 70).

The movement from 'Then Melanctha would find herself with the, for her, gentlemanly classes' to 'Melanctha and some man would stand in the evening' to 'Some man would learn a great deal about her', specifies the textual and sexual wanderings of Melanctha. For example, 'then', as I have shown, indicates a new phase in Melanctha's wanderings. The repetition of 'sometimes' also adds to the variety of movement and experience; her ability to move between classes of men is reflected in the specifics of 'gentlemanly classes' to the oblique 'some man'. The repetition of the phrase, 'some man', twice, within a few lines, suggests that Melanctha's wanderings are sexually promiscuous.

The lure of sexual knowledge is detailed by Stein's/Melanctha's voyeuristic gaze at the powerful freedom of the black body. Apart from the obvious racism in these lines, which I detail in Chapter Four, the 'primitive' black body, becomes a means by which Stein addresses her own otherness, but also suggests that Melanctha's desire is other. Through her interaction with the men of the shipping and railroad yard,

Melanctha gains some insight into the urban world and its processes: 'She loved to see them hoisting, digging, sawing and stone cutting' (p. 71).

With access to the hidden recesses of working-class life, Melanctha gains a greater understanding of the spaces that men inhabit: 'Melanctha loved to see these dark and smelly places. She always loved to watch and talk and listen with men who worked hard' (p. 71). These 'dark and smelly places' provide Melanctha with knowledge of the kaleidoscope of life. It is through her fleeting interaction with men of various classes that her activities are given free rein. As a *flâneuse*, Melanctha is able, to some extent, to enjoy the privileges of freedom that men enjoy: 'Sometimes Melanctha would do some of these things that had much danger, and always with such men, she showed her power and her breakneck courage' (p. 71).

In acting like a man, climbing to a high place on the building site (p. 72), Melanctha expresses a freedom, which was only considered acceptable by women of the lower classes and prostitutes. To be so exposed in the pursuit of freedom and sexual knowledge makes it evident that Melanctha's activities are only acceptable if she is represented as a fallen woman: 'A workman caught her and so she was not killed, but her left arm was badly broken' (p. 72). Melanctha's literal fall suggests, symbolically, a sexual fall.

Although it is never suggested that Melanctha literally prostitutes herself for economic gain, her position as *flâneuse* within the urban space is one of commodity and exchange. As a figure that spends her daylight hours with the porters and 'with the men who worked hard' and the evenings with the 'gentlemanly classes', Melanctha combines her position as *flâneuse* and prostitute. This is evident in the following passage: 'It was no longer express agents and clerks that she learned to know, but men in business, commercial travelers, and even men above these (p. 73). The space between 'no longer' and 'and even' works figuratively to point out that Melanctha's 'wanderings' are excessive. She moves ghost-like across a range of classes and experiences. Moreover, her wanderings with Jane Harden, described at this point in the text, are insisted upon by Stein's use of repetition-as-iteration and

repetition-as-variation. The emphasis on 'now' in the first line of the passage, 'It was now no longer, even in the daylight', brings an immediacy to the text, but also suggests that Melanctha has wandered prior to this. The repetition of 'and even' is used to reinforce both the time of her wanderings, not even daylight, but night time, as well, and the different classes of men that she and Jane Harden associate with. In pursuit of her pleasure, Melanctha walks literally and figuratively across boundaries of class and race.

The casual nature of sexual relations in the lower classes of Bridgepoint, and the figurative representation of prostitution, reflects what Baudelaire would call the 'ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent' (p. 13). Georg Simmel, in his essay 'The Stranger' would call this the distinctly objective attitude of the stranger who comes and goes as he pleases, and who finds his participation in the urban spectacle one of 'remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement' (p. 145). Interestingly Simmel's distinction between remoteness and nearness is mirrored in many of Melanctha's encounters. Throughout the opening pages of the text we are told, 'The man would sometimes come a little nearer [ ... ] and then Melanctha would always make herself escape' (p. 70) and 'As she grew older she often stayed a good deal longer [ ... ] but she always made herself escape' (p. 70). The movement between nearness and escape is indicative of what Wilson would argue is the prostitute's complete understanding of the 'transient' nature of the urban experience:

They understood, better than anyone, the pitiless way in which the city offered an intensity of joy that was never, somehow, fulfilled. The spectacle melted away just as you felt you had reached its centre; the bubble burst when you touched it. This was the source of the melancholy which lay at the heart of the city (p. 55).

Melanctha's relationships reflect what Wilson would call an intensity of joy that is never fulfilled: 'And so Melanctha wandered on the edge of wisdom' (p. 70). Urban experience is fleeting, re-enacted by Melanctha in each of her relationships in which 'the man would sometimes come a little nearer, would detain her, would hold her arm

or make his jokes a little clearer, and then Melanctha would always make herself escape' (p. 70). Pleasure is the thrill of temporary contact and escape. Like the stranger in Simmel's urban metropolis, Melanctha's 'prostituting' of the body denotes the fact that she does not belong to the spaces in which she finds herself: she is not and cannot be indigenous to them. Furthermore, Melanctha's contact with the various men she meets never provides her with the sexual knowledge she requires. Always hovering on the edge of wisdom, the suggestion is, surely, that the process of modernity is unintelligible and the individual is denied a clarified and meaningful experience. The transitory nature of Melanctha's relationships (except with Jeff Campbell), illustrates that meaning is indeterminate and random. Meaning is always fuelled by a certain lack: 'It was now something realler that Melanctha wanted, something that would move her very deeply' (pp. 75-6). 'Realler' and 'deeply' testify to the experience of the modern, for Melanctha, as 'lacking'.

The lesbian relationship with Jane Harden is one of the most illicit yet least explicit relationships in the text. The figure of the lesbian and the prostitute enabled Stein to engage with philosophical ideas about public life as male-dominated and to consider its failure to engage with aspects of women's experiences of modernity. However, the movement of women into public places made it difficult to keep a sexual hierarchy in place, especially when that hierarchy depended on the invisibility of deviant forms of sexuality. Richard von Kraft Ebing and Havelock Ellis, two important sexologists of the nineteenth century, linked the 'sexual inversion' of the lesbian to the 'criminal' behaviour of the lower classes and the prostitute. According to Kraft Ebing, the vice of lesbianism ('Saphism') is met more frequently among ladies of the aristocracy and prostitutes.<sup>24</sup> And, according to Lillian Faderman, 'In the popular imagination, love between women was becoming identified with disease, insanity and tragedy'.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Richard von Kraft Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis with Especial Reference to Antipathetic Sexual Instinct: A Medico Forensic Study* (London: Rebman Ltd., 1899), pp. 577-8. Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Vol. 1 (*Sexual Inversion*. By H. Ellis and John Addington Symonds) (London: Wilson and Macmillan, 1897).

<sup>25</sup> *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow & Company Inc., 1981), p. 252.

Melanctha's relationship with Jane Harden is stigmatized by the operation of a sexual and ideological hierarchy. Like Melanctha, Jane is also a woman who uses public sites for sexual pleasure. Jane is not only a 'wanderer' but her reckless behaviour is what sets her apart from other women. She is continually betrayed by the fact that she has a drink problem and is never able to hold down a job. What is significant about this relationship between Jane and Melanctha, is that transgressive desire pervades the parameters of both public and private spaces. If the private has always been a space for female enclosure, even deprivation, it now becomes a space for female liberation: 'Then they began not to wander, and Melanctha would spend long hours with Jane in her room, sitting at her feet and listening to her stories, and feeling her strength and the power of her affection' (p. 73).

Although the relationship with Jane provides a temporary halt to Melanctha's wanderings, the relationship provokes thoughts about the gendering of public and private spaces: women can find pleasure in both, but only in what is considered illegal or illicit forms. Lesbianism, considered another form of deviancy, and prostitution, a symbol of social and sexual malaise, locate these women at the margins of society; yet although considered invisible, their presence is a resistance to the configurations of a sexually hierarchical system, which values heterosexuality, marriage and procreation as instruments of cultural and social power. Indeed, the lesbian and the prostitute become avatars for the mobility and ambiguity of modern forms of desire.<sup>26</sup>

Melanctha's relationship with Jane Harden ends because Melanctha has exhausted the knowledge that she sought. Moreover, despite its emotional content, the relationship's unequal partnering, reveals Melanctha's increasing independence and strength in exploring and escaping transitory encounters with men: 'She was always alone now when she wandered. Melanctha did not need help now to know, or to stay longer, or when she wanted, to escape' (p. 75). Stein represents Melanctha's new-found confidence and sexual independence by emphasising her readiness to return to

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<sup>26</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 20.



exploring relations with men. She writes, 'Melanctha Herbert was ready now herself to do teaching' and 'And so Melanctha began once more to wander' (p. 75). Sexual maturity and the desire to wander are indicated by 'was ready' and 'once more'. The adjective 'more' suggests that this is something that has happened previously, forcing the reader to acknowledge the relationship with Jane as a temporary stasis. Also, to begin the sentence with the conjunction 'And' marks wandering as the natural progression of a movement onwards, from a stage of stasis, in which Melanctha has gained knowledge. The full stop, between the two sentences, moreover, adds a textual pause, which mimics her movement from stasis to wandering.

Before she settles into her longest relationship with Jeff Campbell, we are told that Melanctha 'tried a great many men, in these days before she was really suited' (p. 76). 'Trying' incorporates the necessity of sexual experience and, again, Stein's choice of words hints obliquely at the nature of the experience. Added to this 'many men' is qualified by the adjective 'great' to reinforce the number of men she chooses to liaise with. Stein's language may be oblique, but its intentions are made clear through a subtle use of adjectives and adverbs, in specific contexts.

Melanctha's most settled relationship, and the longest of the text, is with Jefferson Campbell, the young 'mulatto' doctor. We recognise Jeff as a middle-class, non-church centred respectable: 'Jeff Campbell had been raised religious by his people but religion had never interested Jeff very much' (p. 78). Jeff represents, according to Drake and Cayton, a figure of 'racial uplift'. His mother and father, employed in lower class service positions to the Campbell family, have sought to extend and provide opportunities for their son so that he might take advantage of a better social class position: 'The Campbell family had been very good to him and helped him on with his ambition' (p. 78).

Jeff believes in education as a means of advancing one's social position in society. Such middle-class foundations instill in him a desire to be 'settled'. The narrator tells us, 'Dr. Campbell said that he wanted to work so that he could understand what troubled people, and not to just have excitements, and he believed you ought to love

your father and your mother and be regular in all your life' (p. 81). Jeff's insistence on 'regularity' in one's life is a practical approach to economic and emotional stability.

Melantha, on the other hand, cannot afford such an optimistic outlook on life. We learn that the material conditions of Melantha's existence are meagre. She lives in a two-story house with her mother, but 'they had not much furniture to fill it and some of the windows were broken and not mended' (p. 80). Unlike Jeff, Melantha does not have the economic means to provide her with a route into middle-class life. Indeed, Melantha's father's experience, and the experiences of the other male characters, highlights the lack of economic opportunities for working class men (Drake and Cayton, p. 583). For Melantha, despite an education, her wanderings also reflect a socio-economic base of deprivation.

While Melantha can pick up work on a temporary basis, there is a deep-seated sense of rootlessness to her life, a result of the dissociation between parent and child: 'Melantha Herbert was now, all alone, in Bridgepoint. She lived now with this coloured woman and now with that one, and she sewed, and sometimes she taught a little in a colored school as a substitute for some teacher. Melantha had now no home, nor any regular employment' (p. 76). Unlike Jeff, whose economic base is supported by constant work and family help, Melantha fails to secure any regular work, and familial conflict only adds to her personal sense of alienation. Her wanderings, then, are fuelled by parental conflict, but also by her need to understand the nature of sexual power.

These wanderings are determined by her relationship with her father. The violent and abusive relationship between Melantha and her father is represented obliquely in the text by sentences such as, 'But what could you expect when Melantha had such a brute of a black nigger father, and 'Melantha was always abusing her father and yet she was just like him, and really she admired him so much' (p. 78). Melantha's desire to be like her father, and to demonstrate masculine traits, links her lesbianism

and prostitution to Joan de Rivière's theory of femininity as masquerade.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, from a social standpoint, Melanctha's wanderings, in an attempt to imitate the freedom possessed by the father, reveal how economic dispossession is endemic for men of the lower classes, whilst providing a sort of liberating mobility for women. That Melanctha wants to be like her father reveals a desire for power that is male, yet socially unacceptable for women.

In her relationship with Jeff Campbell, Melanctha ceases to explore urban sites and confines her quest for knowledge to the places that she and Jeff inhabit. Jeff reinforces a view of living that is antithetical to everything Melanctha has ever understood. As he says to Melanctha,

You see Miss Melanctha [...] Instead of just working hard and caring about their working and living regular with their families and saving up all their money, so they will have some to bring up their children better [...] the coloured people just keep running around and perhaps drinking and doing everything bad they can ever think of (p. 85).

Jeff espouses the values of social mobility and he seeks to extend these aspirations to his fellow men and women. He distinguishes between regular living and having it 'like any animal that's low in the streets together' (p. 87). Jeff delivers a cultural belief that sex outside the constraints of marriage is the lowest form of sexual irregularity. His views reflect specific ideas about prostitution, outlined in 'Article VII on Prostitution', in *Nield*, which defines prostitution as a 'voluntary exchange of the passionate love of a spiritual and intellectual being, for the mere hunger and thirst of the beast' (p. 450). Jeff's views about women and passion, like those of William Sanger, in his study of prostitution, suggest that 'excitement' is not an innate characteristic of women; it is a desire that 'exists in a slumbering state until aroused by outside influence' (p. 489). Melanctha, on the other hand, fails to understand Jeff's excessive view of restraint and living regular. Her pursuit of life experiences is

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<sup>27</sup> Joan de Rivière, 'Womanliness as Masquerade' (1929), in *The Inner World of Joan Rivière, Collected Papers: 1920-1958*, ed. by Athol Hughes (London and New York: Karnac Books for the Melanie Klein Trust, 1998), pp. 90-101 (p. 95).

based on a desire to 'really feel things way down in you'(p. 86). Such an antithetical view of life and love is what sets Jeff and Melanctha apart and despite his remark that he might learn about women if he had a good teacher, he realises that what Melanctha represents will, inevitably, destroy his illusions of selfhood and his mastery of such illusions.

Initially, Melanctha finds some happiness in her relationship with Jeff and ceases to wander with other men. The time they spend together, reflected in a rural idyll, stands in stark contrast to the urban spaces that have thus far mesmerised Melanctha. The landscape of flowers and sunshine is simply metaphoric of Jeff's illusory landscape of human relations; he seeks perfection in everything and is unable to address the more complex nature of human emotion and feeling. Marianne DeKoven argues, in her article 'Darker and Lower Down', that 'Jeff's relation to nature provides a totally non-threatening arena for the release of his erotic feeling [...] But when this feeling is allowed to include Melancthan human eroticism, it becomes dangerous' (p. 83).

Jeff is forced to question his feelings for a woman who has, according to Jane Harden, entertained 'different men, white ones and blacks, Melanctha never was particular about things like that' (p. 101). Her biracial and bisexual liaisons contradict Jeff's heterosexual view of family and sexual relationships. Indeed, his knowledge of Melanctha's past infects his ability to see his relationship with her in clear terms: 'He felt very sick and his heart was very heavy, and Melanctha certainly did seem very ugly to him' (p. 101). The figurative ugliness of Melanctha stands as an emblem of the debasement and social malaise that the prostitute/lesbian was considered to represent.

As Jeff distances himself from Melanctha, she becomes an isolated figure of social ills, reaffirming, for Jeff, the need and necessity of regular living, honesty and goodness. His physical sickness is symbolic of his psychological pain of coming to terms with what Melanctha 'represents'. Unable to face 'spring fields' with Melanctha, he creates an excuse in order to avoid being with her (p. 104). Jeff's

aversion to Melanctha lies in his fear of sexual and moral contagion. DeKoven suggests that 'when moist natural fecundity is expanded to include or acknowledge the human component, it suddenly becomes smelly, dirty, "negro" and associated with wandering' ('Darker and Lower Down', pp. 83-84). To love Melanctha would also mean to address that in himself which he despises and represses:

He was silent, and this struggle lay there, strong, between them. 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 (p. 393).

Indeed, Jeff's initial vision of Melanctha is as a figure of all that is beautiful and true in the world. Her presence reaffirms his religious and cultic belief in an idealised vision of womanhood: "And sometimes then there comes out in you what is certainly a thing, like a real beauty" (p. 97). If being with Melanctha makes Jeff feel that he has real religion, then the revelation of Melanctha's past devalorises this ideal. The model figure of womanhood now becomes one whose 'eyes, pure and impressive mirrors are from this point on closed to every idealised and sublimated belief. *Beauty has become petrified*' (Gluckmann, p. 411).

While the modern world reveals itself to Jeff in a linear vision of history and time, the vision for Melanctha is one of emptiness and lack. Affected by what Melanctha's past reveals to Jeff, the process of disaffection and alienation becomes marked in his responses to the world and people around him: the world is no longer 'all green, and warm, and very lovely to him' (p. 109). Melanctha's insistence in exposing the ephemeral and fleeting nature of modern alliances turns Jeff's world of colour and harmony into one of pain and ugliness. He rejects Melanctha because she reveals to him the melancholic and futile nature of modern consciousness.

Jeff lives according to ideals based upon values of religion and beauty. Melanctha, on the other hand, simply acknowledges the emptiness of a belief in such archaic symbols. In an attempt to salvage some of the beliefs he had in goodness and regular

living, Jeff tells himself that 'he could work, and perhaps he would bring some real belief back into him about the beauty that he could not now any more see around him' (p. 137). Jeff advocates an idealistic vision of social cohesion and progress for the lower classes. Melanctha's status as *flâneuse*, undermines Jeff's vision and attests to its inadequacies. Firstly, not everyone, as Jeff might assume, is fortunate to have access to employment; secondly, Jeff's patriarchal view of women, collapses into a religious ideal of beauty, Baudelaire's neo-classical ideal. He fails to appreciate the dynamic nature of female desire and the possibilities of sexual pleasure outside heterosexual paradigms of gender relations. Whereas Melanctha's actions continually challenge the conventions of female propriety, Jeff's are always demarcated by these boundaries. Jeff's dis-ease with Melanctha is fuelled by a fear of contagion, literally and metaphorically: 'He felt very sick and his heart was very heavy, and Melanctha certainly did seem very ugly to him' (p. 101).

### The Fallen Woman and Nineteenth-Century Endings

If, as I have suggested, Melanctha is a figure of moral contagion, like the figure of the prostitute, then before moving on to Melanctha's final relationship, I would like to show how Stein's text must be considered in light of traditional representations of nineteenth-century literature and the plight of the fallen woman. Christine Buci-Gluckmann's statement that in the figure of the prostitute, beauty has become *petrified* becomes significant. The term '*petrified*' links the gaze of the woman and, in this case her beauty, to the figure of Medusa who could, literally, turn men into stone. The castrating figure of the prostitute, literally petrifying the male body, becomes, in Elisabeth Bronfen's groundbreaking analysis of the feminine and death, an example of a female sexual other, whose excesses must be removed from the text.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I refer specifically to chapter nine, 'Sacrificing Extremity', pp. 181-204. Bronfen's analysis of Prosper Mérimée's novel *Carmen* (1845) provided much of the thought about the nature of Melanctha's death and her relationship with Jeff.

Bronfen's argument in Chapter Nine of her book is that the death of the female body is necessary for the preservation of existing cultural norms:

I will now turn to representations involving a social sacrifice of the feminine body where the death of a beautiful woman emerges as the requirement for a preservation of existing cultural norms and values of their regenerative modification. Here feminine death serves as the site at which cultural norms can be debated (p. 181).

Whilst it is not my intention to discuss her analysis at length, the proposition about the relationship between Carmen and her lover, José, in Prosper Merimee's novella, *Carmen* (1845), provides a sharp insight into the dynamics of the relationship between Melanctha and Jeff, and helps us to better understand what Melanctha, as a *flâneuse* represents, and why Stein chooses to end her story with death.

Bronfen takes Merimee's novella as an example of a text in which the myth of woman as Other exists and signals Carmen as a figure of archaic desire whose 'fascinating sensuality and passion [...] is disruptive of masculine order, reason and control' (p. 183). Like Carmen, Melanctha is also linked to the disruption of masculine control. Bronfen continues: 'The feminine body produces an irritation in her lover that can move either in the direction of masochistic self-destruction or a sadistic violence directed outward. Both forms, as Freud has argued, can be understood as traces of the death drive on the psychic apparatus' (p. 184).

Melanctha's tainted sexuality causes Jeff to respond masochistically to the world and people around him: 'And so Jeff Campbell went on with this dull and sodden, heavy, quiet always in him, and he never seemed to be able to have any feeling' (pp. 137-138). Melanctha, in her role as *flâneuse*, is the carrier of this textual and emotional disruption within the order of the narrative.

In her analysis of the relationship between Carmen and José, Bronfen states that 'In their incompatible conception of love, the general opposition between Carmen's desire for mobility and volatility on the one hand, and José's desire for permanence and univocal identity on the other, takes on a fatal aspect' (p. 185). Indeed, the very

polarity between movement and rest, between multivocal and univocal identity is the basis of the contradiction at the heart of the relationship between Melanctha and Jeff. Despite her desire for rest, Melanctha cannot prevent herself from actively seeking movement. Moreover, her transitory alliances and the inability to commit to the formal properties of a conventional relationship, link her prostitution and role as *flâneuse* to the modern and death.

Although the nature of Melanctha's sexual encounters is never described, it is suggested that she understands the emptiness of the sexual act and that the encounter is simply a meeting of strangers whose isolation within the social mechanism unites them. There is nothing meaningful about the meetings; they are simply instances of human frailty and need. In the early days of Melanctha's wanderings, Stein writes, 'It was a wonderful experience this safety of Melanctha in these days of her attempted learning. Melanctha herself did not feel the wonder, she only knew that for her it had no real value' (p. 68).

This is the knowledge that makes Melanctha so blue, so blue that she could kill herself. The meeting with the temporary lover in order to learn is simply a game in which both participants understand the rules. Melanctha is, like Baudelaire's courtesan, in 'The Painter of Modern Life', a 'creature of show', a spectacle of desire to be consumed and to consume, without ever having to challenge the nature of the exchange (p. 36). Jeff, on the other hand, depends upon an idea of meaning that confirms the connection between signifier and signified. Beauty must reveal a truth, an inherent wholeness about Melanctha: 'He could not use any way now to reach inside her to find if she was true in her loving' (p. 124).

Unfortunately, Melanctha only highlights his illusory beliefs and becomes a deceptive mirror, more disruptive than supportive of his illusion of wholeness (p. 186).<sup>29</sup> Bronfen goes on to add that Carmen, and as I see it, Melanctha, 'functions not as a signifier for his possession but instead for the fact that he is dispossessed of a secure and eternal being. In this sense she becomes the signifier of ambiguity because

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<sup>29</sup> Bronfen makes this comment about José.



she is positioned between several signified masculine self-images and, in this in-betweenness, she also articulates her autonomous desire' (p. 186). Melanctha, too, is positioned between several images of masculinity, all of which she desires as the key to an autonomous status. Significantly, in her relationships with her father and with Jeff Campbell, Melanctha seems to be a castrating figure, whose desire cannot be controlled and who incites a loss of dependency in her liaisons.

The transition between Jeff Campbell and Jem Richards, her final lover, is marked by a brief period of wandering. Frustrated by her relationship with Jeff, Melanctha turns to brief liaisons with other men in order to fulfill her emotional needs. Melanctha's desire for emotional and sexual gratification is suggested by her 'need [...] to begin to look for others' (p. 130). Furthermore, the distinction between the eternal feminine and the prostitute's contingent modernity is illustrated in Melanctha's relationship with Rose, which occurs before her wanderings with Jem Richards. When they wander together, the narrator makes it clear that Rose's wanderings are distinct from those of Melanctha. We are told that 'Rose always knew very well in herself what was the right way to do when you wandered' (p. 142). Unlike Rose, who 'always knew' what she wanted and how to behave in order to get it, Melanctha can only 'find new ways to be in trouble' (p. 62).

When she meets Jem Richards, Melanctha is wandering with a white man (p. 154), but she is drawn to Jem because he represents power and success: 'He knew how to win out, and always all her life Melanctha Herbert loved successful power' (p. 154). Jem is a gambler and earns his living by fine horses and betting. Interestingly gambling was very much associated with the modern consciousness and the monotony of existence. In 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Benjamin writes:

The jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called *coup* in a game of chance. The manipulation of the worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding operation for the very reason that it is its exact repetition. Since each operation at the machine is just as screened off from the preceding operation as a *coup* in a game of chance is from the one that preceded it, the

drudgery of the labourer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler. The work of both is equally devoid of substance.<sup>30</sup>

Jem Richards is a truly modern figure; his gambling work, as Benjamin suggests, is a response to the consciousness of the modern. Gambling is emptied of meaning and Jem, like other gamblers, is an automaton, a character who has ‘completely liquidated [...] memories’ in order to live for the moment, seized body and soul by an emotion (p. 174). The desire to gamble, continues Benjamin, is one more aspect of the “‘unsettled lives that are lived in the basements of a large city’” (p. 174). In the same way that Melanctha endlessly repeats the masochistic nature of her relationship with her father in all of her relationships, so too does Jem, who participates in an endless game of repetition in an attempt to win and to triumph over the meaninglessness of his existence. Gambling becomes a sort of narcotic, a means of trying to cheat oneself of the experience of nothingness and of living life in all its possibilities in one moment or one *coup*.

Melanctha’s relationship with Jem, as with her other relationships, is doomed to failure for two reasons. Firstly, Jem Richards is a man whose activities move him from place to place and when his fortunes change, he is unable to sustain any relationship. Secondly, Melanctha’s desires for security and marriage are alien to Jem’s world: ‘Sometimes Jem talked as if he wanted to go off on a trip somewhere and try some other place for luck with his betting. Jem Richards never talked as if he wanted to take Melanctha with him’ (p. 158). The places that had once provided Melanctha with the satisfaction and spectacle of the modern no longer have the same impact on her desire to know. Her one obsession in her relationship with Jem is marriage. Almost reaffirming the conventional values espoused by Jeff, Melanctha’s desire seems exhausted in this last relationship.

Indeed, Melanctha becomes almost servile and hysterical in her desire for permanence in the form of marriage: ‘She was mad and foolish in the joy she had

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<sup>30</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, 2nd edn (London: Fontana, 1992), pp 152-196 (p. 173).

there' (p. 155). It seems that Stein chooses to weaken the narrative trajectory of Melanctha's story as it propels itself to an ending. In earlier meetings with male figures, Melanctha maintained an emotional independence in order to free herself from the constraints of heterosexual relationships; however, in her relationship with Jem, she reflects a dwindling inability to preserve any sort of independence or energy.

Once rejected by Jem, Melanctha is unable to sustain any interest or motivation in the world around her. Depleted emotionally and physically, she acknowledges the emptiness of her existence and the lack of attained fulfilment: 'Often Jem would talk so as to make Melanctha almost certain that he never any more wanted to have her. Then Melanctha would get very blue, and she would say to Rose, sure she would kill herself, for that certainly was the best way she could do' (p. 161). Stein moves Melanctha out of the public spaces associated with sexual knowledge, to a domestic sphere where Melanctha's desire has saturated itself. That she ends her days, a consumptive, dying in a home, is perhaps indicative of the problems Stein faced in trying to approach the question of public spaces and female desire.

Melanctha is an exemplary *flâneuse* who revels in the arbitrary nature of the modern, as she knows it. In her early quests for knowledge, Melanctha is keen to enjoy the freedom men have access to in public spaces. People like Jeff frown upon her ambulatory experiences because they deconstruct a belief in a linear and monolithic approach to time and experience. Melanctha, through her encounters, suggests that any meaning to be had is transitory and incommunicable: therein lies the truth of the modern experience.

On the one hand, traditional associations of history, time and narrative experience are represented, through Jeff, in his insistence on a unilinear viewpoint; on the other, the modern, figured in Melanctha, becomes a site of semantic disruption. It is fitting that Stein never reveals what it is that Melanctha learns in these public spaces and through the approximate language we are kept at a distance from the spectacle of Melanctha's encounters. In fact, the meaning of the modern is the excess of pleasure to be had. Such excess, like the pleasures of gambling, is an experience of the

moment without substance. Melanctha's sense of feeling blue suggests a deep understanding of the nature of modern life, intensified by the fleeting nature of her encounters. Like the narcotic effect of gambling, Melanctha's pursuit of pleasure eventually depletes itself and results in a desperate attempt to be accepted into Bridgepoint society through marriage. When this fails, the only option left to Melanctha is death: there is nowhere else to go.

Melanctha's ending, like that of many fallen women in nineteenth and early twentieth-century novels, is, as I have suggested in Chapter One, indicative of Stein's inability to resolve the complex issue of female desire within the text. Melanctha forces the text to speak, in a vague manner, the 'unspeakable' pleasures of female sexuality; yet, such forbidden pleasure must be punished. As Epstein-Nord states: 'Tainted female sexuality becomes a locus of social disruption and must be purged' (p. 360). It is almost as if Melanctha's sexual excesses feed upon her emotional and social body. She is eaten away by her own literal and figurative dis-ease and dies a poor consumptive: 'They sent her where she would be taken care of, a home for poor consumptives, and there Melanctha stayed until she died' (p. 167).

In 'Melanctha,' the death of the female protagonist reinforces Bronfen's assertion that the death of the feminine is necessary for the survival and continuance of the social order (male). Melanctha's dangerous presence within the textual and social body of Bridgepoint society designates the space where Stein articulates an anxiety about female sexual desire (her own desire). Through Melanctha, Stein exteriorises a personal and social anxiety about transgressive female desire in the form of the prostitute and the lesbian.

Furthermore, the conflict isn't simply between conventional and unconventional forms of desire, but the consequences of losing control of all normative forms of desire. Melanctha's death is necessary in order to enable the triumph of order and univocal identity over volatility, fickleness and duplicity (Bronfen, p. 187). Jeff constantly suggests that he is unable to empathise with Melanctha's duplicitous self: "Melanctha, which is the way that is you really, when you are alone and real, and all

honest”” (p. 98). Jeff’s ideas about the wholeness of selfhood are simply illusions that Melanctha fully understands and cannot accept. Her passion for life is destroyed because in every relationship, the masculine order is unable to sanction or comprehend what it is she represents, other than as a symbol of ill repute and a threat to the social fabric.

In seeking from Jem the stability of marriage, Melanctha has already died: she has been subsumed by a system that insists on ‘proper conduct’ in order for entrance into a community. Melanctha’s death is Stein’s way of bringing under control an Otherness which, explains Bronfen, ‘functions as a force disruptive of the security of sameness, of clear oppositions and stable identities’ (p. 189). Her death ‘stabilises the drifting desire she arouses in her lover, but also serves to stabilise her function as a subversive sign, as she turns the sign of the subversive so that a univocality of culture and hierarchical coherence based on binary oppositions can again be re-established’ (Bronfen, p. 189).

In conforming to traditional nineteenth-century resolutions for her character, Stein shows how Melanctha’s role as *flâneuse* serves as a symbol for the ‘Otherness’ of female desire. This desire is defeated by the agency of patriarchy in the text, and by the hand of her author who, within the context of this story and nineteenth-century literary conventions, must apply the appropriate fate to her heroine.

## Chapter Four : 'Melanctha' and Race

In this final chapter I will argue that Stein's racist representation of the black community of Baltimore challenges our critical response to her modernism and feminism, outlined in Chapters One, Two and Three. If, as she suggests, 'Melanctha' was her route into the twentieth century, then her representation of race is both flawed and problematic. It is flawed because of her stereotypically racist depiction of the black community of Baltimore, and because, in an attempt to inscribe a sexual otherness which is liberating for women, she simply reinscribes a stereotype that equates black female sexuality with a moral promiscuity. So why, I ask myself, given her obvious racist depictions of black life, would Nella Larsen, in 1928, praise Stein's text for catching 'the spirit of this race of mine' (*FF*, p.216) and Richard Wright, in *I Wish I'd Written That* (1946), consider 'Melanctha' 'the first realistic treatment of Negro life' (p. 254)? These comments, written by African-American contemporaries of Stein, seem to suggest a deference to Stein's literary status among Harlem Renaissance writers. Stein's novella is not the first serious treatment of black life. In fact, as the proliferation of critical studies on the matter show, there is a whole tradition of writing by African-American writers that represents the reality of black life far better than Stein. Many African-American writers may have employed the same stereotypes as Stein but, as Houston Baker and other critics acknowledge, these stereotypes were a means of both colluding with and challenging the Anglo-American belief in the inferiority of the black man and woman.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For critical works on narrative strategies in African-American literature, see Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial Self"* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1987) and *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1988). See also, Elizabeth Genovese-Fox, 'To Write Myself: The Autobiographies of Afro-American Women', pp. 161-180, and Hortense J. Spillers, 'A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love', pp. 181-207, both found in *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, ed. by Shari Benstock. Both writers deal with the narrative strategies of African-American women in their attempt to represent themselves. Genovese provides an interesting article on the strategies Harriet Jacobs both uses and subverts in order to present herself to a white female audience. Spillers looks at Zora Neale Hurston's attempt to rewrite the self beyond the bounds of biography.

Given these comments, is it possible to agree with either Larsen or Wright about Stein's representation of black life? On the one hand, Stein follows a tradition of literature, by Anglo- and African-American writers, in which black men and women are represented across a range of images, none of them designed to represent his or her humanity, or individuality. These images, ranging from the child to the savage,<sup>2</sup> represent the black man and woman as 'a formula [rather] than a human being'.<sup>3</sup>

The formulaic aspect of Stein's text depends on her use of the 'tragic mulatto' stereotype.<sup>4</sup> This stereotype has a long history and 'Melanctha', in many respects,

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this tradition, see Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 1-30, Houston A. Baker, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Catherine Juanita Starke, *Black Portraiture in American Fiction: Stock Characters, Archetypes and Individuals* (New York and London: Basic Books Inc., 1971); Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" Self* (1987) and *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, 1988; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1969) and Sterling Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction* (New York: Kemmikat Press, Inc., 1937).

<sup>3</sup> Alain Locke, ed., 'The New Negro' in *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), pp. 3-16 (p. 3). Further references to individual essays in this work will be given after quotations in the text.

<sup>4</sup> The stereotype of the 'mulatto' was simultaneously represented in literature and scientific discourse as incapable of assimilation into society because of his/her mixed origins. These images were fueled by scientific debates about evolution and the progress of the races in the period. Nathaniel Southgate Shaler (1841-1906), a geologist and palaeontologist, carried out extensive research into the characteristics of different races. Shaler believed that no matter how much contact the African had with white civilization, he/she would inevitably revert to 'savage' ways. In an article in *Atlantic Monthly* LXVI (July 1890) pp. 36-45, Shaler writes, 'This savage heritage was in the blood of the black man, and it made him not only inferior to the white race, but an alien, unassimilable element in American society' (Mencke, *Mulattoes and Race Mixture: American Attitudes and Images, 1865-1918*, (Massachusetts: UMI Research Press, p. 42). Josiah C. Nott, a pre-Darwinian polygenist, wrote that the 'adulteration' of the white race through miscegenation would result in the retrogression of the race [*Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researches, based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and Upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History* (London: Truber & Co., 1854), p. 405]. The 'mulatto', according to John G. Mencke, represented the visible presence of 'mixing which had long gone on in the shadows of black/white relations', *Mulattoes and Race Mixture: American Attitudes and Images, 1865-1918*, p. x. Miscegenation, which was proclaimed illegal in Maryland and Virginia, as early as 1660, demonstrated an American anxiety about mixed-race children, which was one borne of an acknowledgement that the white American male had no control over his libido. According to Winthrop D. Jordan, in *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, the 'mulatto' figure provided 'evidence that sheer animal sex was governing the American destiny and the great experiment in the wilderness had failed to maintain the social and personal restraints which were the hallmarks and the very stuff of civilization' (p. 543). The 'mulatto' stereotype can be found in literature of the period through figures such as Cassy, the octoroon in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly*, published in 1852; Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, 1905, and in *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, 1900. Pauline

simply reinforces this tradition. Melanctha's mixed-race parentage acts as a symbol for her alienation from society, and her 'seemingly irrational moody conduct' has been 'viewed as a function of the racial disharmony of the mulatto.'<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Stein's depiction of certain characters, Jeff Campbell, for example, an educated black man, becomes at times farcical. Almost to the point of caricature, Jeff is presented simplistically, as someone who cannot articulate his feelings clearly. In his relationship with Melanctha, Jeff is always at pains to understand her: "Miss Melanctha I am a very quiet, slow minded kind of fellow, and I am never sure I know just exactly what you mean by all that you are always saying to me" (p. 93). To suggest that Jeff would speak like this is surely nonsense. Admittedly, characters' speech is marked by Stein's insistence on repetition, simplistic diction and unusual syntax in order to represent 'how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally you could hear it rise and fall' (*The Gradual Making of Americans*, p. 243). Stylistically, then, her use of language has nothing to do with trying to represent black dialect as it was spoken at the time. How serious can her treatment of black life be when she consciously fails to address variation in language use?

In the *Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Douglass recounts his apostrophe to the moving ships on the Chesapeake Bay: 'You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave' (p. 106). Whilst appreciating that Stein and Douglass have different literary agendas, Douglass, in his apostrophe to the ships, marks his servitude, and yet

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Hopkins, the author, describes a scene in which the racial ancestry of Grace Montfort is decided over by two overseers, Bill Sampson and Hank Davis. In their discussion, they observe "thet thet ar female's got a black streak in her somewhar" (p. 41). Grace's mixed blood is reason enough for these two men to submit her to a series of cruel whippings, which act symbolically of as an exteriorization of their sexual desires to possess Grace. Unable to live with the degradation and pursued by Anson Pollock, Grace commits suicide rather than live with the consequences of her position. Hopkins, a black woman, like Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, chooses the plot of the sentimental novel in order to enter into the political debate about race.

<sup>5</sup> Judith R. Berzon, *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 64.



inserts his significance and his presence in this moving moment; Stein, on the other hand, represents Jeff Campbell as a man simplistically childish. In one scene with Melanctha, Jeff is represented idiotically: ““You can’t say ever, Melanctha, now can you, I ain’t a real good boy to be always studying to be learning to be real bright, just like my teacher”” (p. 113). The presentation of Jeff as an educated, college-trained doctor is undermined by the emotional childishness of this speech.

The representation of characters such as Jeff Campbell, and the black community of Baltimore, demonstrates Stein’s lack of knowledge about African Americans and her belief in racial stereotypes. Houston Baker, in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, gives pertinent examples of writers in the white literary canon who appropriate the sounds of the minstrel mask in order to present their sounds or words as representative of black speech. He adds that this tradition of ‘white dada’ is found in Fennimore Cooper’s *Satanstoe* (1845), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894) (pp. 22-24). Moreover, the white writer’s insistence on the primitivism, sensuality and child-like simplicity of the black community is, according to Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘more invidious than outright bigotry’ (p. 215). She goes on to argue that ‘the projection of the sexual and the irrational onto blacks continued to deny full humanity and autonomy to black artists’ (p. 215).

The stereotype of the ‘tragic mulatta’ is just one of the many stereotypes about black women discussed in recent critical works on the study of black women’s history,<sup>6</sup> and the use of this stereotype in ‘Melanctha’ has implications for Stein’s

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the subject, see Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985); *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. by Carole S. Vance, (Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); Calvin C. Hernton, *Sex and Racism* (London, Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1965); bell hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1981); “Race,” *Writing, and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985); Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, (1985); Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America* (New York: Vintage Press, 1973)

representation of black female sexuality and the discourse of sexual morality inscribed by it.<sup>7</sup> In Chapter Three, I argued that Stein's use of Melanctha as a 'street walker' was an attempt to inscribe positively into the text a radical and subversive female desire. However, in this chapter, the trope of the 'tragic mulatta' forces to the surface of the text the problem of a sexual morality that, in Chapter Three, I saw as challenging and liberatory. In this chapter, I will argue that an analysis of Stein's use of race changes the perspective of such issues: the equation of Melanctha's sexual promiscuity and race becomes simply another stereotype designed to reveal the basic immorality of black people.

In order to assess this issue of the 'tragic mulatta' and sexual morality, I will divide the chapter into three sections: section one provides an analysis of 'Melanctha' against other Anglo-American and African-American texts, specifically Harriet Jacobs's, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; section two takes my analysis into the twentieth century, and explores comparisons between Stein's text and Nella Larsen's *Passing*; section three will bring these analyses together in order to assess the significance of Stein's representation of race.

The first section, 'Racial Stereotyping and the Trope of the 'tragic mulatta' will engage in a discussion of Stein's 'Melanctha' against other texts by Anglo-and

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and Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> For black women of the nineteenth and early twentieth century a double standard existed when it came to sexuality; in fact, the discourse of sexuality was a particularly fraught one. The institution of chattel slavery meant that black sexuality emerged as a concomitant variable of race; racism was both racialized and sexualized. The myth of the black woman's licentiousness meant that writers had to negotiate and resist the social, cultural and literary stereotypes associated with the proclivity of the black woman's sexual appetite. Engendered by race relations in the South, the black woman came to embody a sexuality that was bestial and unlawful. She was a commodity for procreation and so her flesh was considered property. The white men and women of the South protected the myth of white womanhood, by displacing onto the body of the black slave all the fear, guilt and anxiety associated with their own sexuality. The black woman, and for that matter, man, explains Hortense Spillers, in 'Interstices: A Small Drama of Words', in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. by Carole S. Vance, pp. 73-99, 'mirrored for society what a human being was not'. Her sexuality became transformed into a myth of illicitness and so black women were forced to construct a sexual self, based on a very different set of criteria from white women. Black women writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Pauline Hopkins and Frances E. W. Harper wrote in order to dispel and deconstruct these myths by presenting women who risk everything in order to preserve the very virtues white women took for granted. In *Contending Forces*, Hopkins describes the fate of grace Montfort, and Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, describes her resistance to the advances of her slave master, Dr. Flint.

African-American writers, demonstrating how she reproduces racist stereotypes of the period. I will focus my comparison on *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861) and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845).<sup>8</sup> In order to supplement this Anglo and African-American tradition, I will make passing references to Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly* (1852), and Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905).<sup>9</sup>

Douglass's text is, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr., in *Figures in Black*, representative of a tradition of slave narrative in which 'the slave's search for his humanity' is also the search for 'his text, the text that will come to stand for his life in the form of an autobiography' (p. 90). This statement, I believe, applies equally to the slave narrative of Jacobs and her attempt to write her history. In *The Journey Back: Issues In Black Literature and Criticism*, Houston A. Baker

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<sup>8</sup> Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (Boston: Published by Herself, 1861; repr. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), with an introduction by Valerie Smith. This text will be referred to hereafter as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and cited parenthetically in the text. Oxford University Press in collaboration with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture has begun publishing works of African-American women, which have remained, until recently, buried in obscurity. Originally, Jacobs did not intend to write the narrative herself. She asked her friend, Amy Post, an abolitionist, if she would approach Harriet Beecher Stowe in helping her produce a dictated narrative. Firstly, Jacobs was horrified when Stowe sent the manuscript to Mrs. Cornelia Grinnell Willis, Jacobs's employer for verification. Moreover, and to Jacobs's horror, Stowe, upon verification, planned to use Jacobs's *Incidents* in the *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Jacobs had never revealed her sexual history to Mrs. Willis and she felt betrayed by Stowe. Jacobs's daughter, Louisa, copied the manuscript, standardizing her mother's spellings and punctuation. Lydia Maria Childs, a literary editor, substantiated the narrative and found it a publisher. Unfortunately the publishers went bankrupt but Jacobs eventually bought the plates for her narrative and had it published. These accounts of the publication can be found in the introduction to Jean Fagan Yellin's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. xxi-xxiii. Frederick Douglass's narrative, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, was first published by the Anti-Slavery Office of America in 1845, republished in the Penguin American Library in 1982, and reprinted for Penguin Classics in 1986. References will refer to the Penguin Classics edition, ed. by Houston A. Baker.

<sup>9</sup> Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (Boston, Massachusetts: The Colored Co-operative Publishing Co., 1900); Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly*, ed. by Ann Douglas (New York: Penguin Books, 1981-85; repr. 1986); Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (London: W. M. Heinemann, 1905). All of these texts will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

writes that '*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, one of the finest black American slave narratives, serves to illustrate the black autobiographer's quest for being' (p. 32). In her introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, Jean Fagan Yellin writes, 'Jacobs's achievement was the transformation of herself into a literary subject in and through the creation of her narrator, Linda Brent' (pp. xv-xvi). Indeed, the comparison between Stein's 'Melanctha' and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* will allow us to see how each writer represents the relationship between female self, gender and social condition.

In the second section of this chapter, 'Melanctha and *Passing*', the discussion will focus on Stein's use of the racial mask, as a means of 'Signifying' her own sexual difference. This issue of race has already been explored by Michael North and Marianne DeKoven, who argue that Stein's use of the racial mask comes at a time of modernism's growing interest in African sculpture and masks. However, what I want to explore is the way in which Melanctha's "in-between-ness", racially, becomes a metaphor for a space in which, according to Blackmer, Stein and Larsen, 'explore the central role that racial visibility and invisibility play in establishing gender roles and sexual identities for black and white women alike' (p. 233). As a 'mulatto' character, Melanctha's racial origins open a space "in-between" the wanderings of her 'pale yellow, sweet-appearing mother' and her 'black coarse father' (p. 63). This space, discussed in Chapter One, enabled Stein to challenge the conventional narrative modes of representation for women and discourses of female desire. This chapter addresses the uses to which she puts her Africanist persona, and asks what happens when female sexuality is complicated by the inscription of race.

With this in mind, and using the work of Henry Gates Jr. and Houston Baker Jr., my second reading of 'Melanctha' will look at the operation of the mask in this text. Moreover, in order to provide a more explicit analysis of Stein's use of the racial mask and its significance for her modernism, I will compare

‘Melanctha’ with Nella Larsen’s novella *Passing* (1929). Corinne E. Blackmer has already highlighted the similarities between the two, but I believe that the significance of Stein’s use of masking can only be fully understood if we also acknowledge the limitations of this masking. As I said earlier, the trope of the ‘tragic mulatta’ confines Stein’s character to a narrative history in which her sexual ‘wanderings’ are reduced to the stereotype of the sexual depravity of the race.

Does the mask, then, serve to delimit the sexual stereotype or does it reinforce it? These are the problems of the text, which need to be addressed. What distinction should we make between a writer like Larsen, who ‘literally inhabited the mask of racial difference’, and Stein, who used the mask as ‘an artistic vehicle’? (Blackmer, p. 263). These questions are central to an understanding of Stein’s modernism and sense of self. In the third and final section of this chapter, ‘Stein’s Modernism and the Issue of Race’, I will bring together these readings of Stein’s representation of race in order to assess how they work against one another, and the consequences of this for Stein’s modernism.

### **Racial stereotyping and the trope of the ‘tragic mulatta’**

The composition of ‘Melanctha’, as I mentioned in my introduction, did not derive from any real knowledge that Stein had of African Americans or their lives. Her time spent at Johns Hopkins as a medical student gave her the brief opportunity of delivering babies in the black quarter of Baltimore but did little for her knowledge and understanding of black life. In other words, at an emotional and critical distance from the lives of African Americans, Stein composed her story, relying on the stereotypes of an Anglo-American tradition to provide descriptions of the black community of Baltimore.

My introduction highlights the critical reception of ‘Melanctha’, and responses to the story’s racism. Although Wyndham Lewis berates Stein’s text for ‘its sodden lustreless heaping up of sheer meaningless material’ (p. 74), adding that

her representation of the 'life of a poor negress' is given, 'not in the negress's own words', but in Stein's 'own manner' (p. 74), he is not interested in the specifics of black female sexuality, only in the ways in which Stein's story contributes to 'the present mass democracy' (p. 78). Other critics, such as Francis Russell and Milton H. Cohen, questioned Stein's racial stereotypes, arguing that this story could not possibly represent the first serious treatment of 'the Negro in American in literature' because Gertrude Stein 'knew nothing about Negroes' (Russell, p. 73). The insights of these early critics are important but, significantly, they tend to skirt the issue of Melanctha's sexuality, focusing, instead, on Stein's use of language. It is only Sonia Saldivar-Hull, I believe, who has had the foresight to attack Stein for her blatant racism and classism, suggesting that we must re-evaluate her feminism and place in the canon, in light of such racism (pp. 187-88).

In order to provide a more telling analysis of the way in which Stein's use of race works to stereotype black female sexuality as aberrant, it is important to compare specific sections of her story with Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, because there are indeed many pertinent parallels, it seems, to me, to be made between these two stories, parallels located at the level of form and content. As Valerie Smith says in her introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs's 'unique cultural experience requires her to question the assumptions of literary conventions' (pp. xxxvii-xxxviii). Hazel V. Carby usefully adds that Jacobs 'used the material circumstances of her life to critique conventional standards of female behaviour and to question their relevance and applicability to the experience of black women' (p. 47). In both cases, these critics rightly point out Jacobs's intent to question and critique, a task that Stein, too, was engaged in. Whereas Jacobs makes it clear in her preface, that her intention is to 'arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse' (Preface by the Author, p. 6), Stein makes no political claims to the significance of her work.

Jacobs's intended audience is white middle-class women of the North, and her effort in writing is to make them question the ideological and social structures which they perpetuate, if not condone. Gertrude Stein claimed that she never wrote for an intended audience: 'I am writing for myself and strangers' (*The Making of Americans*, p. 261) but was always concerned about her literary reception.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, these two women, each in their own way, challenge ideological narratives which reflect specific structures of conventional female experience. Marginality, because of race and/or sex, forces both writers to develop narrative strategies with which to relate their experiences. The ways in which they both do this is in many respects similar but their treatment of female sexuality separates the two writers. Jacobs transforms the material of a 'tragic mulatta' into the story of a woman who triumphs over her material circumstances and the expectations of the white race towards her. Melanctha's story is more complicit in its adherence to the conventions of plot associated with the 'tragic mulatta'. Unable to determine the right plot of marriage for herself, she spends the novel wandering from one relationship to another, 'complex with desire' (p. 67). Her wanderings, figurative detours from the 'right' course of marriage, signify a sexual deviancy associated with fictional representations of black women. In contrast, for black women, like Jacobs, suggests Carby, the task of writing was designed to 'rescue their bodies from a persistent association with illicit sexuality', which had its roots in the slave system (p. 32). For Stein, I will go on to argue, it was, I think, this very illicitness that enabled her to transcribe her own 'deviancy' at the expense of perpetuating a racial and sexual stereotype.

The word 'escape' structures these texts literally and metaphorically. Literally, Linda's story moves forward in time to represent her journey from bondage to freedom. Throughout the text, however, her literal escapes are also used

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<sup>10</sup> I think it is important to recognise that Stein, whilst insisting that her writing was never intended for a specific audience, was always worried about her reception. Indeed, Leo Stein in *Journey into the Self* (p. 52), talks about Stein's 'thirst[s] for *gloire*.' However, Leo is not perhaps the most reliable commentator on Stein's writings due to their falling out and his departure from Rue de Fleurus.

figuratively as a means by which she can comment on the brutality of slavery and the concomitant misery and shame brought to bear on female slave children: 'The poor black woman had but the one child, whose eyes she saw closing in death, while she thanked God for taking her away from the greater bitterness of life' (p. 24). The spaces that Linda occupies in the text are also the places from which Jacobs resists stereotypical definitions of black womanhood. The spaces that Melanctha occupies also enable her to question the definitions of female propriety by insisting on a woman's right to examine and negotiate heterosexual and lesbian relationships. However, in this case, the sexual deviancy, and illicit sexuality, challenged by Jacobs through Linda, become in Stein's text, a means of reinforcing this equation.

Both Melanctha and Linda are 'mulattas', and move between Anglo-and African-American worlds. Linda's text recounts the interrelationships between four generations of her grandmother's family and that of their masters. She relies on the support of her family but also her grandmother's white friends who provide support for Linda and hide her when she most needs protection. Melanctha also wanders between these two worlds but her kinship ties are more problematic, unlike Linda who, despite losing her mother at a young age, shows how 'racist practices are gender-specific and sexual exploitation racialized' (Carby, p. 53). Linda loses her mother at the age of six but finds comfort in the house of her mother's foster-sister, under whose care she never suffers. Although she can never consider this woman as a mother, she does enjoy the freedom of 'free-born white child' (p.14).

Melanctha's mixed-race parentage and her 'complicated disillusion' (p. 62), reflect the literary stereotype of the 'tragic mulatta'. According to John G. Mencke, the 'mulatto' was often represented as 'a victim of an incompatible heritage, which left him out of joint with basic race patterns' (p. 56). Melanctha feels no sympathy or love for her mother, from whom she inherits her 'wandering' ways, or her father, even though she loves 'very well the power in herself that



came through him' (p. 63). The inability to reconcile these traits in her personality is mirrored by the fact that Melanctha 'was always seeking peace and quiet, and she could always only find new ways to get excited' (p. 64). Such contradictory impulses suggest that Melanctha is the 'tragic mulatta' doomed to live out cultural and literary stereotypes.

The desire that motivates Linda's narrative is one of emotional and physical triumph; she determines, in the face of her master's power, 'never to be conquered' (p. 31). Her resistance to institutionalized sexism – that is patriarchy, since slavery is a "patriarchal institution" (p. 14), - serves to highlight the fact that the black female slave was doubly oppressed. Linda's resistance to perceptions of black women in the system of slavery is an attempt to rewrite a black identity that had been, according to bell hooks, 'socialized out of existence' (p. 7). As Linda states, 'My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each' (p. 131). Melanctha's narrative is not determined in the same way as Linda's. Whereas Linda's resistance is against all forms of oppression, sexual and emotional, Melanctha is driven by the inability to reconcile her desires. Whereas Linda knows exactly what she wants, that is, freedom, or the right to inhabit the sphere of womanhood and motherhood from which her experience as a female slave excludes her, Melanctha finds it hard to make her 'wants and what she had, agree' (p. 62). Linda is driven by her determination not to be conquered, a determination that inscribes her specifically black female experience against the Law-of-the-Father; Melanctha's power, on the other hand, is inscribed very much by the Law-of-the-Father: she hates her 'black father, but she loved very well the power in herself that came through him' (p. 63). The power that Melanctha associates with her father, is a sexual power but also one associated with violence. It is here, in her inscription of Melanctha's desire for power, that Stein begins her uncritical association of Melanctha's sexual wanderings with a 'primitive' and 'virile' black sexuality.

The adjectival insistence on James Herbert as 'powerful,' 'brutal,' 'virile' and 'serious', equates James Herbert's sexuality and, by extension, Melanctha's, with a stereotypical animalism. In *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, Winthrop D. Jordan writes that Americans 'knew perfectly well that Negroes were men, yet they frequently described the Africans as "brutish" or "bestial" or "beastly."' The hideous tortures, the cannibalism, the rapacious warfare [...] seemed to somehow place the Negro among the beasts' (p. 28). Melanctha's desire to 'hav[e] it like any animal that's low in the streets together' reveals Stein's stereotypical thinking about the sexual morality of black people (p. 87). Indeed, her stereotyping swings between two extremes: either the black man/woman represents a primitive sensuality or he/she behaves in a child-like way. These stereotypical representations of black men or women can also be found in Harriet Beecher-Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In the chapter on 'An Evening in Uncle Tom's Cabin', we are told that Uncle Tom possessed a 'confiding and humble simplicity' and that when he prayed the 'touching simplicity, the child-like earnestness, of his prayer, enriched with the language of Scripture [...] seemed so entirely to have wrought itself into his being' (pp. 68-79). Stein, like Stowe, continues a tradition of thinking about the black race, which has nothing to do with their humanity, but simply reinforces stereotypes of black men and women: 'Suddenly between them there came a moment filled with strong black curses, and then sharp razors flashed in the black hands, that held them flung backward in the negro fashion' (pp. 65-66).

Right from the start of the novel, the accumulation of polyadjectival tags used to describe Rose Johnson, reinforce the stereotype of unlicensed black female sexuality. Rose is described as 'unmoral, promiscuous, shiftless' as well as 'sullen, ordinary, black [and] childish' (p. 60). In this one description of Rose Johnson, Stein reinforces commonly perceived signs of black inferiority. Indeed, the adjectives seem to groan under the weight of the semantic possibilities of these ideological signifiers. Unlike Linda who acknowledges that marriage is a union

she aspires to, even though she is excluded from it, Stein suggests that Rose's promiscuity and marriage are incompatible. She writes, 'and why was this unmoral, promiscuous, shiftless Rose married [...] while Melanctha with white blood and attraction and her desire for a right position had not yet been really married' (p. 60).

Thus, Stein equates the sexuality of Rose, a 'real black negress' (p. 59), with promiscuity, and the sexuality of Melanctha, and her 'real white blood' (p. 60), with a desire to enter into the conventions of marriage, reserved only for white people. Stein's dialectic of racial patterns, in which Melanctha is presented as superior to Rose, suggests that despite her desire to pass for white in social and cultural conventions, Rose cannot mask an innate primitivism. This representation of the black woman's sexual lust echoes similar images found in Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*. In his novel, Dixon symbolizes the 'mulatto' woman, Lydia Brown, as the figure who imperils the white values of America. Relying on the identity of the African as 'sexual savage', Dixon proposes that Lydia Brown masks an inner animalism that has the power to corrupt the morals of white congressman, Austin Stoneman. He describes her as a 'woman of extraordinary animal beauty', possessing 'the fiery temper of a leopardess' (p. 57). In his belief that the figure of the 'mulatta' endangered 'stable and proper marriage and family life', Dixon lays the crux of the American race problem firmly at the feet of the 'mulatta'.

Social stratification by colour inserts Stein's characters into their allotted 'types'. As a figure caught between the potentials of two races, Stein implies that Melanctha's position as a 'mulatta' is responsible for her failure to achieve the cultural goals that Rose has acquired. Significantly, Jacobs, in her story, attempts to undermine the very stereotypes that Stein employs. In fact, Linda's resistance to forms of emotional and sexual pressure can be read against Stein's depiction of Melanctha's wanderings as a natural promiscuity found in the black race.

Linda's primary resistance throughout the story is to the physical, emotional and sexual overtures of Dr. Flint, her slaveholder. She makes clear the ways in which definitions of beauty in white women 'commands admiration' (p. 46), whereas for the female slave, beauty is 'her greatest curse' (p. 46). Dr. Flint's obsession with Linda and his desire to make her 'submit to him' (p. 46) is one of the most powerful aspects of her resistance in this novel. Linda is determined to maintain her honour and virtue, attributes she ascribes to all women, black and white, but which she argues is taken from the female slave in her state of persecution. The very fact that Jacobs unites all women of virtue together and argues that it is because of social and cultural conditions — the institutionalization of slavery — that they are treated differently, proves a telling moment in the novel:

The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman. From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky. Scarcely one day of her life had been clouded when the sun rose on her happy bridal morning.

How had those years dealt with her slave sister, the little playmate of her childhood? She, also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink (p. 48).

What Jacobs does in this moment of resistance in the text is to shut down the cultural and social signifiers that polarise white female sexuality as purity and propriety, and black female sexuality with danger and licentiousness. She appeals to a broader vision of female sisterhood, one begun with two children playing together, one, 'a fair white child; the other [...] her slave and also her sister' (p. 47). Through this example Jacobs attempts to show how 'the struggle against the oppression of all women must also reveal the complexity of the social and economic differences between women' (Carby, p. 53). Indeed, apart from critiquing such inscriptions, Jacobs's language circumvents the reality of rape,

whippings and other brutalities inflicted on slave women. This displacement of the sexual realities of slavery is also found in Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces*, where the rape of Grace Montfort, the wife of a West Indian planter, recently moved to North Carolina, is presented as a series of brutal whippings. The suspicion that Grace has a strain of African blood in her body becomes justification for her transition from woman of virtue to illicit object of sexual desire. The whipping of Grace Montfort, suggests Carby, explicit in its violence and terror, enabled Hopkins to demonstrate how 'the possibility that Grace Montfort was black represented the ultimate violation of the position of the white woman which necessitated the degradation of her and her offspring to use as chattel' (p. 132). Textual circumlocution, demonstrates how Jacobs and Hopkins, like Stein, but for different reasons, was inhibited in telling her story by the requirements of conventional narrative frames. Jacobs and Hopkins's metaphoric language opens up a space "in-between" what is said: 'she drank the cup of sin and shame' and what that reality represents - rape and its implicit terrorization and dehumanization of the black woman's body.

Linda's love for a 'colored carpenter; a free born man' (p. 58), and her desire to marry him, are denied by Dr. Flint. In her challenge to Dr. Flint's assumption that marriage and honour are not acceptable goals for the female slave, Linda insists on her virtue as a prerequisite of the carpenter's love for her. She tells Dr. Flint when he challenges her right to marriage that 'we are both of the negro race. It is right and honorable for us to love each other [...] he would not love me if he did not believe me to be a virtuous woman' (p. 61). Once more, Jacobs, through Linda, undermines ideological assumptions about the female slave's exclusion from heterosexual plots of marriage. Moreover, she inverts the signifiers of black and white in order to redeem the qualities of the black slaves against white slaveowners. When she writes about Mr. Flint, she talks of the 'footsteps' which 'dogged' her and the 'dark shadow' which followed her wherever she went (p. 46). As to her carpenter-lover, he is 'intelligent and rebellious' (p. 65). In these

lines, Jacobs begins to destabilize the stereotypes associated with the signifiers of black and white.

In her introduction to the text, Valerie Smith suggests that Linda chooses her 'own space of confinement' rather than submit to the tyranny of Dr. Flint (p. xxxiv). Linda's determination not to be conquered is epitomised by the strategies she takes in order to maintain her virtue and dignity, and the safety of her children. Unable to marry the man she loves, she chooses, instead, to become the lover of Mr. Sands, 'a white unmarried gentleman' (p.84). Linda's choice of Mr. Sands over Dr. Flint is a strategy designed, paradoxically, to empower her. She makes this clear when she writes, 'There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment' (p. 85).

In the act of choosing her own lover, Smith argues, albeit as a ruse against her master, Linda's narrative attempts to 'negotiate a tension between satisfying moral expectations and challenging an ideology that would condemn her as immoral' (p. 58). Linda expresses the fact that she takes Sands as a lover as a means of procuring the freedom of herself and her children (p. 85). When she writes, 'I felt confident I should obtain the boon,' she alerts her readers to the fact that the decision was a political one. She appeals to the moral sensitivities of the reader when she asks them to 'pity [...] and pardon' her (p. 86).

Yet at the same time as acknowledging that what she did was wrong and shameful, she states that the 'slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others' (p. 86). Linda's narrative tone moves between accepting the moral censure of the reader whilst, in effect, questioning that very censure. Indeed, her vulnerability as a female slave to the actions of Dr. Flint is always countered by her triumph at the 'thought of telling *him*' (Linda's emphasis) that she had taken another lover (p. 86). The strategic act of taking another lover, the narrative tone of the address, and the constant distinction between the lives of white middle-class women and female slaves, leave no room for moral censure.

Linda moves the reader to understand that the conventions of morality applied to other women do not, and can not, apply to the slave: 'But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection' (p. 83). At this point, does Jacobs 'propose[s] a new definition of female morality grounded in her own sexual experience in a brutal and corrupt patriarchal racist society', as Jean Yellin, in her introduction to *Incidents* suggests (p. xxxiii).

The freedom to choose the object of one's affection is, in Linda's case, an affirmation that her sexuality cannot be and should not be set against conventional parameters. Yet, in 'Melanctha', female choice represents exposure to all sorts of experience. When the narrator tells us that 'sometimes she was with a fellow seeker, and she strayed and stood, sometimes by railroad yards, sometimes on the docks or around new buildings where many men were working' (p. 67), Stein equates Melanctha's wanderings with promiscuity. Linda Brent's sexual relationships are confined; after all, she is the property of Dr. Flint; Stein, however, gives Melanctha plenty of spaces in which to test out her sexual power.

The story of 'Melanctha' is set in Baltimore, but Stein never specifies, unlike Jacobs, and Douglass in his narrative, the names of people and locations. The movement from one urban space to another, in 'Melanctha,' is not designed to specify the progressive movement of her journey forward, since, for Melanctha, there is no journey. On the one hand, the lack of attention to places and names indicates that Stein's story is not one concerned with history or the definition of character set in an historical context.

For Jacobs and Douglass, however, place provides an historical record of their life, their journey and their transformation from bondage to freedom. Divided between the slave plantations of the South and the free cities of the North, Douglass and Jacobs detail places and people because their narratives were autobiographical acts of self-determination: acts intended to provide direct historical evidence of the institution of slavery and the literary discourse of the

African American. Both Douglass and Jacobs appeal to their readers' knowledge of slavery, and ask them to consider that what they write 'is no fiction' (*Incidents, Preface*, p. 1). They adopt an apologetic, if not servile tone of voice, at once presenting themselves as inadequate to the job, since, according to racial mythology, black people could not, and did not, write. Yet their apparent servility and humility — 'this little book' — in fact masks a contrary belief that these works are of historical as well as literary importance.<sup>11</sup> Stein, on the other hand, merely forges her place in modern literature by stating confidently that 'Melanctha' was her step 'into the twentieth century in literature' (*AABT*, p. 50).

In Douglass's narrative, places in Baltimore, such as the docks and the shipyard, are detailed precisely in order to locate his position, psychological and physical, at a certain point in his narrative. In *The Journey Back*, Houston A. Baker shows that Baltimore is the transitional stage between Douglass's life on the plantation and his journey to freedom; and the place where he learns that reading and writing are the means by which the white man has the 'power to enslave the black man' (*Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass*, p. 78). Baker goes on to add that in his apostrophe to the ships on the Chesapeake Bay, Douglass 'wrests significance from what appears to be a blank and awesome backdrop' (p. 35). What is significant about Douglass's descriptions of Baltimore is that they provide more insight into the economic life of the city and the black man's position than Stein's text, which simply reverts to literary stereotype. For example, Stein talks about the shipping yards as 'dark and smelly places', putting emphasis on Melanctha's search for contact with men rather than the social realities of the yard (p. 71). In returning to the use of place and space, Stein's depiction of urban spaces functions as a metaphor for the nature of Melanctha's desires. The railroad yard is a world of 'mystery and excitement' (p. 68); the shipping docks are where Melanctha can listen to 'the yowling of the free

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<sup>11</sup> In the appendix to his autobiography, Douglass writes, 'Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system', p. 159.



swinging negroes, as they ran, with their powerful loose jointed bodies and their childish savage yelling' (p. 71), and the building site is a place of danger, where Melanctha 'showed her power and her break neck courage' (pp. 71-2).

These descriptions only reinforce Stein's racial stereotypes. If, as she seems to suggest, Melanctha's sexuality is aberrant, then her fascination — which is also Stein's — with the 'loose jointed bodies' of black men, returns us to Melanctha's desire for power, which is that of her 'virile' black father. The reference to her listening 'with full feeling to the yowling of the [...] negroes' (p. 71) suggests, problematically, a 'primitive' link between the black workers and Melanctha's black parentage. Moreover, the fact that Melanctha likes to show her 'break neck courage' reduces Stein's language to sexual metaphor. Courage, in Stein's text, is signified by sexual adventurousness.

On closer examination, more telling differences emerge. The shipyard, where Melanctha wanders, is not named, and its economic, racial and social mix is reduced to a description of black workers. Douglass, on his arrival in Baltimore, locates Smith's Wharf, Bowley's Wharf and Fells Point. He describes Philpot Street, near Durgin and Bailey's shipyard, as a place instrumental in his educational development. Here he met poor white children, with whom he discussed slavery (p. 83). He talks about the Wharf and he describes two Irishmen, who suggest to him that escape to the north was the only way he would ensure his freedom (p. 86). In the shipyards he would watch letters being engraved into wood and this enabled him to learn. All these descriptions add significant textual detail, not reduced, as in 'Melanctha', to a stereotypical description of black workers.

Melanctha is free to wander and interact in spaces usually reserved for working-class men. These spaces can function progressively, as a space in which female desire can write itself or, regressively, as a place in which black female desire is represented simply as wayward. Jacobs's Linda Brent, on the other hand, is literally confined in spaces and yet uses her confinement as a means of resisting

her oppressor, Dr. Flint, and finding a way of liberating herself and her children. Indeed, Linda's journey is a series of flights or escapes from Dr. Flint. Her first escape is to a friend's house, where she is harboured; she then moves to the house of an acquaintance of her grandmother, where she is hidden in small storeroom (p. 153). She finally ends up concealed, after a brief period in a swamp, in a small garret in her grandmother's house. Each of these confined spaces symbolises, paradoxically, her escape from Dr. Flint and her ability to elude him at every turn. Linda tells the reader that she spent 'seven years' in that 'little dismal hole' (p. 224). In those seven years Linda manages to plot her escape, to negotiate the future for her children, and to make Dr. Flint believe that she is in the North, through a series of letters she writes and has sent from the North. Confinement becomes physically debilitating but spiritually empowering, as Linda makes clear: 'Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave' (p. 174). To 'transform the conditions of her oppression into the preconditions of her liberation and that of her loved ones' is representative of Linda's refusal to be emotionally, sexually and physically 'conquered' in this novel (Smith, introduction, p. xxxiii).

The final analogy I would like to make between *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and 'Melanctha' is the way in which each writer ends their story. Stein's story ends with the death of her protagonist. Critics have responded differently to this ending. Margaret M. Dunn overlooks the death of Melanctha and concentrates on the fact that the story's success depends on Stein's rewriting of the "loose woman" plot (p. 56). Lisa Ruddick, in her analysis of William James's influence on the ending of the story, suggests Melanctha is 'a character unfit for the world who is weeded out by a brand of natural selection' (p. 556). Unlike Dunn, I do not believe that we can celebrate the ending of the story. Melanctha's death is, as I have noted in Chapters One and Three, a traditional plot ending for the fallen woman. In this story, marriage becomes subordinate to sexual wanderings, and is never achieved by Melanctha. Her death, by implication, suggests that her promiscuous ways have killed her. At the end of the story, we

are told that Melanctha, physically and emotionally drained, 'began to work and live regular' (p. 167). This can be read in two ways. Firstly, an attempt to live 'regular' is what brings about Melanctha's end; adhering to the 'right plot' and discourses of conventional female behaviour literally kills Melanctha. Secondly, death is a signal of a transgressive sexuality, associated with her blackness, which must then be purged from the text, since there is, as of yet, no appropriate discourse for it.

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda reaches her journey's end having had her freedom bought for her by Mrs. Bruce. Although still employed by her mistress and not yet economically independent, Linda has not been 'conquered.' Her ending, unlike Stein's, subverts the traditional ending of much nineteenth-century fiction, in which there were, for the majority, only ever two outcomes for a woman: marriage or death. Linda writes, 'Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage' (p. 302). Once more, Linda employs the ultimate challenge to narrative conventions and suggests that her story is one that cannot be told within the parameters of sentimental novels.

It seems, then, that if we take Stein's novella and compare her understanding of the African-American presence in literature with that of Douglass and Jacobs, we better understand the failings of Stein's representation at an ideological and ethical level. Compared to Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which female sexual morality is always put under pressure but manages to assert itself against conventional literary expectations, Stein's representation of female sexual morality, figured in her character, Melanctha, depends on appropriating the idea of sexual deviancy in order to examine her own sense of 'otherness', which I will go on to demonstrate. Paradoxically, then, this text, which makes its claims for modernity and contemporaneity, is politically conservative and racially bigoted.

### Tropes of Masking: Stein and Larsen's "Signifyin(g)"

I now want to move on from analyses that situate 'Melanctha' in a nineteenth-century tradition of the 'tragic mulatta', and stereotypes of race, to a consideration of Stein's use of race against that of an African-American contemporary, Nella Larsen. This section of the chapter will focus on the impact of race as a form of linguistic and racial masking. 'Melanctha', as we already know, was a 'revisionary masquerade' and the racial mask seemed a significant strategy through which Stein could transform what Blackmer calls 'binary categories and character typologies' and by which she means the racial and cultural oppositions between Anglo-and African-American worlds, and the racial stereotypes of the 'happy' black man or the 'tragic mulatta' (p. 240). As a contemporary of Stein, and an admirer of her work, Larsen is an appropriate model for comparison, particularly as her novella, *Passing*, can be seen to 'Signify' upon Stein's 'Melanctha'.<sup>12</sup> For one thing, in 'Melanctha' and *Passing*, the racial mask that Melanctha and Clare Kendry, as 'mulatta' characters inhabit, ensures that they can move between Anglo-American and African-American worlds, exposing the contradictions of racial invisibility and visibility. For another, Stein's experimental modernist aesthetic and Larsen's conventional plot of racial 'passing' mask erotic subplots of lesbian desire. And, finally, the radical implications of subversive female desire is purged from both of these texts through the deaths of Clare and Melanctha.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of the African mask was not new to Stein, as Michael North suggests. Firstly, Stein had used the African mask previously in her Radcliffe days.<sup>14</sup> Rosalind S. Miller's publication of Stein's unpublished and published

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<sup>12</sup> Thadious M. Davis in his illuminating biography of Nella Larsen, *Nella Larsen Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), p.311, shows that the opposition between Jeff and Melanctha becomes the basis for the 'bipolar' relationship between Clare and Irene in *Passing*.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of 'masking' and the lesbian subject matter in *Passing*, see *Quicksand and Passing, Nella Larsen*, ed. and with a postscript by Deborah E. McDowell (London: Serpent's Tail, 1986), pp. 249-275.

<sup>14</sup> Stein was enrolled at Radcliffe, the Harvard annexe, in 1893-1895.

Radcliffe manuscripts provide an insight into Stein's first experiments with the mask, outlining her use of a black persona in her study of the Radcliffe themes.<sup>15</sup> For example, in an entry dated 22nd March 1895, Stein writes about a young 'dark-skinned girl in the (*full sensuous development of budding*) woman-hood', who cannot resolve the conflict of emotions that weigh upon her consciousness ('In The Library', p. 141). In another entry, dated May 22nd, 1895, titled 'The Temptation', Hortense finds herself increasingly alienated, both physically and psychologically, from her cousins. She struggles to articulate her feelings and writes, 'Again she had become one apart. Again there was something that none knew beside herself, that no one else of those about her had been guilty of. The struggle continued at intervals all day' ('The Temptation', p. 151). The language of the text prefigures the linguistic masking evident in 'Melanctha' and shows that even in her Radcliffe days, Stein used an Africanist persona to exteriorise her own feelings.

Secondly, in a fascinating article about the collaborative efforts of Stein and Picasso, Michael North argues that whilst Picasso engaged in producing the African mask from an artistic and aesthetic point of view, Stein, too, was preparing her own African mask in the figure of Melanctha: 'Placing a painted mask over his naturalistic portrait, Picasso duplicates the linguistic mask Stein was simultaneously devising for herself. By rewriting her own story for black characters, Stein anticipates, and perhaps even motivates, Picasso's use of African masks in *Les Femmes d'Alger*' (p. 271).

The mask ensured that Stein could 'say one thing, all the while meaning another'.<sup>16</sup> The use of a mask, either linguistic or physical, was one accepted and appreciated by other writers besides those who had something to hide. Indeed, the use of the mask would enable writers to step outside their lives in order to look more closely at their culture and their own personal preoccupations. According to

<sup>15</sup> *Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility* (New York: The Exposition Press, 1949).

<sup>16</sup> *Figures in Black*, p. 175. Gates refers to the use of spiritual slave songs, which enabled the slaves to mask a political meaning in the guise of religious expression.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *Figures in Black*, the mask is ‘essential to the art of re-covering — that is, covering the human face with another, second surface — to recover, an almost mystical sense, a self-contained, virtually autonomous world’ (p. 169). The idea of transcending gender and, as a consequence race, was an attractive one to Stein. Throughout her writing career, the issue of writing and identity was to plague her, but she insisted that no act of creating oneself could depend on a fixed identity. In ‘What are Masterpieces’, she writes: ‘The thing one gradually comes to find out is that one has no identity that is when one is in the act of doing anything’ (p. 148). She goes on to add, ‘At any moment when you are you you are you without memory of yourself because if you remember yourself while you are you you are not for purposes of creating you’ (p. 149).

Stein’s sense of identity, as I have shown in Chapter Two, was a fluid one. She resisted an essentialist definition of gendered identity and, furthermore, her sense of identity, like the act of writing, was governed by her use of the continuous present and repetition. In the act of ‘creating you’, there can only ever be a plurality of selves; self-presence is not assured. Stein’s deconstruction of language and identity, through the process of *différance*, relates to Gates’ definition of the mask and ‘Signifyin(g)’.<sup>17</sup>

Gates provides stimulating material on the use of ‘Signification,’ in African-American culture and writing. He documents his ideas about a theory of criticism inscribed in the black vernacular tradition by identifying two ‘trickster figures’ found in African and African-American myths.<sup>18</sup> The figure of the ‘Signifying Monkey’ is a trope for ‘the ambiguities of language [...] for repetition and

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<sup>17</sup> In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates makes the distinction between ‘signification’ and ‘Signification’. He capitalizes ‘Signification’ in the black literary tradition because, as he adds, ‘signification’ is a homonym of the Afro-American vernacular word. The confrontation between ‘signification’ and ‘Signification’ is designed to show how the terms of ‘signification,’ — signification, signified, signifier — used consistently in general linguistics, are homonyms of terms used in the black vernacular tradition almost two centuries ago (p. 46). ‘Signification’ comes to represent the ways in which black writers ‘Signify’ in order to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, ‘to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning’ (p. 47).

<sup>18</sup> He identifies Esu-Elegbara as a trickster and messenger of the gods in the mythologies of Yoruba cultures found in Nigeria, Benin, Brazil and Cuba. The Signifying Monkey, he adds, belongs to a distinctly African-American tradition (introduction to *The Signifying Monkey*, xx-xxi).

revision' (p. 52). His theory about the confrontation between African-American culture and American culture, through the figures of Esu and 'The Signifying Monkey', reflects, to some extent, Stein's use of race and gender to confront, through language, 'white' meanings about sexual 'otherness'.

Furthermore, in his discussion of dialect in 'Dis and dat: Dialect and Descent', in *Figures in Black*, Gates analyses the function of the African mask in African-American literature. He traces the use of the mask in African art, demonstrating how the mask becomes the 'vehicle of a complete hermetic universe [...] an autonomous world' (p. 168). He goes on to add that the mask 'with its immobilized features all the while mobile, itself, is a metaphor for dialectic — specifically, a dialectic or binary opposition embracing unresolved or potentially unresolvable forms, notions of origins, or complex issues of value' (p. 168).

Houston Baker, in his discussion of African-American modernism, in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, identifies the *minstrel mask* as at once the '*mastery of form and deformation of mastery*' (p. 15). He demonstrates how writers like Booker T. Washington 'mastered' the minstrel mask as a means of keeping his white audience 'tuned', yet he 'deformed' the mask because he was always 'playing *behind* a pious mask' (p. 25). The mask, then, becomes a means by which Stein and Larsen can seek to 'e-[f]face' differences; to say one thing whilst all the while meaning another. The mask that Irene and Melanctha wear becomes the vehicle through which both writers attempt to transcend binary oppositions and differences of race and sex.

This analysis of the use of the racial mask will lead me to consider its significance for these two writers and the consequences of racial masking from a literary and historical perspective. It is important, I think, to provide pertinent parallels between the two writers, but more important to establish the differences between a woman for whom race was a lived reality, and another for whom race was a blank page on to which she wrote 'the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness' (Morrison, p. 17). Before I do this, however, I feel it

necessary to take a brief textual detour in order to be reminded of the evolution and nature of the Harlem Renaissance, the time at which Larsen was writing, and to distinguish the different responses to race by politicians and writers alike.

### Harlem Renaissance

Harlem Renaissance, like the term modernism, defies definition by specific dates or decades because politically this period has its roots in the philosophies and writings of African-Americans from the 1890s: those of, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt. W.E.B. Du Bois, in his *The Souls Of Black Folks* set forth his argument for the 'double-consciousness' of the African American, who symbolised 'two warring ideals in one dark body'.<sup>19</sup> Du Bois resisted Booker T. Washington's accommodationist policies, outlined in his 1895 Atlanta address, and insisted on the progress of the race through the 'talented tenth' (p. 87).<sup>20</sup> Du Bois, in his now famous metaphor, talked about the 'veil' through which the African American senses his own separation, literally, through segregation, and emotionally, culturally and psychologically, because of the white man's attitude to him (p. 4).<sup>21</sup> Du Bois would lift the veil in order to reveal the 'souls of black folk'.

The Harlem Renaissance, in part a response to the consciousness of black men and women, was accelerated by the urbanization and the migration of millions of blacks from the peonage of post-Reconstruction in the South. Harlem became a migrating point for blacks seeking work in the new industrialized North.<sup>22</sup> Those

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<sup>19</sup> *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 5, originally published by A.C. McClurg & Company, 1903.

<sup>20</sup> Du Bois takes issue with Washington on several accounts. Firstly, he criticises Washington's image of the contented and industrious peasant who was not ready for equal rights. Secondly, Washington insisted that the black man relinquish the quest for political power. And finally, Washington did not insist on the higher education of the black man. Overall, according to Du Bois, Washington 'claimed that the Negro can survive only through submission' (p. 44).

<sup>21</sup> The 'veil' also refers to the 'color line' and enforced segregation brought about by the U.S. Supreme Court's interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment Act in *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896).

<sup>22</sup> New York was not the only city to which blacks in the South migrated. Philadelphia, Chicago, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Illinois were also centres of migration. In 'Harlem: The Culture Capital', James Weldon Johnson writes of the labour agents who, during the war, were sent to the



who migrated to the North in the 1890's were the first generation of the freed slaves, who tended to stay on in the states and counties where they had formerly existed as slaves.<sup>23</sup> Harlem's population exploded between 1903-1911 as white tenants, persuaded to rent out their properties, found profits to be made from renting to the new migrants. Nancy Cunard explained in 'Harlem Reviewed' that 'in other parts of New York they simply "don't let to coloured," at least never *en masse*'.<sup>24</sup>

The emphasis on the 'New Negro' was, according to Alain Locke, in his essay 'The New Negro', a challenge to stereotypes of the black man defined by those of the ' "aunties," "uncles" and "mammies"' (p. 5). The birth of the New Negro began with the publication of *The Messenger* magazine, considered the only radical Negro magazine. First published in 1917 by A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen, *The Messenger* called for a radical transformation of the social and economic conditions of black and white men and women. This attack on all forms of oppression paralleled the rise of revolutionary fervour throughout Europe.<sup>25</sup> This magazine extended and reacted against a tradition already begun by W.E.B. Du Bois when he edited *The Crisis* magazine in 1910.<sup>26</sup> Alongside these political magazines were political associations such as the National Association for the Advancement Colored People (NAACP) and the National

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south to recruit black people to the north in order to meet the new industrial demands, especially in munitions factories, cited in *The New Negro*, pp. 301-311 (p. 305).

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in *Negro: An Anthology* (London: Published by Nancy Cunard at Wishart & Co., 1924), pp. 67-74 (p. 68).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *The Easter Rebellion* (1916); Mahatma Ghandi's non-co-operative philosophy in India (1920s) and the Russian Revolution (1917).

<sup>26</sup> In an article entitled, 'A New Crowd-A New Negro', A. Phillip Randolph argued that people like Du Bois of the NAACP, and Kinckle Jones and George E. Haynes of the National Urban League, were of the 'Old Crowd'. He believed that these black leaders served the interests of white middle America because their policies did not demand the economic and social activism of the black man; instead they urged the black man to be conservative. They never urged the black man to strike or to become politically active. Against this 'Old Crowd' stand the new militant black leadership who will have 'no armistice with lynch-law; no truce with jim crowism and disenfranchisement; no peace until the Negro receives complete social, economic and political justice' (p. 20), cited in *Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. by Nathan Irvin Huggins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), from *The Messenger*, Vol. II (May-June 1919).

Urban League. The former, founded in 1909 as an interracial organisation, had, by 1939, 350 branches in nearly every state.<sup>27</sup> Directed principally by W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, William Pickens and Daisy Lumpkin, it worked for the abolition of all segregation, equal education for white and black children and complete enfranchisement of black people. The latter devoted itself to social, health and industrial improvement of workers conditions. Like the NAACP, it was also an interracial organisation. At the same time, Marcus Garvey, through his Universal Negro Improvement Association, called all African Americans to look to Africa as their spiritual home.

The parallel movement of the New Negro, politically and socially, took place in the Arts, in Harlem. Alan Locke, a professor of Philosophy at Howard University, published, in 1925, a collection of essays, stories and poems titled *The New Negro*. In his introduction to the volume, he addresses the issue of what the 'New Negro' means. The 'Old Negro', he argues, 'is a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism' (p. 3). He adds, in the same essay, that the mass migration of the Negro from South to North was not simply brought about by the 'pressure of poor crops coupled with increased social terrorism in certain sections of the South and Southwest' but by 'a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize [...] a chance for the improvement of conditions' (6).

The spirit of the period was caught by the writers most associated with it. Langston Hughes, in his autobiography *The Big Sea*, writes, 'In those days of the late 1920's, there were a great many parties, in Harlem, and out, to which various members of the New Negro Group were invited.'<sup>28</sup> He describes the breadth of intellectual life, and the range of gatherings, from the exclusively black gatherings of Jessie Faucet to the gin mills and speakeasies and nightclubs where you would find Buddy da Silva and Theodore Dreiser (p. 249). Nancy Cunard in 'Harlem

<sup>27</sup> *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History*, ed. by Roi Ottley and William J. Weatherby (New York: The New York Public Library and Oceana Publications, 1967), p. 174.

<sup>28</sup> *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York and London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), p. 243.

Reviewed' reflects on the way that in Harlem 'one can make an appreciation of a race' (p. 74).<sup>29</sup> She talks of its noise and colour, its 'personification of restlessness, desire, brooding' (p. 73). James Weldon Johnson in *Black Manhattan*, sums up the significance of Harlem as a geographical, cultural and spiritual centre when he writes,

Harlem is still in the process of making. It is still new; so mixed that one may get many different views — which is all right so long as one view is not taken to be the whole picture. This many-sided aspect, however, makes it one of the most interesting communities in America. But Harlem is more than a community; it is a large-scale laboratory experiment in the race problem, and from it a good many facts have been found.<sup>30</sup>

Although differing in their approach to the question of race, African-American writers did address the different forms that the mask of racism assumed. Most writers of the Harlem Renaissance sought to reconcile their emotional and intellectual feelings about Africa as a source of their identity. In his essay on 'The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts', in *The New Negro*, Alain Locke reflects upon the ways in which African art will have a 'profound and galvanising influence' upon the mind of the American Negro (p. 256). He writes about the influence of African art and sculpture on European painting and sculpture, arguing that 'this art can scarcely have less influence upon the blood descendants, bound to it by a sense of direct cultural kinship, than upon those who inherit by tradition only, and through the channels of an exotic curiosity and interest' (p. 262). For Locke, the African idiom was a symbol for a new radical idiom in the works of the New Negro artists (p. 256).

Writers of the Harlem Renaissance wrote about the effects of race in different ways. Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes wrote about African Americans' relationship with Africa; for example, in his poem 'Heritage', Countee Cullen

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<sup>29</sup> In 'Harlem Reviewed', Cunard describes the genesis of Harlem as a Dutch development, settled in about 1637. By the nineteenth century it was a settlement of diverse races: German, Dutch, English and African Americans (p. 68).

<sup>30</sup> (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), p. 281.

writes, 'What is Africa to me?' and exposes the difference between the romanticized version of Africa and its stark reality.<sup>31</sup> Other writers such as Langston Hughes and Nella Larsen explored the issue of mixed races. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes writes, 'The problem of mixed blood in America is, to be sure, a minor problem, but a very dramatic one—one parent in the pale of the black ghetto and the other able to take advantage of all the opportunities of American democracy' (p. 263). Cullen in a poem entitled 'Near White' writes about mixed race individuals: 'Ambiguous of race they stand/By one disowned, scorned of another' (*Color*, p. 11).

Other writers such as Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston attempted to get beyond definitions of race. In *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, she writes, 'I learned that skins were no measure of what was inside people. So none of the race clichés meant anything any more'.<sup>32</sup> By the end of the chapter on 'My People, My People!' she acknowledges, 'There is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified [...] that there is no possible classification so catholic that will cover us all' (p. 245). Jean Toomer, too, would attempt to get beyond definitions and classifications of race. In 'Bona and Paul', one of the stories in his most famous work *Cane*, he deals with the issue of mixed race by reconciling black and white in the metaphor of rose petals: 'white faces are petals of roses [...] dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals.'<sup>33</sup> Although Stein never talked specifically about race, her understanding of identity, as I have detailed it in Chapters One and Two, resisted, much like Toomer's writing, cultural and gendered divisions.

After the publication of *Cane*, Toomer was under increasing pressure to write from the perspective of a black man. This he found to be limiting and he resisted

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<sup>31</sup> See the collection *Color* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1925), pp. 36-41 (p. 36). References to other poems in this collection will be cited by title and given after quotations in the text.

<sup>32</sup> (New York and London: J.B. Lipincott Company, 1942), p. 243.

<sup>33</sup> (New York: Liveright, 1975), p. 73. Originally published by Boni and Liveright, 1923.

personal definition by race or ethnicity.<sup>34</sup> In a short piece titled 'Not Typically American' he articulates a view of an American tendency to 'adhere to racial, religious or nationalistic nationalisms' which keep the country divided.<sup>35</sup> He goes on to add, 'I have lived as an American, which I am' (p. 99). In this line, Toomer attempts to transcend race, sex and religion by providing a kind of 'American-ness' which assimilates the qualities of whichever group he happens to belong to at a particular time. This is, in many respects, similar to Stein's depiction of her writing as an 'American thing' (*The Gradual Making of Americans*, p. 98), in which 'the American way has been not to need that generations are existing' ('Portraits and Repetition', p. 99). Stein takes writing and identity out of the realm of race, ethnicity and gender, trying instead to advocate an identity free from the shackles of history. Toomer, like Stein, goes on to define his 'American-ness', in 'Not Typically American', by calling himself a humanist; that is, a man who sees not just himself but others too. Unlike 'bipedism', a form of parochialism, which extends to 'racialism, classism, credism and narrow nationalism', humanism extends to a 'proper valuation of race, of nation, of religion' (pp. 100-101).

Belonging to a new American race meant that writers like Toomer and Stein could transcend the cultural, racial, sexual and social divisions that caused separatisms and rivalries, and confined them to rigid demarcations personally and professionally. By seeing himself simply as an American, Toomer, like Clare in Larsen's *Passing*, wants to bypass altogether the racial and social groupings which have contributed to the representation of the 'mulatto' as a tragic and villainous figure. Paradoxically, a writer like Stein, who makes it clear throughout her

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<sup>34</sup> On September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1923, Toomer wrote a letter to Horace Liveright at Boni and Liveright, publishers of *Cane*. In response to Liveright's request that he not 'dodge' his 'colored blood' in the biographical sketch to *Cane*, Toomer replied, 'For myself I have sufficiently featured Negro in *Cane*. Whatever statements I give will inevitably come from a synthetic human and art point of view; not from a racial one', cited in *A Jean Toomer Reader, Selected Unpublished Writings*, ed. by Frederick Fusch (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.94. Further references to essays in this edition will be given after quotations in the text.

<sup>35</sup> 'Not Typically American', pages 95-101, (p. 96) in *A Jean Toomer Reader*. This essay, dated March 1935 in the collection *The Blue Man*, was so titled by Fusch.

writing that gendered identity is an anathema to her, seems to have little difficulty in appropriating a racial identity in order to work through her own sexual identity. Positively, and perhaps naively, Toomer imagines an American-ness, which through integration will, eventually, absorb all minority groups in the name of a utopian unity; consciously and problematically, Stein speaks of a utopian identity, especially in her later works such as 'Patriarchal Poetry' and 'Lifting Belly' but fails to achieve it in the early story of 'Melanctha'. The position of gesturing toward a utopian deconstruction of gendered identity, through the trope of the 'metaphoric lesbian' in Chapter One, and the trope of the '*flâneuse*' in Chapter Three, is problematised in this chapter through race. However, the conflict between, and of, racial and gendered identities, and conformity to one or both, is what unites Larsen and Stein in their work.

### 'Melanctha' and *Passing*

Although these two writers never met, they did communicate through Carl Van Vechten, a close friend and a major white literary patron of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>36</sup> Van Vechten had written to Stein in May 1927, informing her that Nella Imes (Larsen) had read 'Melanctha' and considered it to be 'the best Negro story she has ever read'.<sup>37</sup> Larsen's letter to Stein in February 1928 made it clear that the story of 'Melanctha', was one she'd 'read many times' (p. 216), and this is evident from the implicit embedding of 'Melanctha' in the narrative of Larsen's

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<sup>36</sup> For a complete biography of Larsen's life, see *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, A Woman's Life Unveiled*. Larsen Imes met Carl Van Vechten in New York in 1924. Along with Walter White, also a writer and assistant secretary to the NAACP, Vechten promoted Larsen as an accomplished African-American writer. In 1926, Larsen was half way through her first novel, *Quicksand*. In December, Van Vechten read the manuscript and offered suggestions for revision. He submitted it to Alfred A. Knopf, head of Knopf publishing company, who published most of Van Vechten's work. It was Van Vechten who suggested that Larsen send a copy of *Quicksand* to Gertrude Stein. Van Vechten read the manuscript for *Passing*, which Larsen called "Nig" after Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926). She was advised to change the title because it was rather inflammatory and changing it to *Passing* would alert the reader to the issue of passing and would raise more interest. It was with publication of *Passing* that Larsen hoped to achieve the Harmon Award for Literature. This was an award for 'Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes'.

<sup>37</sup> Carl Van Vechten, letter to Gertrude Stein, in *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten*, pp. 126-127.

1928 novel *Quicksand*. Moreover, like Douglass who hoped that his 'little book' might go some way to alleviating the persecution of millions of slaves, Larsen asked Stein, in her letter, to accept a copy of her 'poor first book' (p. 216). Like Douglass, Larsen suggested that she, too, would like to capture the spirit of her race.

Born in Chicago in 1891, the daughter of a Danish mother and a black father, Larsen was a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.<sup>38</sup> She married Elmer Samuel Imes in 1919 and began writing fiction in 1926, under the guidance and support of Van Vechten and Jessie Faucet, a contemporary and friend. It was Van Vechten who brought her work to prominence and publication through his publishers Alfred A. Knopf. Larsen's two novels are essentially discourses on female desire, gender identity and racial oppression. Like many of her contemporaries, she was interested in the ways in which narrative could negotiate a self not yet fixed by confining narratives of race, gender, and class identity. Furthermore, Larsen had to negotiate, like black women writers before her, the representation of black sexuality. She was aware of the vogue in much literature of the period for representations of female sexuality as 'primitive' and 'exotic'. On the other hand, she was also aware of the limitations of this perspective. Larsen was caught in the double bind of wanting to respond to a tradition of black women writers who had redefined sexual politics, by working within and against prevailing sexual ideologies, and also find a space for herself in which to explore female desire beyond these conventions.<sup>39</sup> This attempt to write

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<sup>38</sup> Larsen knew many of the figures of the Harlem Renaissance. She uses an epigraph from Langston Hughes's poem 'Cross' to preface *Quicksand*, demonstrating that her story foregrounds the issues of gender and race. She also takes an extract from the poem 'Heritage' by Countee Cullen, to preface *Passing*.

<sup>39</sup> For the 'primitive' and 'exotic' in literature of the period, see Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1928). In this novel, McKay's description of black women is erotically charged and openly sexual. For example, 'the mulattress was all a wonderful tissue of throbbing flesh' (p. 42) and 'The women, carried away by the sheer rhythm of delight, had risen above their commercial instincts [...] They were gorgeous animals swaying there through the dance' (p. 108). Firstly, McKay suggests that these women dancing respond to an innate primitivism, throwing off the mask of 'commercialism' that they inhabit. Sherwood Anderson in *Dark Laughter* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1926), writes, 'The brown women tending up to the job-getting the race lighter and lighter' (p. 69) and 'A brown woman

beyond ideological discourses of gender and race provides a parallel with Stein's 'Melanctha'. Furthermore, the opposition between Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield in *Passing* is mirrored in the opposition between Rose Johnson and Melanctha in 'Melanctha'.

The opening of each story establishes an opposition between women who prioritise marriage as a cultural goal and those who call that goal into question. Rose Johnson in 'Melanctha' has been 'really regularly married' (p. 61), unlike Melanctha, who fails to secure economic and social security through marriage, and so spends her time 'wandering' between the African-American and Anglo-American world of Bridgepoint: 'Jane began to tell all about the different men, white ones and blacks, Melanctha never was particular' (p. 101). In *Passing*, Irene Redfield, Clare's opposite number, has married Brian, a Harlem doctor. She is mother to two boys, Ted and Junior, and spends much of her time organising functions for the 'artistic or sociological interest' of her community (p. 182). She proudly tells Clare Kendry that apart from a little more money, 'I've everything I want' (p. 160). Clare Kendry, her childhood friend, whom she hasn't seen in twelve years, functions much like Melanctha in 'Melanctha'. Clare, married to a white businessman, John Bellew, has spent her marriage 'passing' for white'. Like Melanctha, and Larsen's character Helga Crane in *Quicksand*, she traverses the African and Anglo-American worlds, finding herself alienated from both. Her desire to pass for white is a means of escaping a specifically black racial history that suggests her racial identity would be defined as a 'charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham' (p. 159).<sup>40</sup> 'Passing' becomes a means of erasing cultural and racial difference in order to become an American, not a

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having thirteen children – a different man for every child' (p. 71). The link between black women and an implicit promiscuity is obvious.

<sup>40</sup> 'Genesis', chapter 9, verses 20-27. Clare refers to the story of Ham (Cham), son of Noah and father to Caanan. Ham discovers his father drunk and naked in his tent and tells his brothers. On waking and hearing of this, Noah curses Ham and condemns him to a life of servitude. This reference to Ham symbolises the race as an enslaved race. Douglass refers to Ham in his *Narrative* and shows how it perpetuates a myth that the black man must be enslaved: 'God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right' (p. 50).



Negro. Her return to 'that other' that she was once 'glad to be free of' orders the tension in the narrative (p. 145).

On the first page of *Passing*, Irene Redfield receives a letter from Clare Kendry, but resists opening it. She describes the letter as 'out of place and alien', that there was something 'mysterious' about it and that within its contents she knew danger would reveal itself (p. 143). The significance of the letter and its danger is not revealed until later in the novel, once Irene has recalled the renewed relationship between herself and Clare in Chicago. The danger that Clare represents seems, at first, defined by the issue of 'passing'. Yet at a latent level in the text, Clare Kendry's presence also reveals a sublimated female desire that, by the end of the story, has been exorcised, much like Melanctha's.

The letter works literally and figuratively in the text. Literally it provides a link for the renewed relationship between Irene and Clare; figuratively, Clare, through her letter, is inserted into the text so that she displaces and disrupts Irene's relationship with Brian. Instead of a male-female dyad, we now have a female-male-female triad, a transformation of sexual bonding, according to Terry Castle in *The Apparitional Lesbian*, in which the 'male term drops out' (p. 73). Moreover, the fact that Brian has a 'craving for some place strange and different' (p. 178) suggests that his commitment to his heterosexual marriage is never guaranteed and thus he becomes displaced in that triad. The power of Clare's letter to unnerve Irene indicates that her fear of the danger that lies within is not simply racial but sexual. Clare's racial presence, whilst invisible to those who are unaware of her 'passing', is countered by a sexual presence which cannot be overlooked. Her white mask represents her invisibility racially, her heterosexuality, visibly.

When Irene first meets Clare in a rooftop hotel, Irene herself is 'passing' for white. Both women have escaped the spatial boundaries imposed by racial segregation in the city. The woman watching her, whom she supposes is white, provokes an inner anxiety within Irene about her own racial origins. She panics

and assumes that the woman might just understand that she was, in fact, 'passing'. Her anxiety becomes even more telling because, 'Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro' (150). She justifies her fears of racial shame, being a Negro, by masking them as social shame, being ejected from the hotel. This inner deflection of racial shame masks a deep-seated fear of racial exposure. Unlike Clare, who has e[ff]aced the mask of blackness by passing for white, Irene clings on to prescribed notions of race and sexuality. Like Rose Johnson, who 'had lately married Sam Johnson' (p. 59), Irene, too, moves in a world of fixed patterns of gender and racial expectations. Clare becomes an object of fascination and disturbance precisely because she challenges Irene's concepts of both. Irene resists what Clare represents; that is, what 'separates herself from the untenable in her existence; and the dreaded, in that no social structures can hold her in' (Davis, p. 315).

On meeting Clare in the hotel, Irene is dazzled by her beauty and finds her dangerously exciting, even exotic: 'She wished to find out about this hazardous business of "passing," this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chances in another environment' (p. 157). The desire to 'take one's chances in another environment' refers immediately to the white world that Clare inhabits, but there is also a suggestion, at the heart of this statement, of some other world beyond categories of race and sex that attracts Irene, and which Clare represents. It is this breaking away from all that is familiar or regular — marriage — according to Rose Johnson, that brings about Melanctha's end. Rose consistently articulates a belief that Melanctha's failure to adhere to appropriate modes of behaviour causes her downfall: 'No she never no way could learn, what was the right way she should do' (p. 167). In 'wandering' between two worlds but inhabiting neither fully, Corinne E. Blackmer's belief, that Clare is the 'sexually and racially "doubled" figure through whom Larsen explores the incoherency that results from symbolically dividing the world into opposing binarisms', can also be used in conjunction with Melanctha (p. 257).

Despite Irene's resistance to Clare's 'passing', she is drawn to her friend in a sublimated sexual way. At the end of their first meeting, Irene's desire to sever the acquaintance with her friend is overpowered by a suggestion that sexually Irene is attracted to her. The language of the texts speaks an unconscious process of sublimation. When Irene describes the 'caress' of Clare's eyes (p. 162) and her smile as that with which she felt a 'sense of being petted and caressed' (p. 161), there is already a highly charged eroticism between the two women. Displacing erotic desire onto racial desire, Irene convinces herself that it is Clare's exoticism that is so appealing. Davis in his biography on Larsen suggests that Irene's transformation of Clare into a sexual object can be read as her aesthetic attraction to the idea of whiteness; however, the exotic in Clare also represents repressed aspects of Irene's selfhood, aspects she denies fully at the end of the novel (p. 326).

The erotic attraction between Irene and Clare is mirrored in Melanctha's relationship with Jane Harden. The language of 'Melanctha', like Larsen's text, masks an implicit eroticism between the two women: 'Melanctha would spend long hours with Jane in her room, sitting at her feet and listening to her stories, and feeling her strength and the power of her affection' (p. 73). The constant references to Jane and Melanctha 'loving' each other goes beyond the merely platonic. The intimacy and joy of their relationship is masked but the text speaks its unconscious desire, in the same way that Larsen's language exposes Irene's feelings for Clare. Irene does not understand, because she sees life in terms of its absolutes, like Jeff Campbell, that 'passing' enables Clare to articulate her desires subversively. Irene's conviction that 'behind what was now only an ivory mask lurked a scornful amusement' (p. 157) suggests that Clare understands the potential of the mask to e-race differences; because the white mask she occupies can "pass" undetected through worlds marked by oppositional boundary lines of race, sexuality and gender' (Blackmer, p. 233).

'Passing' through these worlds is highlighted in a key moment in the text, when Irene, along with a school friend, Gertrude, visits Clare at home. The discussion about 'passing' and motherhood highlights the problematic reconciliation of race and gender through motherhood. The attempt to make oneself racially invisible through 'passing', to obliterate the signs of difference, is undermined by the birth of children. As Gertrude makes clear, 'It's awful the way it skips generations and then pops out' (p. 168). What Gertrude is referring to is the trace of that difference which is 'lost in an irretrievable invisibility, and yet even its loss is covered, preserved, regarded, and retarded' (Gates, *Figures in Black*, p. 202). While Clare attempts to 'pass', the dialectic of the mask, operating 'between' black and white and male and female, reserves in itself a trace of the past. This trace, belonging both to the past and the future, demonstrates the way in which complete racial invisibility is not always possible. Clare's decision not to have any more children is a recognition that not only will motherhood inscribe her in cultural formations of gender and sexuality, but that motherhood threatens to expose the reality behind the mask that she wears. Irene, on the other hand, affirms her racial difference through her children, one of whom she tells Clare 'is dark' (p. 168).

When Irene's husband, John, returns home he calls his wife 'Nig', to the consternation of Irene and Gertrude. The irony of the situation is made all the more implicit when Clare tells her friends that John calls her this name because "'she's getting darker and darker'. He also tells her "'if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger'" (p. 171). As the three women sit there, aware of the irony of the situation, angered and frustrated by Bellew's remarks that he hates "'the black scrimy devils'", the racial differences that Clare attempts to transcend through her mask are exposed for all to see.

These racial differences are subsumed by and with sexual differences that Irene will come to understand as a burden, but which she cannot accept at this point.

Clare's facial gestures, the operation of the mask, suggest a meaning which is intangible, unknowable to Irene, because she is afraid to move outside the boundaries of her own knowledge and move 'between' the worlds that Clare represents. She is puzzled by Clare's look, a look that is 'unfathomable, utterly beyond any experience or comprehension of hers' (p. 176). The mask, Clare's white face, always suggests immobility, 'unrevealing [...] Unaltered and undisturbed by any emotion within or without' (p. 220), but it is always mobile, always conveying a meaning that is 'other' and which Irene has yet to understand.

This inability to read others figuratively is evident in the relationship between Melanctha and Jeff. The problem for Melanctha in her relationship with Jeff is that she fails to live up to his expectations of the roles assigned to women. Not only is she unconventional in her attitude towards gender roles, but her articulation of desire is also unconventional. The fact that Melanctha wants to explore sexual power with a freedom that is only condoned for men isolates her from Jeff who is unable to sanction her behaviour, in the same way that Irene cannot condone Clare's.

It is Melanctha's presence in the text, like Clare's in *Passing*, that places social forms in conflict with one another. Whereas Jeff, like Irene, seeks stability in all aspects of his life, Melanctha can only think about excitements. Her relationship with Jeff, like Irene's with Clare, shows how such social forms become unresolvable and irreconcilable. Jeff's life is controlled by a need to know 'where you were, and what you wanted, and to always tell everything just as you meant it' (p. 82). The opposition between the mask, mobile and immobile, is reflected in Melanctha's comment to Jeff:

It seems to me, Dr. Campbell you want to have a good time just like all us others, and then you just keep on saying that it's right to be good and you ought not to have excitements, and yet you really don't want to do it Dr. Campbell, no more than me or Jane Harden. No, Dr. Campbell, it certainly does seem to me you don't know very well yourself, what you mean, when you are talking (p. 82).

Melanctha highlights the discrepancy between Jeff's thoughts, 'you ought not to have excitements' and his real desires, 'to have a good time'. Jeff would like to abandon himself to experiences that negate racial and social differences but he represses his natural instincts because to give into them would simply be reverting to 'having it like any animal that's low in the streets together' (p. 87). Jeff cannot have it, as he says, like an animal, because as a representative of the potential qualities of his race, through racial 'uplifting', to demean himself in this way would simply be reverting to type. What Jeff cannot see is that the white mask that he wears prevents him from touching base with the very vitality of his black roots. In many ways, Jeff's cultural and social association with white values, like Rose, whose 'white training had only made for habits, not for nature' (p. 60), enables him to carve out a secure and stable future for himself whilst repressing the cultural roots of his black heritage. Melanctha, on the other hand, because she acknowledges both races within her psychological makeup and is bale to move between the two in an attempt to transcend both.

The more Melanctha says about feeling and desire, which is to 'really feel things way down in you' (p. 86), the clearer it is, suggests Michael North, that 'very little is stable in the system of language or in the morality it supports' (p. 286). As Melanctha oscillates between different racial and sexual partners, the colored porters and Jane Harden, the language of the text marks cultural and sexual identity as linguistic instability. If Jeff maintains that it is easy "just to say" what he is thinking, Melanctha reveals how whatever she is "just saying" need not represent her innermost thoughts' (North, p.83). In 'Melanctha' language is continually in conflict with itself and meaning becomes indeterminable. When Melanctha tells Jeff that he 'is always wanting to have it clear out in words' (p.121), the drama of 'Melanctha' becomes, according to North, 'about what characters say, instead of what they do, and the conflict between the sayable and the non-sayable comes to dominate the story' (p. 287). The space between the differences that regulate the mask is where Melanctha

hovers in the text.

The indeterminacy of language enables Stein to hover between male and female, black and white, the sayable and the non-sayable (North, p. 288). In addition, the fact that the text uses a series of rhetorical tropes such as simile, metaphor and repetition indicates that Stein never intended the meaning of the text to be clear. Metaphor already implies a space between the word and its intended meaning. As various interpretations of the trope reveal, metaphor forces the reader to reorganize the way we ordinarily conceive words, and the distinction made between the word or sentence meaning and the utterance meaning shows that an elliptical space emerges between word and meaning and produces, in the process, a series of relations. When Stein insists on Melanctha's 'wanderings' and yet refuses to define what she means by the term, she is already engaging in an elliptical game where the metaphor suggests a series of relations and hermeneutic possibilities. Metaphor, like repetition, but for different reasons, can be seen as a form of linguistic masking: a refusal to write literally, and a demonstration that the relationship between words and things is not quite as straight forward as Saussure's signifier/signified correlation would suggest.<sup>41</sup> If the mask, according to Gates, plays out the dialectic between opposing ideologies, then the white mask that Melanctha suggests Jeff wears, allows us to see the way in which the dynamics of Melanctha's African mask unfolds and undermines the concrete reality of language that Jeff must cling to. In his desire to know if "we know at all really what each other means by what we are always saying" (p. 90), Jeff insists that the word 'really', as an adverbial qualifer, stabilizes language and meaning.

Indeed, the more Jeff tries to assert some sort of hold on Melanctha's meaning, the more he finds that he 'really knew nothing' (p. 91). The frustration for Jeff with Melanctha's use of language is that it fails to qualify her reality for him. He

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<sup>41</sup> M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 6<sup>th</sup> edn (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1993). See pages 67-8 for a discussion of various interpretations of metaphor.

insistently repeats that “I don’t know anything real about you Melanctha” ([. 112). Jeff’s repetition of the word ‘real’, to define Melanctha ontologically, demonstrates that the ‘very act of invoking the real over and over again actually multiplies it’ (North, p. 286). If reality can never be named through language, then Stein’s linguistic masking reflects much of Derrida’s thoughts about language as a play of differences. The more Jeff seeks to respond to language literally and read Melanctha’s words in the same way, the greater the gap between his understanding and her intention. Because he insists on determining meaning through a series of adjectival and adverbial qualifiers, he finds that the definition of what he intends and understands slips from his grasp.

Words exist literally for Jeff; what he says reflects exactly what he means: “No, Miss Melanctha too, I don’t mean this except only just the way I say it. I ain’t got any other meaning Miss Melanctha, and it’s that what I mean when I am saying about being really good” (p. 85). Jeff’s literal interpretation of ‘really’ is designed to reinforce the act of being good; for Melanctha, adjectival or adverbial qualifiers mask a linguistic instability of the word. For example, she states

It certainly is all Dr. Campbell because you is so afraid you will be losing being good so easy, and it certainly do seem to me Dr. Campbell that it certainly don’t amount to very much that kind of goodness (p. 87).

What Melanctha identifies in Jeff’s need to literally read words is a desire to fix meaning so that social and cultural forms of identity and behaviour are inclusive and prescriptive. But, as Melanctha goes on to suggest, Jeff’s literal interpretation of the word ‘good’ and his need to create a relation between the word and its sign means that language is lost to him already. If language, and thus meaning, is the effect of difference and deferral, meaning will always be lost to Jeff. According to North, even ‘in the act of assuring their hearers that they can speak the truth, speakers like Jeff Campbell convict themselves of lying’ (p. 287). Jeff is aware of the evanescence of language, of the masking that exists in speech, yet he holds steadfastly to reading language literally in order to define some sort of logical and



ontological parameters of existence. The fact that Jeff understands that to 'lose it was to say it', reveals an appreciation of the way in which language presupposes a duplicity of layers; 'losing' is the spacing of signs in Derrida's terms.

Melantha, on the other hand, acknowledges that meaning can never be fixed or assured. The space in between black and white, reality and fantasy, male and female is the place where the potential of language, sexuality and culture can be played out. Melantha's pleasure in masking her meaning is designed to expose the conflict between two approaches to language and identity, a conflict articulated by Clare in a brief note to Irene: "'Rene dear, it may be just that, after all, your way may be the wiser and infinitely happier one. I'm not sure just now' (p. 178). Jeff's literal approach to life and his conscious masking of feeling is what destroys his relationship with Melantha. Melantha's dislocation of meaning, which remains undefined, ensures that there is no room for inclusion between the two. Clare's words to Irene, undermined by 'may be', indicates Clare's belief that Irene's way, like Jeff's, is motivated by an adherence to racial and sexual differences. The masking of meaning through ambiguity, and linguistic instability, shows how the mask becomes a means for Larsen and Stein to break with mimetic theories of literary and pictorial representation. Admittedly, Stein's stylistic use of repetition, which is not designed to capture black dialect or to represent realistically the speech of black people, does, nonetheless, demonstrate her belief that sexual differences must be challenged through the language that articulates them.

The more contact Irene has with Clare, the more she is forced to question her own assumptions about sexual and racial desire. Her discussion with Brian about 'passing' (p. 185) forces Brian to admit that if he knew why people 'passed', he would 'know what race is' (p. 185). When Brian tells Irene that 'it excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it,' he articulates the tension in Irene's own position. On the one hand, she is contemptuous because Clare undermines all the values about race and 'racial uplifting' that seem the 'right thing' (p. 195) for

Irene to do. On the other hand, she admires it because it suggests the possibility of transcending the burden of race and sex.

Increasingly, towards the end of the novella, Irene is frustrated by Clare's alterity and she moves closer to a physical and psychic breakdown. The material security of the roles by which she has chosen to live her life, which involve her in a negation of her true self, are revealed to be a hopeless sham. She comments, 'She was caught between two allegiances, different yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her' (p. 225). This acknowledgement of her sexual and racial burden demonstrates Irene's double bind. Racially, she cannot escape the role she has created for herself as advocate for 'racial uplifting'; sexually, she is inscribed with the discourse of heterosexuality, which she gets nothing from. Constantly afraid to face the consequences of living within the necessity of racial and sexual difference, Irene refuses to confront her fears.

She locates Brian's unhappiness in geographical terms; she seems not to want to admit that Brian's desire to be in Brazil is not just physical but sexual too. Increasingly unable to respond to Clare's sexual presence, obsessed by the belief that Clare will 'steal her husband and despairing of Brian's emotional abandonment, Irene clings to what she has always known.'<sup>42</sup> Her determination to 'hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain' (p. 235) reflects an inability to appreciate the dynamics and potential of Clare's 'passing'. Like Jeff, and Rose, in 'Melanctha', Irene's language, 'fixed' and 'certain', foregrounds a resistance to the ambiguity of Clare's racial mask, where the meaning of racial and sexual differences collapses.

The final scene in which it is suggested that Irene pushes Clare to her death has important consequences for Larsen's vision of a female selfhood able to transcend race and sex. Just as Clare had inserted herself between Irene and Brian, in a

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<sup>42</sup> Davis believes the material for this episode derived from Larsen's knowledge that her husband, Samuel, was having an affair with a white woman.

sublimated vision of female desire, Irene breaks that dyad by refusing to face up to its possibilities. To dispose of Clare is to dispose of a racial and sexual signifier that floats intangibly about in the text, disrupting all those certainties that make life bearable for people like Jeff, Irene and Rose. The ending of the novel, suggests Blackmer, affirms Irene's need to 'uphold the "veil" or racial and sexual self-division and maintain her security' (p. 261). In the same way, we might also suggest that Larsen is unable to get beyond race and sex divisions; like Stein, she e-races subversive desire from the text.

Similarly, Jeff cannot relate to the sexual and racial ambiguity that Melanctha represents. The impasse between them results from Jeff's need to 'be quiet, and to live regular' (p. 146). Rose, who is the instrument of Melanctha's final rejection, acts in a similar way to Irene Redfield, although Rose never understands the significance of Melanctha's racial and sexual masking. Rose rejects Melanctha on the pretext that she does not understand the 'the right way she should do' (p. 167). Her real fear, however, is that Melanctha will take Sam from her, thus undoing her position of being 'really married' (p. 59). Irene convinces herself that Clare, too, desires her husband, Brian, and that she 'got the things she wanted' (p. 236). However, unlike Rose, what Irene represses is her understanding that Clare represents the possibilities of living beyond the conventional boundaries of race and sex. In pushing Clare, Irene 'passes' into a spiritual death that she acknowledges as she sinks to the ground (p. 242). According to McDowell, the ending of the novel repeats that of *Quicksand*, in that Larsen punishes 'the very values the novel implicitly affirms, to honor the very value system the text implicitly satirizes' (p. 271). Melanctha is sent to a home for consumptives where she dies. Where Irene Redfield is aware of the consequences of her actions and rejection of Clare, Rose Johnson remains unaware of the impact of her rejection of Melanctha. This, in many ways, has to do with Stein's stereotypical representation of Rose's childish simplicity that suggests she would be incapable of articulating and identifying Melanctha's 'otherness'.

### Stein's Modernism and the Issue of Race

What conclusions, then, do we draw from the comparisons between Stein's 'Melanctha' and Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Larsen's *Passing*? Given the similarities in representations of racial masking in these two texts, how do we distinguish between them? Both Stein and Larsen attempt to articulate the difficulties of living within prescribed parameters of racial and sexual differences and the problems inherent in trying to get beyond these; both women negotiate female relationships as a place free from sexual and racial categories and divisions. There is, however, a fundamental difference that needs to be addressed in these two stories. I come back here to Blackmer's important distinction between the two writers. She argues that Stein uses the mask as a vehicle for her modernity and that Larsen inhabited the mask. Furthermore, she adds that 'in "Melanctha" Stein domesticates the issues of cultural difference and historical absence raised by the African mask by exploring the consciousness of racial and sexual minorities who are colonized *within* Western culture by projections of primitivism' (p. 263).

I do not think, as Blackmer suggests, that Stein was interested in exploring the projections of primitivism in what seems for Blackmer a totally innocent manner. Indeed, Stein's use of the primitive is both positively racist and what her story of female 'otherness' depends on. As I have tried to show in the comparison with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Stein's ability to write about sexual otherness is tied in with a racial appropriation of the stereotypes of black sexuality and deviancy; that is the only way her story can work. Rather than exploring that primitiveness, she simply reinforces it as a stereotype associated with the African-American, male and female, and 'colonizes' it within her text. Furthermore, the relationship between race and history is also problematic. I have argued, in Chapter Two, that Stein's story 'deconstructs' the relationship between history and identity and I believe Blackmer is right when she argues that Stein

'symbolizes the problems of constructing an adequate language of lesbian sexuality in the absence of a historical record of a lesbian community' (p. 245). However, this also has implications at the level of race in the story.

When I identified Stein's 'deconstruction' of historical identity, I did so at the level of the language in the text and the consequences of this for Stein's articulation of a creative, gendered identity. At a stylistic level, I believe that Melanctha's inability to remember is associated with Stein's insistent argument that identity was not consistent with a beginning, middle and end, but with a becoming-of-the-self in the continuous present. Identity is the endless repetition and deferral of a presence, which is also an absence. In the context of race, this becomes problematic. Blackmer is right to show that the absence of a viable history by which to explain Melanctha reduces her story to 'immutable if not incongruous "facts of nature"' (p. 249). Yet, Blackmer seems only too eager to move on from this fact without articulating the problem of the double displacement of history at work in the text. Stein displaces her own sexual 'history' onto that of the African-American race. In so doing, she also delimits the history of the African-American race, despite claiming that this was her 'negro' story. The vehicle of race does not draw attention to issues of race, but to issues of sexuality. All the time that Jeff Campbell is talking about the 'colored people', the context of the story places that 'history' in opposition to Melanctha's 'forgetting' of history.

Whereas Larsen and Jacobs inscribe the sexual and racial differences that historically oppressed them as women, Stein appropriates a sexual and historical racial stereotype, not as Blackmer, implies, to explore projections of primitivism but to reinforce projections of primitivism; we do not get beyond the stereotype of the loose woman. Furthermore, to present racial history as an absence is to collude in the erasure of black identity, to deny the implicit relationship between race and sex that writers like Larsen and Jacobs were so aware of.

Larsen and Jacobs place their stories within explicit historical contexts. Jacobs

writes out of slavery in order to persuade her readership of its wrongs. These specific wrongs, besides the brutality and dehumanization of the African, are concerned with the limits of conventional images of female sexuality for the black woman whose experience of race and sex place her outside those conventions. Larsen writes at the centre of the Harlem Renaissance, a period in black history concerned with the representations of black life and an assertion of the self.<sup>43</sup> In each case, these women explore the issue of race and gender as it affected them directly; Stein, on the other hand, mapped her experience of sexual and gender difference onto a racial body. She used the figure of the 'mulatta', stylistically, to capture the essence of her modernity in language. At a semantic level, the content of her story reinscribes European attitudes to the African and Africa as a space on which to write one's desires, something that critics like Barkan, Bush and North seem to want to celebrate. Racial history is subservient to a displaced sexual history and in the process tells us nothing about the experiences of black men or women, or the ways in which racial division informs gender division for the African American.

This alone prompts me to suggest that Stein's modernity is undermined in this story because she fails to write, from the perspective of race, a modern 'Negro' story'. Blackmer places Stein along side Larsen as a writer who shares, in the project of modernity, a desire to uncover the way in which sexual taboos operate in tandem with racial prejudice; I think this statement needs to be reassessed. As I have said, I believe that Stein wants to challenge sexual taboos, not in conjunction with racial prejudice but at the expense of racial prejudice. We can only really appreciate this text as Stein's first 'modern' piece if we accept that her modernism is one written at the expense of a racial history of African Americans and that her modernism, which delineates sexual and textual otherness, stylistically, only reinscribes a black sexual otherness thematically.

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<sup>43</sup> In *Harlem: The Great Black Way, 1900-1950* (London: Orbis Publishing, 1982), p. 197, Jervis Anderson states that the New Negro writers represented in art what the black nationalists represented in politics.

## Conclusion

Like many of the critics I have discussed in this thesis, Marianne DeKoven, Lisa Ruddick and Jayne Walker, to name a few, I too came to Gertrude Stein's 'Melanctha' with a keen sense of the text's significance from a feminist and deconstructive perspective. I blindly convinced myself that 'Melanctha' could be read innocently as a text in which, as DeKoven argues, Stein's experimental aesthetic is powerful and revolutionary: it stands in stark contrast, in many ways, to the nineteenth-century's insistence on representing human life over a prolonged period of time, from beginning to end. Whilst my belief in the centrality of 'Melanctha' to Stein's later texts, textually and thematically, is not diminished, my understanding of this text's significance in relation to Stein's claim for its modernity has undergone an important reassessment in light of recent critical studies on Stein's use of race. Most of the criticism of this text has concentrated on Stein's use of Melanctha as a female character, who subverts cultural paradigms of gender and identity through her language and actions, and I take no exception to this; in fact, such analyses, which I discuss in this thesis, provide fruitful means of understanding just how far Stein could challenge nineteenth-century discourses about specific gendered roles for women. However, the fact that most critics seemed reluctant or unwilling to discuss the issue of race should have alerted us to a critical problem of the text. How could we, as readers, fail to understand the significance of Stein's racism to her modernist claims that this is her 'negro' story? I, for one, had neglected to think about this until recently.

The project of this thesis, then, has been to bring together a range of feminist and deconstructive readings of 'Melanctha' in order to demonstrate Stein's dynamic challenge to issues of gender and identity through her use of the continuous present, narrative structure and repetition. In Chapters One and Two, the concentration of discussion focused on Stein's aesthetic use of the continuous present and repetition in order to expose her concerns about gender and identity. In Chapter One, I read

'Melanctha' through the trope of the marginal and Marilyn Farwell's trope of the 'metaphoric lesbian'. This chapter demonstrated the ways in which the narrative trajectories of the main characters reflected the conflict between traditional narrative forms, such as a linear, diachronic narrative with its emphasis on beginning, middle and end, and Stein's challenge to this through *Melanctha*, whose narrative trajectory circles back on itself, insisting that the continuous present is the only means of representing experience. As a 'metaphoric lesbian', *Melanctha*'s position in the text enabled her to subvert and undo the conventions of female sexual behaviour that had oppressed women for centuries. I tried to show how these issues are present in the other two stories in *Three Lives*, but find their culmination in 'Melanctha', where issues of female desire and appropriate female behaviour are overtly put into question. In many ways, this chapter developed a long line of thinking begun by DeKoven in her study *A Different Language* but goes beyond DeKoven in its exploration of the 'lesbian haunting' in the text.

Chapter Two is an extension of Chapter One and the discussion of Stein's aesthetic. Many critics had discussed Stein's texts, although not 'Melanctha', from the feminist and deconstructive perspectives of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. It seemed to me, as I read 'Melanctha' that Stein's concerns with gender and identity brought her closer to French philosopher, and father of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida. I have tried, then, in this chapter, to show that feminism and deconstruction can work productively as a means of articulating the problems of epistemology and subjectivity. It also seemed to me that as I read Stein's lectures and essays about her writings, she actually prefigured much of what Derrida had to say about writing, language and identity. Indeed, her concerns with these issues are tested out in 'Melanctha' and find their genesis in poems such as 'Lifting Belly', and 'Patriarchal Poetry'.

In Chapter Three, I moved on to a deconstructive and feminist approach to the text through the figure of the *flâneuse*. Reading 'Melanctha' against critical studies of women and streetwalking, I wanted to show the ways in which *Melanctha*'s wanderings could be



read as a sign of Stein's engagement in the debate about public and private spaces for men and women. This reading of the text extended the trope of marginality in Chapter One, through a discussion of the prostitute and lesbian as avatars of modern desire. However, as in Chapter One, I endeavoured to show how Stein was unable to move beyond nineteenth-century plot endings for the fallen woman, thus the significance of the text's position between two centuries.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I addressed the issue of race in Stein and returned to Karin Cope's discussion of what it meant to read 'Melanctha' ethically. As I read 'Melanctha' with, and against, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*, I understood the importance of not diverting the question of judgement. Up until this point in my thesis, I had allowed myself the freedom to negotiate readings of Stein which did not demand, necessarily, that I pay attention to Melanctha's position as a black woman. In this final chapter, such a reading forced me to recognise that I could not make a claim for Stein's feminism, even if I might still make a claim for her modernism. If I make a claim for one and not the other, am I still diverting the question of judgement? I do not think so.

Firstly, Stein's use of a black woman in order to address issues of her own sexuality becomes highly suspect and problematic when considering Melanctha's bisexual and biracial liaisons. Melanctha's promiscuity only reinscribes, as I have shown, a belief in the 'natural' promiscuity of the black woman. Whilst it might have been useful to Stein, who felt inhibited talking about her own marginal position as a lesbian, to describe her feelings through the marginal figure of a young 'mulatta', it did nothing for the historical project of black women, attempting to rewrite and debunk the myths that perpetuated black female sexuality as illicit. Furthermore, Stein's representation of the black people of Baltimore is outrageously bigoted and racist, and puts into question her belief that the only serious thinking in the twentieth century has been done by herself. How could she fail to see that her representation of Melanctha was positively flawed?

Secondly, whilst I find Corinne E. Blackmer's discussion of Stein and Larsen engaging, I cannot help but feel that Blackmer, like all those critics before her, bypasses the issue of Melanctha's sexuality, and her promiscuity, in order to reinforce the ways in which Stein's use of the racial mask enables her to deconstruct and question racial and sexual binary oppositions. We can, indeed, read the text in this way, as I have done, but this reading alone, forces us to lose sight of the Stein's racism; in effect, it forces us to stop reading ethically.

What conclusions do I come to, then? Stylistically, I want to make a claim for Stein's modernism in 'Melanctha', rather than 'The Good Anna' and the 'Gentle Lena'. After all, she did say that this story was her step into the twentieth century. Aesthetically, I do not think we can deny that Stein's experimental language, her insistent repetition, as well as her use of the continuous present, place her among the most radical of early twentieth-century writers, extending her thinking and writing in and beyond modernism. Aesthetically and stylistically, she deconstructs constructs of gender and identity, a preoccupation which she continued to write about up until her death.

Thematically, I have offered feminist interpretations of 'Melanctha', arguing that Melanctha's position within the text enables Stein to 'deconstruct' and challenge traditional nineteenth-century discourses about female behaviour and desire. These readings, I would argue, are valid and productive but must be considered in light of Chapter Four and the discussion of Stein's representation of race. Not until we come to accept the blatant racism of this text and its implicit association of black female sexuality with promiscuity, can we better understand the contradictions and problems of this much-discussed text. Not until we open up the various perspectives by which we can read 'Melanctha', including that of the uses to which she puts her Africanist persona, can we fully appreciate Stein's place in the canon and make a more honest critical judgement about the merits and failings of this text. Not until we read Stein ethically, can we understand how this text mediates a space between being aesthetically radical and

politically naive. The contradictions are important and should not, as has happened, be overlooked. I have shown, in this thesis that a broad approach to this text, across feminist and deconstructive analyses, opens up a 'conducting path' between 'Anglo-American' and 'African-American' criticism. Although a long time coming, the benefits of this bi-focal approach can not be ignored, not least because they expose Gertrude Stein as a woman unable to throw off, completely, the literary and cultural stereotypes of her age, and this must force us, as readers and critics, to acknowledge the problems of this text, which cannot politically allow us to make a claim for Stein's feminist place in the canon. That reputation must depend on later works such as 'Patriarchal Poetry', 'Lifting Belly' and works such as *The Geographical History of America*.

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