

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Gertrude Stein (1874-1946)

The Gradual Making Of "The Making of Americans"

The Making of Americans (1925) is Gertrude Stein's last read and most ambitious book, a 925-page novel based in part on the experiences of her and her family in evolving from immigrants into "Americans." It is repetitious, plotless, and chaotic—the consequence of some of Stein's conflicting or unperfected theories of modern fiction. It was written between 1902 and 1911, but waited many years to be published.

Yet Stein thought so highly of the book as one of the ground-breaking experiments in modern fiction that she lectured about it on her trip to America in 1934-35. Hence this autobiographical lecture-essay about the writing of the book and what she was trying to do in it. Simply stated, her theory was that all human character is essentially expressible in a range of psychological types, types which are basically changeless except as the language in which they are "composed" changes. This language, "the composition in which we live," as she called it in another lecture,¹ comes out most forcibly in the unconscious patterns of ordinary speech—of repetitions, with shifting emphases and meanings, and without description and sequential narrative.

What she does in this essay, therefore, is express her character through her own patterns of speech: her way of asserting something and then repeating it with slight changes of words, word order, and emphasis. She tells how she arrived at her theory and how she attempted to use it, quoting passages from the book to illustrate it.

Such repetitions have made Stein seem like an oracle or a jokester, or just made readers ignore her. But when one approaches her style in the right spirit and takes it at the right pace, it becomes subtle and insightful. The sentence in the middle of this selection, "Slowly everyone in continuous repeating, to their minutest variation, comes to be clearer to someone," applies to how the style works. The ensuing sentences about how people understand one another, about history, and about resemblances and differences and how people feel about them are brilliant. They could be seen as representing Stein's theory of autobiography.

The selection below is taken from *Lectures in America* (New York: Random House, 1935). Stein's source citations of *The Making of Americans* within the text have been retained as given there. The indispensable book on Stein is Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970).

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1. Stein, "Portraits and Repetition," in *Lectures in America*, p. 165.

Reading

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