

Final Written Report

Professional Development Grant

“Muting Melodrama in Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*”

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This final report addresses the results of a professional enhancement project funded by an ATU Professional Development Grant. This report follows the instructions provided in the Guidelines for Professional Development Grants.

A. Title Page (see above)

B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented:

The range of Gertrude Stein's work make her a "novelist, poet, playwright, opera, librettist, memoirist, autobiographer, travel writer, literary theorist, critic" (Benstock), and her texts require consideration of genres, particularly the "autobiography." I want to consider the autobiography's links to and revisions of film melodrama, a feminine genre at the height of its popularity in the 1920s. As Marianne DeKoven points out, "Stein herself compares the 'successional' structure of her writing to the structure of film, defending her form by linking it to the representative genre of the twentieth century," and Stein even wrote what she called "film scenarios." As with other genres, the melodramatic form that surfaces in the autobiography is radically altered, disengaged from the genre's masculinist textual politics (I am indebted to Mary Ann Doane's work on melodrama).

A film structure that engages women in the pleasure of their own victimization becomes rather an empowering feminist form as Stein empties it of pathos and masochism. I find the circulation of an altered domesticity and sentimentality, in other

words, an altered melodramatic aesthetic that reworks particularly patriarchal sentimental structures as a modernist strategy for reconfiguring a traditionally feminine genre. In the maternal melodrama, women attain subjectivity and independence only to lose them in the confines of marriage and home, and bear children in order to hand them selflessly over to the symbolic order, Stein authors a different script, inverting the pattern by means of a lesbian sexuality, and reconfiguring the central reproductive function in this marriage as textual. Female desire thus remains unrecuperated. Rather than representing female-female relationships as dangerous, Stein shifts the marginal spectator position to the central scene of active fame and success, with no concomitant suffering and punishment. Internal emotions are externalized and embodied in décor and mise-en-scène, yet the domestic space which is typically claustrophobic becomes here a bohemian space of liberation. As in melodrama, the rhythm of experience takes primacy over its content, with lived time foreshortened in favor of intensity. Rather than the interiority of a single mind, narrative conflict occurs between characters, the drama occurring in a complex nexus of relationships to be read and deciphered by the community of readers that includes us. But, unlike traditional melodrama, there is no ultimate and ineluctable frustration of feminine desire.

Stein further manages to circumvent the primary emotion of melodrama through the masquerade of Toklas's authorial signature, a re-reading of authorship in the autobiography that allows a more subversive view of what Catherine Stimpson considers the "packaging" of the text, in which Toklas's femininity serves as camouflage for Stein's machismo and the silence surrounding their lesbianism as a cowardly textual carapace. Once we discover the distance between Alice and the "I" of the text, the

primacy given to Alice's traditional femininity becomes a means of problematizing that femininity, of making that image, in Doane's words, "manipulable, producible, and readable by the women." Furthermore, the narrator thus resists the embodiment that delineates woman's position within patriarchal viewing structures. And by refusing to show us lesbian sexuality just outside the frame, Stein provides a distance between within a femininity constructed as masquerade, she can occupy the positions of both desirer and desired, and both within a multiply valent femininity. What we can discover in the version of their lives presented here is a reconfigured generic space in which women represent themselves to themselves and do not suffer for it.

#### C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the South Central Modern Language Association conference in Baton Rouge, LA, and presented my paper there. I drove from Russellville to Baton Rouge on October 29, 2009, and drove back on November 1, 2009.

#### D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is American and, within that, modern. I am the primary teacher of Modern American Literature, a required course for all our majors. In that course, Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is a text I consistently teach. The SCMLA is the regional conference within our major organization, the Modern Language Association. Not only did I manage to get positive feedback on my paper, I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship.

## E. Conclusions and Recommendations

I am working on a publishable essay of which this paper is a part. The full essay is now in the hands of a Stein scholar and friend, Dr. Kirk Curnutt, who is to give me his recommendations for final revisions before submitting for publication. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference and progress toward publishing this essay.