Or, the Narrative Satire of Identity Politics in Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*

When I thought about writing a title for this essay, I wondered immediately if I should focus on aspects of the words, the sounds of the words, the use of verbs, or nouns; should I focus on rhythms, cadences, phonemes and morphemes; or perhaps the heavy weight of the connotations associated with each word. Ultimately, it’s clear that regardless of my intent, the interpretation of these words lends itself to a complex and multi-faceted understanding of what words mean, and, subsequently, what is balanced within the understanding of each word.

Particularly, within Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, where words are ordered in this similar manner, it begs the ultimate question: what do these words mean? Though there are arguments for and against the meaning, or lack of meaning, within Stein’s writing, there is a clear functioning method being utilized. *Tender Buttons*, through a deconstructed narrative, works to illuminate the stark contrast between what something *is* versus what something *does*. It is satirical in the sense that it provides commentary on the way that identity is formulated only by brief descriptors and not by the actions of that person.

In much the same way that both the signified and signifier of a word are separate but intertwined (de Saussure 66), this essay too is constructed from two parts: (1) The use of narrativity and complexity within the novel, and (2) the way in which Stein utilizes these tools to shape our understanding of identity.

Though they were introduced as a connected concept, and though they work intuitively together, there is an important distinction that needs to be drawn between narrativity and complexity. The first pivotal division stems from Franco Moretti’s claims on narrativity, the idea
that plot itself, and what tends to be the essential portion of a novel, is manifested through the use of prose. More precisely, it is a form of tumbling prose, where, because prose allows for the focus to shift to the end, there is the feeling of forward movement or trajectory. Moretti calls it adventure. (Moretti 4)

However, Moretti points out that it veers into complexity when prose becomes longer. It starts to construct subordinate clauses (Moretti 4), much like the attachment of one thought to another, or like railroads being laid while the train is still driving on it. But this complexity is more nuanced than just the use of prose, and, as we’ll see in Stein’s piece, complexity is also rooted in the use of poetry and rhetorical devices. Where this increasing complexity at one point acted to serve and propel the narrativity forward, Stein deconstructs this relationship. Narrativity is formed in a new and different way, and thus becomes the analytical tool of complexity.

Within Stein’s novel, narrativity is used to shape the understandings of identity. The first section, “OBJECTS” lists a variety of everyday objects, perhaps items that we seldom notice or take for granted, but a quick examination of this section tells us something immediately: there are only six titles that use verbs. Of the 58 sections, or poems, within “OBJECTS,” only six of them utilize some sort of movement within their title. Words like “is” and “raining” explain how Stein is shifting her focus away from the actions of what something is doing and instead focusing on the adjectives surrounding that thing.

What does this tell us? Ultimately, yes, we see that the limitation of verbs within her work means there must be little movement across the book—doesn’t narration require some sort of transitory momentum? Already, it’s being broken down—but at the same time it’s clear then
that what is being described is not contingent upon the act of doing something. Things simply are things.

As in “A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS” Stein seems to preface the book by pointing out the oppressive systems currently in place.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. (Stein 1)

“A spectacle and nothing strange…an arrangement in a system to pointing” is especially revealing. “Spectacle” creates the image of something to look at, of something to observe and be awed by, something spectacular. “Nothing strange” quickly contrasts that by pointing out that whatever this “spectacle” is is something that isn’t strange, that shouldn’t be “an arrangement in a system to pointing.” Though it can seem like these words have little meaning, the very point is that what seems like it isn’t having an effect is. “The difference is spreading” denotes the way in which so many people are affected by oppressive discourses, and the word “system” specifically indicates the widespread oppression within communities and enforced through societal norms. This section lays the ground work for Stein’s satirical argument, demonstrating that identities have become spectacles, that there is something to be pointed at.

In this sense, I’ve been using oppression and identity fairly vaguely. I could be discussing sexual identity, gender identity, or age, or religion, or race—all aspects of someone’s identity,
and, in this context, Stein is pointing out the fact that, regardless of what identity you focus on, they can all be exploited and be victim to a “spectacle.”

However, if Stein never explicitly addresses the notion of identity and the concept of religion or race or sexuality, then how can these interpretations be drawn? Part of the complexity of *Tender Buttons* stems from the fact that because the words are put in an order that is unusual to us, we try to create meaning out of them; we try to make them *do* something. By leaving the words untouched, by realizing that they’re not doing anything, Stein is providing strict commentary on what is more commonly done: people are described by simple adjectives, by one facet of them that then goes on to define their entire identity. By trying to force us into situations where having simple adjectives and words forced together, without them acting in any particular way, it allows us to realize that the way in which we define people is not by their actions but by this swarm of details or adjectives surrounding them.

Stein is utilizing a form of satirical prose. The ridiculousness of disorder without the act of doing something forces the reader to realize the equal ridiculousness of simplified identity definitions—to simply define someone by little more than understood adjectives about them and not by what they do. It’s the idea that someone’s identity is rooted in being “gay” and not by the act itself—a “sodomite” for example would be someone who is committing the *act* of sodomy. Someone who is gay is not committing the act of being gay. They simply are.

As *Tender Buttons* is written in such a complex manner, it can be easy to forget that there is any sort of narration underlining these words—it’s the thing we want most, actually—but narrativity has since been deconstructed. Where complexity highlights the underpinnings of the
poetic functions—associative and dissociative meanings and the identity politics entangled in them—narrativity works as the analytical tool.

That is to say that narrativity only works when it is analyzed and broken down. As the previous passage demonstrated, the only way to form a narrative around that was to stop, go back, and reread it, to analyze it. But, as Moretti would make clear, this is a clear indicator of complexity. “If you don’t put your pen into action, it cannot really be considered reading” (Moretti 8). This can be cleared up through another close reading of the text, where, in the “FOOD” section, “ROASTBEEF” it reads:

Why is the perfect reëstablishment practiced and prized, why is it composed…This is a result. There is no superposition and circumstance, there is hardness and a reason and the rest and remainder. There is no delight and no mathematics. (Stein 25)

First, when considering the section of “ROASTBEEF,” we need to consider its meaning. Roastbeef as a whole, is the pure example of Englishness. Not only does this provide a sort of authority for Stein, demonstrating that she is well aware of where this language originated from, but it too distinguishes her as someone well aware of the complex devices being utilized. It’s satirical in the sense that it self-aware of the ensuing ludicrousness. It almost mocks it.

Not just that, but the placement in the novel is also an important aspect of this passage. It is the first section within “FOOD.” Much like the way “A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS,” “ROASTBEEF” prefaces this section by letting the reader know that to make reason of these words is not possible.
It starts off by questioning the “perfect reëstablishment,” as to “why is it composed?” It’s looking at disorder, of perfection and composition, a certain wholeness and togetherness. The reëstablishment is likened to the systematic establishment of oppression, and it asks why it is this way. Then, “This is a result.” The way we see things, the order and symmetry constructed around us, these labels, are the result of this forced composition and forced reëstablishment. “There is no superposition and circumstance,” she writes. “There is hardness and a reason and the rest and remainder. There is no delight in mathematics.” As a whole, it is seeking to deconstruct notions of order and semblance, and to tear away labels. Though it never says the word “people,” it is arguing that people as a whole are not so simply defined. It is “no mathematics.”

Naturally, we reach a paradox. To utilize Stein’s message, there is clear indication that these words mean nothing, that these labels are just that—labels. But, to analyze that message, to even explain that that is the claim that Stein is making, contradicts the very text being analyzed. If there is no meaning in the text, and yet I am drawing meaning from the text to explain that there is no meaning, does any of this really carry any weight?

The answer is yes. Stein’s writing itself is a paradox in the sense that it both wants to be interpreted and refuses to be. This means that for the words to have meaning, they must undergo a humanistic process. They have to be analyzed, a human act. Narration has to be added to them. They suddenly have to do something, and to make the words all-at-once act as if they were put down on the page with intent and focus, it forces the reader to realize that Stein’s writing is not just a bundle of words. It is also a strict example of the way human beings are defined.
Works Cited

