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# Women and Novels: Modernist Edition, by Gertrude Stein

Cecilia Koncharr Farr\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>St. Catherine University – United States

## Abstract

I begin with the exhibition "La Famille Stein" at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2012. Wandering through the chronologically arranged reconstructions of the Stein family's modern art collections, I was repeatedly struck by Gertrude Stein's aesthetic adventurousness. Early on the three Stein siblings had similar interests-chieflly Matisse, Picasso and Cézanne. But as the modernist movement became increasingly experimental and defiant-past the Fauves, beyond the Blue period, through Cubism and Futurism and beyond-soon only Gertrude remained a collector. The final room of the exhibition spoke volumes: it was huge and full of artistic representations of Gertrude Stein. There was the famous hunched profile of the Buddha-like Jo Davidson sculpture, the masked face of the enigmatic Picasso portrait, the lightness and humor of the colorful Picabia painting and many, many more I hadn't known about. As the exhibition catalogue notes, for modernist artists "It became almost obligatory... to paint Gertrude Stein." Here was overwhelming evidence of the influence Stein had over the modernist movement in its heyday in Paris. Immersed as I was in a book-length study of the aesthetics of the American novel, I was galvanized by this exhibition to take another look at Stein's *The Making of Americans*. Why, I wondered, do we study James Joyce's difficult *Ulysses* but easily give up on Stein's equally challenging attempt to redefine the novel? Clearly, both writers were engrossed in the modernist project; yet, I argue that Stein's work engages with modernism more broadly, across genres, disciplines, practices and cultures. She even takes the practices of women readers and the popular women's novel into account. She claimed to be redefining the novel as Picasso had redefined painting. What if we took her at her word and reimagined the twentieth-century novel with her work at the center?

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\*Speaker