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"MELANCTHA" AS A PORTRAIT

Recognized as the "Mother of Modernism," Gertrude Stein was an avant-garde writer frequently inspired by visual art. As an art collector, Stein sought enrichment through Post-Impressionist painters, such as Paul Cézanne. She was particularly influenced by Cézanne's composition where "one [thing] was as important as another thing" (Stein, *What are Masterpieces?* 98). Inspired by a portrait of Cézanne's wife, *Madame Cézanne with Fan*, Stein transferred Cézanne's techniques of visual art arrangement into her writing of the character Melanctha in *Three Lives*. Instead of colours on canvas, Stein uses words and literature to create a portrait. To gain a fuller perspective of Stein's use of composition, I use both a traditional analysis through close reading and a digitalized analysis through distant reading. Applying the Voyant Tools textual analysis program, I have created graphs and charts to analyze and expose Stein's patterning techniques to reveal a portrait of Melanctha's itinerant nature as evidenced through the various aspects of story composition—rhythm, unity, contrast, and colour.[1]

Inviting readers to view the section "Melanctha" as a portrait, Stein compares *Three Lives* to Cézanne's composition artistry in *Madame Cezanne with Fan*. *In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Stein tells several stories through the persona of her partner (Alice B. Toklas) in a narrative that gives background information on the art collection that her brother and she kept at their salon. In the third chapter, Stein writes about her and Toklas' first purchase of a Cézanne, *Madame Cézanne with Fan*. Stein claims that the portrait of *Madame Cézanne with Fan* "was an important purchase because in looking and looking at this picture [. . .] [she] wrote *Three Lives*" (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 37). Cézanne's composition "impressed [Stein] so much that [she] began to write *Three Lives* under [. . .] [his] idea of composition" (*What are Masterpieces?* 98). While Stein wrote "Melanctha"—the middle story in *Three Lives*—Pablo Picasso was in the process of painting Stein's own portrait, *Gertrude Stein*. Although she finished *Three Lives* before Picasso finished his portrait of Stein in 1906,

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[1] Stefan Sinclair of McGill University and Geoffrey Rockwell of University of Alberta created Voyant Tools.

it was during "long poses" with Picasso that Stein "mediated and made sentences" for her "story Melanctha Herbert" (Baumann et al. 36; Stein, *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 53). Her immersion in the process of portrait creation further influenced her writing of "Melanctha" as a portrait. As the editors of *Cézanne and the Dawn of Modern Art* also note, Picasso's portrait of Stein shows significant influence of Cézanne's style in *Madame Cézanne with Fan* (36). Surrounded by avant-garde art, Stein sought her own experimentation as she developed Cézanne's Post-Impressionism composition methods into her literary portrait of Melanctha.

To appreciate Melanctha's character, Stein's readers must understand Cézanne's techniques of composition, which Stein discusses in *What are Masterpieces?* Equating all composition components, Cézanne "conceived that in composition one thing was as important as another thing" and that "each part is as important as the whole"—or "an end in itself" (*What are Masterpieces?* 98). "For the first time in literature," Stein sought to convey meaning through not only her subject matter but also her composition (*What are Masterpieces?* 98). In Cézanne's and Stein's work, "not solely the realism of the characters but the realism of the composition [. . .] was the important thing" (*What are Masterpieces?* 98). In the case of *Three Lives*, Melanctha's nomadic nature is projected through every aspect of Stein's composition. As Richard Bridgman notes, Stein's "small group of words" can be seen as a "verbal palette" (126). Like Cézanne's use of a limited colour palette for *Madame Cézanne with Fan*, Stein experiments with a limited palette in "Melanctha." Inputting "Melanctha" into the Voyant Tools reveals that only 1,912 words out of 50,135 words are unique, meaning fewer than four percent of words in "Melanctha" are original. Having few descriptive words directly explaining Melanctha's nomadic nature, Stein's readers must look elsewhere to decipher Melanctha's nature—in the composition of the text.

In *Madame Cézanne with Fan*, Cézanne uses techniques of rhythm to draw the viewers' eyes from top left to bottom right in a wave-like motion. Cézanne creates the wave-like rhythm through line and colour shades: blues and greens to darker shades of orange and brown. Similarly, in "Melanctha," Stein repeatedly uses the words "certain" and "wander" to create a literary wave. The wave-like pattern of Melanctha's nature is evident when graphing the occurrence of "certain" and "wandering" in "Melanctha" (Fig. 1, Fig. 2).[2]

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[2] In order to account for different forms of the words, I have equated the words "certain" and "certainly" as one in Figure 1 and equated the words "wander," "wandering," "wandered," and "wanderings" as one in Figure 2.
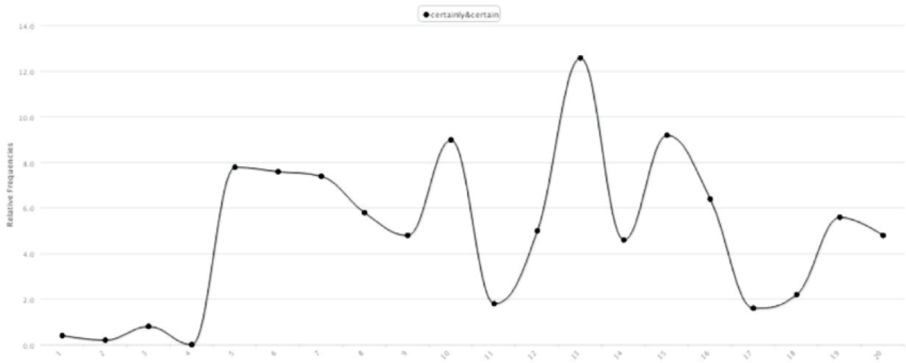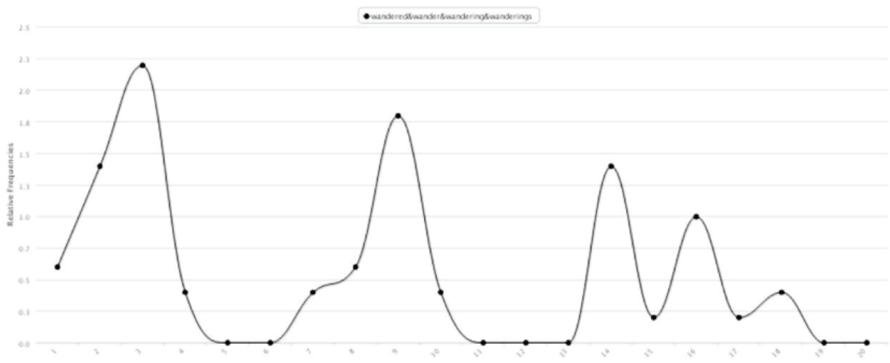
Figure 1: "Certain" Graph using Voyant Tools

Figure 2: "Wander" Graph using Voyant Tools

Ironically, Stein builds Melanctha's uncertain relationship with Doctor Campbell on the vocabulary of certainty. Campbell continually questions the legitimacy of his feelings, and Melanctha turns to "wandering," a reference to her promiscuous behaviour. Although Melanctha claims that "always she wanted to be regular, and to have peace and quiet" (qualities that Campbell offers), she turns to wandering and ultimately dishonours what she claims to desire (*Three Lives* 2304). As Melanctha's and Jeff's certainty comes and goes in waves, their routine of discussing certainty in turn exposes the uncertainty in their relationship. Using a Cézanne-like rhythm with opposing word waves, Stein composes waves of "certainty" and "wandering" to embody Melanctha's nature of recklessness. The inconsistency of "certainty" and "wandering" in the text expresses the lack of certainty in Melanctha's life. Melanctha cannot have both certainty and wandering in her life. Her wandering nature creates a constant uncertainty throughout her life, leaving her heart forever nomadic.

Creating unity amongst colours in *Madame Cézanne with Fan*, Cézanne uses the technique of blending colours by painting with many brushstrokes in the chair and wallpaper. Similarly, in "Melanctha," Stein blends words by repeating identical or almost identical sentences. Throughout Melanctha's second relationship, with Jem Richards, two of the commonly blended words are "joy" and "foolish," a combination of which occur throughout: for example, Melanctha's "joy made her foolish," her "love for Jem made her foolish," and "she was mad and foolish in the joy she had there" (*Three Lives* 2379).

Through this blending, Stein creates unity between Melanctha's "joy" and "foolishness." In seeking the joy and love she always wanted, Melanctha instead kindles her foolish nature, which leads to her fall from joy. In deeply loving Jem, Melanctha blinds herself from seeing his true nature of recklessness. Passionately exerting herself into the lives of others, Melanctha puts her joy in the hands of people rather than seeking happiness internally. With Jem, "she thrust [her love] always deep into [him]," yet "Jem had no way that he ever wanted to be made to feel it [. . .] while he had trouble" (*Three Lives* 2373). The sexual connation of "thrust" suggests that Melanctha invested not only her emotional joy but also her body in attempting to grasp Jem's love. Seeking to fill a void in her life, Melanctha quickly gives herself to others, which instead only further empties herself into unsound hands. In several passages, Stein blends "joy" and "foolishness" in order to draw the reader's attention to Melanctha's cyclical nature. This dramatic contrast forces the reader to question Melanctha's judgment in seeking fulfillment.

Unlike the well-blended chair and wallpaper, Cézanne contrasts primary yellow and blue colours on Madame Cézanne's face, dress, and hand, drawing the viewer's attention to prominent features and reflecting her disposition. Similarly, in the later half of "Melanctha," Stein contrasts the two opposing words "never" and "always" to draw attention to the unattainability of Melanctha's desires. Melanctha's friend Rose describes Melanctha's foolish behavior as an unchangeable part of her nature that inhibits the achievement of her desires. After hearing of her wandering, Rose casts Melanctha out of her life. In losing Rose, Melanctha loses what she needs and wants most: someone "always to believe in her," "always to [. . .] cling to," and "always [to make her] feel a little safe inside" (*Three Lives* 2540). The people Melanctha desires in her life are made unattainable to her due to her own fixed foolish nature. Referring to Melanctha, Rose claims that "it don't never do no good to tell nobody to act right," because "they certainly never can learn" as "they ain't got no sense to know it" (*Three*

Lives 2540). All of Melanctha's wishes for security are unattainable through her nature. Consequently, she never sees Rose or Jem again, and dies alone in the consumptives' hospital. Interestingly, Stein's use of "always" exceeds her use of "never" until the conclusion, in which both "always" and "never" are used with equal frequency (Fig 3). In doing so, she stresses Melanctha's lack of attainment in life.
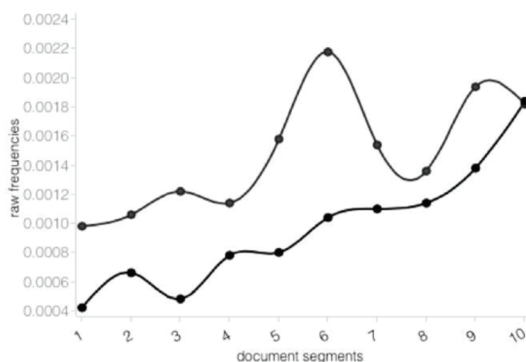

Figure 3: Graph of "never" and "always" using Voyant Tools

The Voyant graph of the use of "never" and "always" throughout "Melanctha," divided into ten sections, reveals that Melanctha dies "always" desiring and "never" receiving due to a nature she could not change.

Figure 4: Links for "blue" and "yellow" using Voyant Tools

Stein further explores Melanctha's unchangeable nature through colour. Beyond the technique of contrast, blue and yellow play a deeper significance. In describing Melanctha's nature, Stein repeatedly uses yellow and blue. Comparing the proximate words to both yellow and blue, it is interesting to note that "Melanctha" and "Herbert" are identified as prominent relations to both (Fig. 4). Melanctha inherits from her

mother both her yellow skin and pleasing nature: she is "a little pleasant like her mother" (865). Melanctha's pleasing yellow nature is described as being against her advantage. She "always loved too hard and much too often" (860). The colour blue represents Melanctha's depression. When Melanctha gets "blue," she wishes to die (2275). Stein begins and ends with drawing attention to Melanctha's blueness. In the end, "Melanctha Herbert never really killed herself because she was so blue," instead Melanctha goes to the hospital, returns home, returns to the hospital, and then dies in "a home for poor consumptives" (2568; 2574). Even Melanctha's death projects her nature of instability.

Distant reading tools enable a more accurate reading of Melanctha's nature. In "*Three Lives*: The Realism of the Composition," Jayne Walker calls Stein's *Three Lives* an "evenly textured verbal surface" that "is analogous to the surfaces of Cézanne's canvases, with their dense patterning of brushstrokes that unite object and background in a tapestry of color patches of equal value" (23). Walker makes strong points about Cézanne's artistry; however, my analysis disproves her view of *Three Lives* as "evenly textured" (23). While Stein's simple language gives "Melanctha" an allusion of an even "verbal surface," distant reading visually displays the messy and incongruous surface that makes up the portrait of a complex and inconsistent character. With text analysis programs (such as Voyant), graphs and images can be created and used to display the rhythm, unity, contrast, and colour within Stein's composition. Distant reading provides a more accurate portrait of Melanctha, and better reflects Post-Impressionist artistry. Both Stein and Cézanne seek to fully grasp the complex nature of humans with each thoughtful stroke from palette to surface. Melanctha's portrait hangs, forever echoing the stronghold of human intendancies.

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