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Psychoanalytic Representations of “The Gentle Lena” by Gertrude Stein

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ABSTRACT

Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) was a North-American modernist writer expatriate in France, whose work has been mainly associated with Cubism due to her engagement with the avant-garde movement and some of its forerunner artists, such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Juan Gris. Stein's salon in Paris became a place where artistic and intellectual gatherings took place. The present study analyses "The Gentle Lena", a short story published in *Three Lives*, in 1909, in the light of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. From this perspective, I seek to demonstrate that Stein's idea of repetition has parallels in Freud's thought too. Moreover, I intend to discuss that, like Freud, Stein observed the impacts of culture on subjects and society.

Keywords: Gertrude Stein. Modernism. Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysis.

1 INTRODUCTION

Human psyche and its *modus operandi* have long been of scientific interest. In the Humanities, literary studies, and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, have lent themselves to the investigation of the mental apparatus. It is known that literature, due to its narrative characteristics, becomes a fertile ground where, among other themes, subjectivity is revealed. As for psychoanalysis, Freud is known to have resorted to literature for textual evidences in order to analyse and corroborate his arguments during his studies on the unconscious and sexual theory.

Based on such grounds, this study looks into how modernist writer Gertrude Stein's "The Gentle Lena", a short story published in *Three Lives*, in 1909, can help unveil and discuss representations of mental symptoms studied by psychoanalysis, more specifically the compulsion to repeat and depression. "The Gentle Lena" portrays the story of Lena Mainz, the protagonist, who is a German immigrant brought to the USA by her aunt Mrs. Haydon. Her aunt has three American-born children – two daughters and a son. Lena works as a servant right up until she has, by her aunt, an arranged marriage with Herman Kreder. The couple has four children, but both Lena and their fourth child die at labour. The story takes place in the fictional town called Bridgepoint. Time in the narrative takes place from the time Lena had worked as a servant for four years, considering she had been brought to the USA when a teenager until she dies after married with four children. From this perspective, the analysis of "The Gentle Lena" will be carried out in order to evidence some psychoanalytic representations. The close reading of the text will focus on the dislocation in meaning through its metaphors and traces of irony, as well as its rhetorical composition. Literature and Psychoanalysis seek to investigate deeper levels of messages certain linguistic constructions convey. Language, therefore, becomes Stein's and Freud's main instrument for the human psyche investigation. This said, it is through language that this research will be carried out.

As readers delve into the Steinian style, one realises Gertrude Stein's use of repetition as a narrative strategy, or "insistence", as she used to call it. Her rhetorical device points to possible latent contents that lie unconscious in the characters portrayed in the short story. By reading the repetitions, readers are likely to ponder over such recurrent patterns of behaviour and wonder why. Stein's writing technique suggests that there must be something below the

surface of those repetitive words and sentences. Having said this, this study intends to investigate the human psyche and its implications on behaviour.

Moreover, the present research also seeks to discuss how different social fabrics can contribute to an increasing mental symptom – depression. In “The Gentle Lena”, the protagonist, Lena, works as a metaphor for this type of mental suffering. Both literary studies and psychoanalysis acknowledge the fact that social contexts can influence subjectivities. Retrospectively, the time between late 19th and early 20th centuries is marked by the second period of the industrial capitalist society, as suggested by Joel Mokyr (1998). Such regime has evolved into our capitalist consumer society. Although civilization has achieved significant scientific and social advancement, one cannot deny that this same civilization has produced profound discontents.

2 CULTURAL-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF “THE GENTLE LENA”

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human drive of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over forces of nature to such an extent that with help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man.

Freud

There is no firmer grasp on human reality than that provided by Freudian psychoanalysis

Lacan

Late 19th century established a new social fabric that caused profound impacts on subjects, culture, politics and economy, most of which led to some unrest. The new way of life in Europe and the United States was institutionalised mainly by the dominant Victorian era. The new lifestyle was built around technology, industries and large-scale production. According to *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1998), the USA, at the turn of the 20th century, was about to launch their way of life to the world: “by 1893 just about all of the elements we identify with modern America were in place” (3). Such changes were triggered by the ongoing Industrial Revolution and the consolidation of Capitalism. However, as Carter and Friedman (2013) suggest, some revolutionary scientific discoveries and the Suffrage movement were soon to bring up some critical debates regarding the patriarchal structures, rigid class and gender constraints.

The imperative patriarchal structure back then, which unfortunately still seems to resonate in postmodern life, was the centre of repression and discontent, as well as the source of inspiration for those who began the various artistic movements just before the turn of the twentieth century and which would be intensified over the following decades until World War II. Among the artists who made harsh critiques on such regime were mainly writers, painters, and the people in the theatre. This new artistic and highly political movement is what is known as Modernism. A rather broad term, modernism is sure to be of extreme relevance to the study of society nowadays.

Among modernist writers, Gertrude Stein, was a *bon vivant* and openly lesbian. She is an example of an artist who engaged in such movement to fight the patriarchal system. In 1903, Gertrude Stein was bound for Europe where she would establish herself for the rest of her life. The search for new experiences aiming at distancing oneself from ingrained inscriptions of a culture was rather common among modernist writers, especially North-Americans, who fled their own land moving across the Atlantic to find new homes in Europe – London and Paris mainly.

Probably not very comfortable with the oppressive social context of the USA, *27 rue de Fleurus*, in the capital of France, would shelter intellectual gatherings hosted by Gertrude Stein and her lifelong partner, Alice Toklas. It was in Paris that Stein would become a writer and an art collector. She was friends with some of today's most famous cubist artists - Picasso, Cézanne and Matisse. These artists were soon to break with established rules, social norms, questioning what was proper, moral and normal.

Stein's experimental writing, which consisted of long sentences, repetition and almost no punctuation, was undoubtedly mind twisting. If we take the definition of 'sentence' from the *Oxford Dictionary*, we have: "a set of words expressing a statement, a question or an order, usually containing a subject and a verb. In written English, sentences begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop/period (.), a question mark (?) or an exclamation mark/exclamation point (!)". Lucy Daniel (2009), Stein' biographer, says the writer was keen on learning about the human psyche, how people behave, feel, communicate, and especially the content of their expression. Therefore, sentences become Stein's main material of observation and intervention in language. As for the full stops, question marks, commas, and exclamation marks, that is exactly where Stein thought she would break with the conventional rules. According to Carter and Friedman (2013), modernist texts "are often slippery, indeterminate, epistemologically uncertain and shifting with each reading or reader"(7). For modernists, experimenting with new ideas becomes central to deconstruct the conservative concepts of what should be regarded as aesthetically beautiful in order to encompass a lot more possibilities of being.

To illustrate this, in *Tender Buttons* (1914), Stein divided the book in three main themes: objects, rooms, and food. However, often times, the names under each theme do "not" fit in with their descriptions. In 'roast beef', for instance, Stein describes it in a very poetic way:

In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling. In the evening there is feeling. In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching. All the standards have steamers and all the curtains have bed linen and all the yellow has discrimination and all the circle has circling. This makes sand (422).

This estrangement might also tell us the writer is playing exactly with this rigid relationship between signifier and signified. It may inform us that meaning is a construction rather than one possible articulation only. In this sense, Gertrude Stein's literary texts are extremely thought-provoking when rupturing solid conservative ideas of the world around us.

In *Innocent Flowers* (1981), Julie Holledge researched the role of women through their representations in some plays during the early 20th century. The writer reveals that an actress could only achieve recognition in so far as "she can recreate male images of women" (3). Such images were of a docile woman, dutiful wife and having home as her proper sphere. Holledge also contends that plays that were not to portray the established rules of society would be highly censored. Much on the counterculture of such roles, Stein's theatre plays, for instance, had no stage directions which might indicate that it does not really matter whether her characters are man or woman; a way to destabilize the norm.

As for "The Gentle Lena", the short story analysed in this study, Stein portrays most women as being submissive to patriarchal laws and how such cultural aspects can be harmful. Even strong-willed women, like Lena's aunt, Mrs. Haydon, are depicted as reinforcing male-dominant views. Stein constructs a narrative that in many ways reveal the frame of mind of her time regarding women and their place in society. In the case of Lena, there is also power struggle for being an immigrant and having had no access to education. Lena is depicted as someone who has no right to voice her own desires and who thinks that one is supposed to endure such life because it is "natural"; that is the way it should be.

However, it is through Stein's groundbreaking narrative strategy – repetition – that readers can realise how culture, gradually and unconsciously, inflicts suffering on people's psyche. It is by imposing strict rules with economic purposes that culture hinders citizens from having the chance of a healthier mental life style. There is a tendency not to consider the major psychological consequences derived from mass events across the world over the history of civilization. Events such as wars, financial crises, coups d'état, and gender violence, for

instance, leave certain traces in our psyche that will definitely come out in a repetitive disguised way.

At present, just over a hundred years of the beginning of modernism as a political movement, there seems to be a strong attempt to silence what modernists unveiled in terms of repression. Therefore, a return to the counterculture movement of Stein and her contemporaries engaged in the same effort is imperative if the *status quo* is to be changed regarding sexuality, class struggle, and intoxicating cultural prescriptions mainly.

3 GERTRUDE STEIN'S AND SIGMUND FREUD'S VIEWS ON THE HUMAN PSYCHE

There is no there there.
Stein

The poets have said it all before me.
Freud

*To understand people I should listen to what they are not
saying, to what they might never say.*
John Powell

According to Lisa Ruddick (1983), in her essay “William James and the Modernism of Gertrude Stein”, *Three Lives* was written under the influence of Stein’s studies in Psychology as a disciple of James William. The literary critic argues that “Stein used him in ways he would not have anticipated” (63). Such statement reinforces my hypothesis that Stein was closer to the unconscious holding significant contents as much as Freud was. Based on that, this chapter seeks to establish a parallel between Gertrude Stein and Sigmund Freud as to how both modernists had similar views on the human psyche.

The writer who “always wanted to be historical, from almost a baby on” (Vechten vii), before moving to Paris, had been a student at the Harvard Annex, which was later to be called Radcliffe College. The year was 1893 and “higher education for women was the topic of the day” (Sprigge 23). Gertrude Stein was a writer who drew attention to an apparently nonsense literary production, but a closer reading of her texts soon revealed some real gems.

Stein's educational background includes Medicine and Psychology, although she did not graduate in any of the programmes. It was during her undergraduate studies that she had the opportunity to take subjects such as Philosophy, History, English and Modern Languages. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Stein says that it was during her studies in Psychology that she met William James, who was “the important person in her life, the really lasting impression of her Radcliffe days” (65). While under James’ supervision she met a young philosopher and mathematician who was doing research work in psychology and who really impressed her. Together, they “worked out a series of experiments in automatic writing

under the direction of Münsterberg” (65). It was probably during this research that Stein began her expeditions into the realm of the psyche aimed at the unconscious

Automatic writing with suggestions to unconscious reactions was intended to investigate second personality, or dissociative disorder, in hysterical cases. The literary critic, Lucy Daniel (2009), adds the following on automatic writing and William James:

Automatic writing was at the time a favourite tool of mediums and spiritualists who claimed it provided a connection with the spirit world. William James himself was on famously equivocal and open terms with this spiritualist view of the mind’s powers. But psychology officially considered automatic writing a door instead to the unconscious regions of human thought. Its use was particularly common in the treatment of hysteria (30).

Stein was thus assigned to carry out such experiments so that thought would flow onto paper, but apparently she was a lot more interested in what the subjects under scrutiny said rather than in what they wrote. It was during those studies she, “watching those young men and women using the planchette and listening to them hardly vaguely talking, discovered a passionate interest in human nature, which later she expressed in thousands upon thousands of words” (Sprigge 30). Besides, “in taking in not what was being said so much as the way it was being said, the rise and fall, and people’s variety of emphasis in repetition, she thought this was the rhythm of personality” (Sprigge 30). Nevertheless, a report had to be written, and the findings were thus published in the article “Cultivated motor automatism: a study of character in its relation to attention”, which was included in the *Psychological Review* of May 1898.

After mentioning her two types of character, she added: “a large number of my subjects were New Englanders, and the habit of self-repression, the intense self-consciousness, the morbid fear of letting oneself go, that is so a prominent an element in the New England character, was a constant stumbling block” (Sprigge 31). As a consequence of noticing the “rise and fall” in people’s mannerisms and the impact of culture on subjectivity, Stein began her interest in what was to be her main writing material. However, her experimental psychological research did not last long nor did her attempts at a medical career in the scientific fashion of the late 19th century flourish. Gradually her “ties with America were loosening” (Sprigge 42), and, with her brother Leo living in Europe, to whom she was quite close, Stein decided to move across the Atlantic to join him and soon to settle down in Paris at the dawn of the 20th century.

While she was conducting all of these experiments in automatic writing aimed at the treatment of hysteria in the USA, in Vienna, just a little earlier, around 1880s, a young qualifying neurologist, Sigmund Freud heard from Joseph Breuer, his friend and doctor with a reputation already, of the treatment of Ann O. With his patient under suggested hypnosis, Breuer sat by her and listened to all she had to say without interrupting her. At the time, Freud was involved with the study of the anatomy of the nervous system, and three years later, he would be studying hypnosis as a method of treatment for hysteria under the supervision of the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot in Paris. However, without much success, he wrote to a friend saying he had used hypnosis in a different way with his first patient, Frau Emmy Von N, by applying the cathartic method. A few years later, Breuer and Freud published *Studies on Hysteria* in which the focus of investigation was: reminiscence and abreaction (Breuer and Freud 2015). In addition to this, in a second edition of the *Studies*, Breuer writes:

Freud's most important achievement was his invention of the first instrument for the scientific examination of the human mind. One of the chief fascinations of the present volume is that it enables us to trace the early steps of the development of that instrument. What it tells us is not simply the story of the overcoming of a succession of obstacles; it is the story of the discovery of a succession of obstacles that have to be overcome. (54)

From this experience in Paris, Freud would devote his entire life to the study of psychoanalysis and its major theory – the unconscious. Psychoanalysis is a method of investigation whose main instrument is known as free association, in which the patient, or analysand, should speak his/her mind, in order that s/he can alleviate the symptoms of repression. For Freud “the theory of repression is the foundation stone on which the structure of psychoanalysis rests”, and soon it led to another important discovery: that sexuality was behind repression, and “psychoanalytic research traces back the symptoms of patients' illnesses with really surprising regularity to impressions from their *erotic life*” (5).

In recollecting the case of Ann O. to an audience in the USA, Freud recognised Breuer to be the one who first saw that his patient “was in the habit of muttering a few words to herself which seemed as though they arose from some train of thought that was occupying her mind. The doctor, after getting a report of these words, used to put her into a kind of hypnosis and then repeated them to her so as to induce her to use them as a starting-point” (19). The outcome was that the patient began to produce a sort of “daydream – sometimes characterised by poetic beauty”. After putting these fantasies into words “she was as if set free”, but the day

after the symptoms would return, and then again she was asked to talk about whatever came to her mind (20). From the early days of psychoanalysis it is clear that a complete turn in the medical practice of that time was to take place – from gazing to listening. In this new procedure language thus became central as “our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are residues and mnemonic symbols of particular (traumatic) experiences”, Freud stated (23).

Based on these initial results, and although the unconscious functioning is rather complex, we can paradoxically start giving shape to it: memory, language, symbols, reminiscences, traumatic experiences, repression, daydream, and poetic beauty. In describing this non-anatomical place and yet ubiquitous realm of human life, psychoanalyst Carlos Augusto Remor concludes that the “Freudian unconscious is related to what can be defined as infantile, sexual and repressed”¹ (60).

All of these first achievements made by Freud required a systematic study, as well as a consistent and explanatory writing skill, but surprisingly enough his work in terms of language use has brought him close to literature. Psychoanalyst Rogério Henriques says that “in *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud called our attention to his literary style, which distinguishes it from the descriptive medical-scientific language of that time” (145). Additionally, Freud pioneered in a whole linguistic endeavour, considering psychoanalysis exposed eccentric themes that required the re-creation of language in order to expose the new findings. Freud spoke and wrote about realities which had not yet been studied by re-defining concepts individually and socially suppressed and repressed. His unsettling language, that is, the psychoanalytic language gave rise to a real sexual revolution in morphology, syntax, and semantics, and that impacted the least conservative man of letters.

When Freud inaugurated psychoanalysis in 1900, his work faced an enormous resistance. In his autobiographical study (1924), he reveals: “I was completely isolated. In Vienna I was shunned; abroad no notice was taken of me”. Freud’s new method to approach and investigate human beings shook up the misleading puritan conceptions of sexual mores. As argued by Paulo Ferraz, Freud wrote, in his isolation, “a work that hurt human pride” (3), and that is precisely why psychoanalysis has been criticised and not largely accepted. If on one hand Freud had not many followers who soon became his dissidents: Carl G. Jung; Wilhelm

¹ All quotes of Brazilian authors were translated into English by myself.

Stekel; and Adler, on the other hand, his work was recuperated by Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst and philosopher, who returned to Freud's texts and read them in a post-structural perspective, being largely studied at present.

As for Gertrude Stein's literature, the reception of her work was not too different from Freud's. Critics could not believe what they were reading and regarded her style as completely unreasonable. Marjorie Perloff recalls a review on *Tender Buttons*:

‘The words in the volume entitled *Tender Buttons*’, wrote the reviewer for the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, ‘are English words, but the sentences are not English sentences according to the grammatical definition. The sentences indicated by punctuation do not make complete sense, partial sense, nor any other sense, but nonsense’ (36).

Critics could be even harsher on her, Daniel describes one critique by psychologist B.F. Skinner published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, under ‘Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?’ in which he says Stein had “invented a second personality for her narrator, one without a past or much intellect” (32). Daniel then explains the consequence of Skinner's review: “many readers followed him into using automatic writing as an answer to the puzzle of Stein's more challenging techniques, her ‘unintelligible’ sentences” (123). As in a chain reaction, this narrow-minded reception led to other reviews, which also indicate another aspect of society Stein had to deal with, written “in fairly hostile if not outrightly misogynist language, critics not only claimed that Stein was a practitioner of automatic writing but suggested that because Stein's poetry resembled its dissociated effects, it amounted to a proof of her own hysterical tendencies, her own ‘degenerate’ nature.” (31).

On the other hand, among those who enjoy open-minded and thought-provoking reading, Stein soon becomes subject for thought as readers realise there is apparently something out of place, something that designs and reflects new possibilities of using language, thus, new ways of being in the world. She “subverts the non-sense that language – after its centuries of encasement in print – has become. Language, Stein shows, is no longer an instrument of perception but has become an instrument of culture that obscures perception” (Kaufmann 448). Her composition goes beyond traditional rhetoric, and it requires not a conventional interpretative mindset but one that aims at freeing from a bourgeois heritage.

In a book whose title is *A Long Gay Book*, written in 1912, rather bold for that time, Stein intrigued her readers by the following opening sentence: “when they are very little just

only a baby you can never tell which one is to be a lady” (1). By such statement, Stein already differentiated biological sex from gender as being a social and political construction. Later on, in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir was to publish her *The Second Sex*, in which she argued in a feminist critique that one is not born a woman but becomes one. Both writers defend the idea that gender is a social construction. Much in the same vein, Stein subverted hegemonic patriarchal meaning through an unconventional language. Carl Van Vechten, her close friend, wrote:

If Picasso is applauded for painting pictures which do not represent anything he has hitherto seen, if Schoenberg can pen a score that sounds entirely new even to ears accustomed to listen to modern music, why should an employer of English words be required to form sentences which are familiar in meaning, shape, and sound to any casual reader? (xii).

Stein, on her intense search for new meanings, did not want to do what had been done for centuries. The literary and artistic movement she was part of – Modernism – was considered a time of rupture, a conscious intention to let go of old habits so that more liberating content and form could emerge. For modernists, experimenting with different ideas became central to problematise the conservative concepts of what should be regarded as aesthetically beautiful. Stein recreated language to recreate consciousness.

Freud, who also recreated language by deconstructing repressive concepts, allowed patients to express uncomfortable narratives by letting them speak their mind and to realise how past events are ever so present. In “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” (1950), he argues that “fundamental rule of psychoanalysis is the bringing into consciousness of the repressed material”, and achieving consciousness involves language and “the art of interpretation” (40-41). In listening to people and to what may sound nonsense, free association, just as a puzzle, brings the pieces up so that a more coherent and cohesive narrative can be written. Freud also noted that people in general “have forgotten their own infantile sexual activity under the pressure of their education to a civilised life” (67).

The way in which people use language to express themselves can be quite revealing, and, thus, Stein was a keen and attentive listener. She had a lady who helped in the house and who “always wanted to know what Gertrude Stein thought of everybody who came in and out. She wanted to know if she came to her conclusions by deduction, observation,

imagination or analysis” (*The Autobiography* 41). There is a passage in Stein’s biography by Daniel that gives us an idea of how much she was into deeper levels of the human psyche:

During the writing of *The Making of Americans*, while Stein was filling piles of notebooks with her analyses of friends and acquaintances, she pounced on Annette Rosenshine. Stein used Annette as a typist and errand-runner, but also as a guinea pig for her theories on character. Every afternoon at four o’clock the girl would submit to intrusive enquiries about all aspects of her personality out of devotion and a faith in Stein’s ability somehow to cure her of her malaise, and the neuroses Stein had invented for her. She became one of her early disciples (94)

With psychology in mind, Stein found a way to emphasize in her literary work one precious source of information about the unconscious – repetition –, giving readers the chance of some (self) analysis. As one reads her repetitive sentences, the ones in which you “repeat the same and it is no longer the same” (Perloff 42), one is sure to ponder on such recurrent behaviour by experiencing a linguistic journey about subjectivity. Readers are likely to engage on “a therapeutic work which consists in a large measure tracing it back to the past”, as suggested by Freud in his study on repetition (34). Stein's gripping style of composition insists itself on being there. Her literary production has a knack of being strange and even nerve-racking at first glance: first one wonders about Steins characters’ recurrent behaviour, and then one’s own modes of repetition are brought back to mind. Freud did observe the same feature and concluded that this repetitive language acts just like our behaviour: “repetition is transference of the forgotten past” (58).

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1955, Freud underlined that “the phenomenon exhibited in the behaviour of children is a compulsion to repeat” (10), and, in the same text, Freud, in a way, constituted a paradox: how can the principle of pleasure lead to unpleasure? As for this apparent contradiction, he explains:

It must be pointed out, however, that strictly speaking it is incorrect to talk of the dominance of the pleasure principle over the course of mental processes. If such dominance existed, the immense majority of our mental processes would have to be accompanied by pleasure, whereas universal experience completely contradicts any such conclusion. (9)

One possible way to get closer to the pleasure principle is suggested by Antoine Compagnon (2006) when he explains one function of literature: “it corrects the defects of language. Literature speaks to all, it resorts to the common language, but it makes of it a language of its own – poetical or literary” (53). The unconscious – common language turned

into *unheimlich*² – is responsible for the “defects” of our narratives. Psychoanalysis also “speaks to all”, it helps analysts reconcile with their own stories through words and sentences; it encourages them to turn these defects into a more fluid composition.

Stein and Freud worked to restore the faulty character of language which insists on being misleading and insists on repeating itself. This repressed language is the one that has constructed sexuality, identity, time, consciousness, and modern life. Both Stein and Freud have worked to revise a whole set of narratives told about the human experience. On this topic, Terry Eagleton (1996) explains that “to use signs at all entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning, indeed, but me: since language is something I am made out of, rather than merely a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction” (112).

In “The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans”, a lecture Stein delivered in the USA in 1935, she explains the importance of writing as a way to work through memories and faulty narratives as “to think about the bottom nature in people” (Vechten 213). In the art of writing, Stein found she could re-experience her personal narratives: “and I want to tell you about the gradual way of making *The Making of Americas*. I made it gradually and it took me almost three years to make it, but that is not what I mean by gradual. What I mean by gradual is the way the preparation was made inside of me” (211). Stein addresses family life, “the new social arrangements of its time and a complex study of psychological traits” (Daniel 77), which points to her interest on family bonds, culture, and their implications on the psyche. She builds it “with persistent repetition” (Sprigge 74). Such persistence in investigating a human trait – repetition – could be taken as an indication that Stein wanted to go beyond consciousness.

² Freud explains that “the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (1). Besides, “the uncanny can be traced back without exception to something that has been repressed” (16).

4 *THREE LIVES* – “THE GENTLE LENA”: ANALYSIS

*Capitalism is the Lord of time. But time is not money.
That is a monstrous thing. Time is the thread of our lives.*

Antonio Cândido

*Sometimes I have the feeling I write out of an intense curiosity.
When I write I allow myself to have the most unexpected
surprises. In writing I become aware of things that were
unconscious to me,
and as they were unconscious I did not know I knew them.*

Clarice Lispector

*Freud, one of the
grand masters of narrative, could never have invented
psychoanalysis if you couldn't go back into the past, drag it out,
reinterpret it and allow that to free the present.*

Jeanette Winterson

“The Gentle Lena” is one of the three short stories that compose *Three Lives*. According to Sprigge, Stein had to pay so that the book would be published in 1909. Lena, Anna and Melanctha are Stein’s three protagonists, and the short stories are written as third-person narratives. It is no surprise Stein chose to have control over her characters’ (un)conscious behaviour. At a few moments in the narrative, readers are exposed to glimpses of Stein’s characters thinking through brief short speeches that corroborate the narrator’s own views. Her studies in psychology were certainly decisive in the mastery of the fictional human psyche.

Stein recalls in *The Autobiography* she and her brother Leo, during one of their favourite leisure activities, finally

chose the portrait of a woman by Cézanne [and] it was an important purchase because in looking and looking at this picture Gertrude Stein wrote *Three Lives*. 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 (*The Autobiography* 28-29).

Three Lives seems to have been written under artistic circumstances – living abroad, with memories and her studies at the back of her mind, Paris as the place to be in terms of art, and all of her new friends and artworks gathered at 27 *rue de Fleurus*.

Three Lives was her first book to shock most publishers and readers. Many are the accounts that reveal they did not accept her “strange” composition, which explains why the writer had to pay for the book to be published. Nowadays this book has become one of her most studied works in North-American literature. Stein’s repetitive sentences continually dawn on readers that there must be something else underneath the surface. According to Gerardo Rodríguez Salas (2002), another curious fact about Stein and her work is that, although Stein’s works belong to the canon, they seem to remain marginal when compared to other contemporary canons, such as Ernest Hemingway’s and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s works.

As for “The Gentle Lena”, we may assume that “Stein was interested in revealing the way the mind worked”, and in order that readers can have a better grasp of her writing, they “must take in a different idea of time” (Daniel 68-69). Reading Stein’s short story closely today may contribute to broaden the discussion towards the false consciousness sold by Lena’s industrial society which, preserving many of its features, evolved into the consumer society.

Based on such grounds, my analysis of “The Gentle Lena” will take a step further into what has extensively been written on Gertrude Stein’s literary composition by bringing some psychoanalytic insights to the fore. Although my criticism is very much in line with most studies regarding Stein’s language and her unique style as associated with Cubism³, in that they challenge consciousness-raising, Stein’s method of repetition, or “insistence” as she used to call it, may work so as to unhinge unconscious latent contents, thus allowing for an engagement at a deeper level of understanding of our subjectivity in both individual and social dimensions.

Within this perspective, this study also wants to confront contemporary society from a psychoanalytic standpoint, inasmuch as it can shed some light over an unprecedented paradox – how can a merry consumer society produce so much depression? This increasingly recurrent symptom, which seems to emerge from the *modus operandi* of this very specific kind of society is crying for help. Moreover, much of the psychoanalytic theory looks into the implications of culture for individual and social subjectivities, as well as the symptoms it

³ For further readings, see:

Kaufmann, Michael. “Gertrude Stein’s re-vision of language and print in Tender Buttons”. *Modern Literature*, XV: 4 (1989): 447-460.

DeKoven, Marianne. “Gertrude Stein and Modern Painting: Beyond Literary Cubism”. *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 81-95, Winter, 1981.

produces. In *Culture and its Discontents* (1961) Freud says “it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression or some other means) of powerful drives.” (44). When Freud and Stein first started their investigations into the human psyche, hysteria was a social symptom in vogue, which now seems to have been widely disseminated by the ongoing civilization process.

Every mental symptom, to a certain degree, explains Maria Rita Kehl (2009), is social. The Brazilian psychoanalyst explains, in Victorian society, those hysterical women who were mothers, housewives, confined to the domestic sphere and sexually repressed were not consciously making a revolution against the straitlaced social system of their time, but, in fact, they were throwing out what was not working for them; their hysteria was the discontent over that society. As for the 21st century social symptom, Kehl claims that “depression undoes, slowly and silently, the web of meanings and beliefs which sustains and organises social life” (22).

Based on the psychoanalyst’s arguments, it is possible to understand how the vivid social symptom of today excludes the ones who have not been able to, or have not wished to, keep up with the demands and restraints of a pragmatic world. Lena, for instance, “was not an important daughter in the family, because “she was always sort of dreamy and not there” (*Three Lives* 172). In this sense, a pragmatic system is the one in which the web of meanings and beliefs dehumanises human experience and proclaims its social misfits. It produces instead a web of sadness and apathy, or as Stein’s narrator describes Lena as she progresses into her grave – “lifeless” (*Three Lives* 195).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as cited in Kehl (2009), the escalating rate of depression, described as melancholia until the 20th century, is of growing concern in our present time. In the early 2000s, six percent of the world population suffered from depression, and they predict by 2020 it will have become the second cause of mortality in the industrialised world, preceded only by heart diseases as. The statistics are appalling if we consider how science, and in this particular case psychiatry, in an attempt to cope with such distressing figures, has developed anesthetics for human mental suffering. The capitalist system’s obsession, which is market growth, cannot allow for mournful workers and shoppers. According to French psychoanalyst, Elisabeth Roudinesco (2001), in order to control and preserve the euphoria the pharmacological industry, even in times of crisis,

continues to flourish remarkably. Today, there is a pill for anything that may occasionally hinder one's rush to death. Amidst extremely fast-paced life there is no time or room to deal with the complexities of subjectivity – *time is money*.

Roudinesco says modern society “has tried to abolish the idea of social and subjective conflicts” (20). Lena, the protagonist, always got “scolded” for not living up to her social expectations: “she did not know that she was always dreamy and not there” (*Three Lives* 172). Mrs. Haydon, another main character, and who is a slave of modern times, “sometimes got very angry with Lena. She was afraid that Lena, for once, was going to be stubborn, now when it was fixed right for her to be married”(177). As a result of Lena's “inadequacy” towards her social community “Mrs. Haydon was furious with this stupid Lena” (177). In this strict system there is no time for subjective conflicts, we are constantly taught the objective protocols of society that do not allow for such expressions. We soon learn through language there is a whole set of ideas already “fixed right” for us about the family, society, gender and sexuality – a normative rhetoric very well syntactically structured.

However, Stein's narrator knows one can get into a worse state for abolishing any conflict: “Lena did what she had to do the way she had always been taught it. She always kept going now with her working, and she was always careless, and dirty, and a little dazed, and lifeless. Lena never got any better in herself of this way of being that she had had ever since she had been married” (*Three Lives* 194). Given the facts and much aware of such mental scenario, psychoanalysis does not walk hand in hand with the capitalist regime, let alone with the consumer society; on the contrary, psychoanalytic thinking has a different perception of time as it fully understands time is not money; it is the thread of our lives. Furthermore, in Roudinesco's words “people of today become the opposite of the subject” (18). The industrial logic of modern times has altered significantly our perception and ability to distinguish between what is sensible, what really matters and what is just frivolous, what drives us into ephemeral experiences producing this generalised feeling of emptiness.

Stein, in a movement to oppose reactionary ideologies, was rather ironic when carefully chose the words and sentences to represent her characters and their attitudes within capitalist North-American society. “The Gentle Lena”, at first glance, may seem a straightforward story about the displacement of a German girl who is on the threshold of a new life by moving to the United States. In her new country Lena works as a servant, saves up all her wages. In turn, her aunt, Mrs. Haydon, with her “best” intentions, finds her a husband

so that together they can raise their own family and follow suit. The “patient, gentle, sweet and german” girl then marries her “better half” and gives birth to four children. At her last labour, both mother and child die. Apparently, it is a narrative which portrays a conventional family saga.

But a second perusal unfolds a narrative filled with highly political subtexts. In surprisingly similar ways to the social enterprise we live in, the story reveals the consolidation of an intoxicating normative society and the strict well-worn roles that are to be fulfilled. The principles are based on compulsory heterosexual marriage, social ascension, hard work and alienation. “The Gentle Lena” works as a metaphor for the individual and social unconscious in Freud. Characters are portrayed as acting on an unconscious mode of thinking – a compulsion to repeat. They are built up with “persistent repetition” (Sprigge 74). Stein created a narrative strategy in which, by the end of the story, readers are sure to ponder over a feature of the mental functioning that seems universal to human beings. And Lena, also in her repetitive way, stands for the brewing depressive subjectivity – “Lena did not really know that she did not like it” (*Three Lives* 172); “she never seemed to feel very much now about anything that happened to her” (194); and “she just dragged around and was careless with her clothes and all lifeless” (195). Lena represents the sort of subjectivity that stands out as considered mentally “weak” and “ill”, which can only render her oppression and exclusion.

“The Gentle Lena”, through Stein’s groundbreaking writing method, is constructed with an emphasis on the “continuous present” duration; a repetitive way of thinking and consequently living. Life in the narrative takes place within a considerable time span, but, day in, day out, characters are constantly reexperiencing themselves. As for this neurotic trait Freud reveals: “repressed content is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences”, and adding that “it is clear that the greater part of what is reexperienced under the *compulsion to repeat* must cause the ego unpleasure, since it brings to light activities of the repressed instinctual impulses” (Freud 21).

However, Stein’s characters’ repetition is, in my viewpoint, her main mechanism to unhinge unconscious manifested contents. It is only by not progressing but instead delaying the readers’ perception of time that one can possibly get in touch with the characters’ repetitive habits and wonder why. Lucy Daniel argues that Stein composed her fiction based on the fact “writing was not simply the expression of one’s thought but a way of understanding one’s own thought and how they work; how oneself works” (88). In delving

into Stein's characters' thoughts one might have the opportunity to retain the meaning of one's own experience.

If Stein's characters had the chance to free associate or talk about their dreams, for instance, psychoanalysts, in a reconstruction setting, which is the moment when analysands have the chance to retell their own narratives, would probably be able to identify some of their traumatic events that have been "forgotten" – either because they took place in very early childhood thus cannot be remembered or the ones, for painful reasons, are not really welcome back to memory. On such experiences, Freud states: "the greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering" (Freud 151). This seems to be the price to pay for abolishing any subjective and social conflicts. Moreover, it is important to highlight that a trauma is not only caused in childhood affecting children only; whole societies are subject to distressing mass events. As a haunting example of a social traumatic experience and how it tends to reproduce itself, the Brazilian dictatorship and the silence it imposed on its citizens are still rather "sound" and echoing, both in the passiveness of the population, as well as in the extremely violence used by our police force.

In *Recreating Sexual Politics*, Victor Seidler (1991), argues that in capitalist society "we grow up being insensitive to what we experience emotionally; we are rarely even aware of what we are feeling" (105), which seems to be Lena's case who "never really knew herself what she needed" (*Three Lives* 189). Lena's progressive depression, culminating in her death, stems from a society in which one's wishes and desires are constantly overlooked. The post-modern capitalist system, although it promises much the opposite, deprives its members of the chance to learn about human experience, subjective time, family bonds, social relations and sexuality from a more in-depth perspective. Individuals hardly ever have the opportunity to experiment, feel for themselves and discover about one's own myriad of past and present inscriptions that construct subjectivities. But instead it is constantly prescribing and subtly forcing members into wearing standardised labels. This same system that homogenises everyone and everything cannot promote satisfaction and well-being. Psychoanalysis knows human desires are to remain unfulfilled. We can only temporarily satisfy what soon reveals to be unsatisfying. Perhaps, this is exactly the kind of notion that best suits a market that makes fraudulent promises with its products.

"The Gentle Lena" narrates a social structure that "minimises our relationships with children, with friends and lovers" (Seidler 21). After Lena's marriage, for instance, "Mrs.

Haydon never saw any more of her niece. Mrs. Haydon had now so much trouble with her own house, and her daughters getting married, and her boy, who was growing up, and who was getting so much worse to manage” (*Three Lives* 194). In fact, the boy, Mrs. Haydon’s son represents the return of the repressed, something that is being overlooked but keeps coming back. This failure in human relationships, Seidler argues, is a consequence of a neurotic family structure stressed by the capitalist mores. Such breakdown in family and social relations seem to have its origins in unknown but ever so present contents. Stein’s narrator reveals how families prefer to draw a veil over relevant issues, mainly over sexuality. Lena’s future husband’s mother, for instance, “did not discuss the matter with Herman. She never thought that she needed to talk such things over with him. She just told him about getting married to Lena Mainz who was a good worker and very saving and never wanted her own way” (*Three Lives* 178). In being a “good worker” and “very saving” of money, and her sexual drive, Lena becomes ideal for the industrial system.

However, this lack of acceptance of the intrinsic elements of individuals in society undermines its own structure for not acknowledging that family life plays a significant part, almost determining, in later social and intimate relations. Seidler notes that “through psychoanalysis we come to realise that there are ‘patterns’ repeated in our relationships. What is striking is how years later in our close relationships we are continually ‘reworking’ the unresolved conflicts in our relationships with our parents” (101). Domineering Mrs. Haydon “knows” exactly what is right and satisfying for everyone: “and here I am so good to you, and find you a good husband so you can have a place to live in all your own” (*Three Lives* 177). The husband she found for Lena is Herman Kreder who “always did whatever his father and his mother wanted” and is known for having a “sullen temper”(176). This young man, “obedient to his parents did not care much to get married, he liked to be with men and he hated to have women with them” (176). Towards the end it becomes clear that Lena was forced to marry a man who “did not really care much about her” (189). After they marry the newly couple moves in with his parents, “and so they began all four to live in the Kreder house together, and Lena began soon with it to look careless and a little dirty, and to be more lifeless with it, and nobody ever noticed much what Lena wanted, and she never really knew herself what she needed” (189). In all this rather overwhelming family setting, disguised as “the proper thing to do”, lies sexual repression.

Lena's social fabric is mainly organised around the heteronormative family and hard work with a very capitalist end in view, as well as social "order". The family, below the State, represents the authority and, within the domestic sphere, was responsible for passing on all the values of this social machinery. But, in order to draw the puritan picture of happiness and virtue, what everyone should aspire to, sexuality had to be repressed. In "*Civilized*" *Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness* (1908), Freud explains that industrial society, in order to achieve its high production, which "can be held only by great mental effort" (22), worked hard to impose a ban on sexuality. This way, "the injurious influence of culture reduces itself in all essentials to the undue suppression of the sexual life in civilized peoples (or classes) as a result of the 'civilized' sexual morality which prevails among them" (24). "The Gentle Lena" thus emerges by suppressing as the typical cultural organization described by Freud.

Portrayed in the character of Mrs. Haydon, the narrator informs readers she is the "hard, ambitious and well meaning" woman who "always hit the ground very firmly and compactly" and who brought up her daughters "very firmly". These girls were "well taught for their position". And, so that everything was under control, "the mother always sat between her two big daughters, firm, directing and repressed" (*Three Lives* 170). As already mentioned Mrs. Haydon "knows", with full consciousness, the girls in the family have to find a husband, despite their sexual orientation and raise a family to serve the State and the industry by working, producing and being loyal to the system. Mrs. Haydon becomes the superego of society as she embodies the ideals and the rules; she "knows" what is right and wrong, what is relevant for society, she establishes the norms for the well-being of its citizens by repressing what should not emerge.

Mrs. Haydon symbolises institutions of power, such as the State, the market, the school, science and the family, to name but a few. She has always "listened and decided, and advised all of her relations how to do things better" (*Three Lives* 171). In listening, deciding and advising there are always implicit rhetorical devices that impose social norms. In euphoric societies the pieces of advices aimed at promoting satisfaction and personal growth turn out to be enslavement. Along the narrative we discover Lena is, to use Spivak's (2010) famous phrase, "the subaltern who cannot speak", and her husband is also deprived of his own right to choose. Attentive readers can identify subtle examples of patronising attitudes disguised as 'generous', 'familiar', 'gentle', 'decent', 'well started', 'well-to-do', 'well

taught', 'well meaning', 'hard working', all in the name of progress and the great expectations of a glorious triumph.

In the narrative Mrs. Haydon and the girls go back to Germany to see their relatives, and the narrator tells us not only how they feel about their new life in the USA, the prospering country, but also how they deal with life histories: "and she [Mrs. Haydon] patronized her parents grandly [...]. They were not peasants, and they lived in a town of some pretension, but it all seemed very poor and smelly to Mrs. Haydon American born daughters" (*Three Lives* 171). The United States are known for their narcissistic ideologies. They find themselves superior to any other country and coercively lay down their hegemonic way of life.

"The Gentle Lena" is a harsh critique of the social system Stein resisted. Her engagement in a political movement through art shows a discomfort in relation to the *status quo* of her society. She escaped and looked back on the American Dream from a distance. The dream Stein left behind is a powerful narcissistic ideology which never ceases to make its victims. According to Garcez, the American Dream "is based on concepts such as liberty, independence, free enterprise, prosperity, justice, and equality" (183). But when we reflect on this unfulfilling way of life it seems the so-called 'American Dream', which has become an imperative across the Western world and a demand for market growth and freedom, has actually become the 'American Nightmare', or rather, the global nightmare.

Of course, the 21st century enterprise has become more technoscientifically sophisticated – we have magical pills and *iPhones*. Besides, the technologies of the self have also improved considerably – state-of-the-art rhetorical images are constantly informing us of who we are and what is best for us; a capitalist force dictating identities and ways of life. But, individual and social compulsions to repeat seem to have just acquired new gadgets that render repetition a more high-tech style. The 'Pleasure Principle' offered by publicity in the consumer society has continually built up dissatisfaction instead, depression, suicide, drug dependency, violence, all sorts of discontents which are quite in the opposite direction.

Modern society, argues Roudinesco, "wants to banish from view the reality of unhappiness, death and violence" (20). However, death, sexuality, sadness, happy moments of being, all of which are important matters of the human experience; we can only come into being through such "conflicts". The constant denial of individual and social memory as history, subjectivity, means of learning, is the worst kind of violence a regime can practice

against its members – irreparable atrocity. The consumer society does not allow for yesterday, for the past. In order to maintain the market dynamics of vitality, people have to steadily seek for novelty, as if subjectivity worked in the same fashion.

As a result, we are left with enormous atrophy of the subjectivity. Although subjectivity is the interaction between conscious and unconscious forces, psychoanalysis informs us that most of the processes of our psyche are unconscious, and that we are mostly not aware of. Psychoanalysts, Fernando Aguiar and Zeila Facci, explain that “the unconscious in Freud is what genuinely constitutes subjectivity and not just an undesirable detail of it” (530-31). Moreover, implicit within this idea of moving ahead towards a better future is the idea of not looking back on past events. Individual and social memories are constantly being suppressed. Not knowing where we came from can only make us hope for the future.

In this regard, another disastrous compulsion we find in Mrs. Haydon is her attitude towards time. She lives for the future, an empty place, and rejects the past, which is a typical Western cultural obsession regarding time. Mrs. Haydon reinforces memory suppression by advocating future is the only place to be: “she arranged their present and their future for them, and showed them how in the past they had been wrong in all their methods” (*Three Lives* 171). The consequences of such ideology are of tremendous negative impact on society as they can only produce both individual and social alienation. And to neglect that past is ever so present is to neglect the unconscious in Freud; what makes us human beings.

Just over a hundred years after Stein’s and Freud’s insights into our mental traps, today’s misleading morals lie in the consumption of products, the quest for identities, individualism, freedom and all sorts of “successful” ideologies. There has certainly been a major paradigm shift in the social fabric of Lena’s society considering we are now treated more as consumers than workers, but the very end has not changed at all. In fact, in order to maintain the ethos of capitalism, the ‘time is money’ frame of mind has co-opted everyone into its law – consumption. Even those who are not buying products have become potential consumers of attitudes, norms, mores and ideologies, as suggests Kehl. The ‘self-made man’ from the past has given way to the self-failed man of our time – from modernity to post-modernity.

Despite all changes, Freud’s “*Civilized*” *Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness* is rather contemporary. The psychiatric list of mental disorders does not cease to be

added. Roudinesco says “each patient is treated as an anonymous being belonging to an organic totality. Immersed in a mass where each is in the image of a clone, they find they are prescribed the same range of medications whatever their symptoms” (19). Based on such argument, a parallel between the way the market deals with its consumers and the way psychiatry treats its patients indicates post-modernity is suffering from an acute infection. Our current commodified society and its confused values, with roots in Mrs. Haydon’s ideology, are constantly prescribing the same range of life style to every soul.

Roudinesco warns us of the dangers in relation to a system that is always promoting the erasure of vital issues that make us human beings by stating that “death, the passions, sexuality, madness, the unconscious, the relation to another: it is these that mold the subjectivity of each person, and no science worthy of the name will ever exhaust the matter, fortunately” (12). However, much on the contrary, we seem to have gradually grown away from the fundamentals of our existence, but definitely not away from what lies in the deepest recesses of our soul.

5 CONCLUSION

In this study I have looked into some aspects of the human psyche, such as a compulsion to repeat and depression; how they relate to the unconscious as described by Sigmund Freud's framework; and how they are disclosed in Gertrude Stein's short story, "The Gentle Lena". This investigation has also considered the fact that culture plays an enormous part in subjectivity construction, as well as how it contributes to make individual and social subjectivities ill.

As a result of my analysis of Stein's text, it can be argued that modernist writer Gertrude Stein was also interested in the unconscious and its implications on behaviour. Moreover, psychoanalysis has proved relevant to literary studies to look into the human and social realms. Having said this, it proves relevant to analyse the other short stories in *Three Lives* – "The good Anna", and "Melanctha" – under the scrutiny of Freud's theories. Moreover, bringing psychoanalysis back to Literary Studies may broaden scholars' views on subjects and society.

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