

GERTRUDE STEIN

b. February 3, 1874 – d. July 27, 1946

*“A writer should write with his eyes
and a painter paint with his ears.”*

Known as an influential American writer who focused on character depth, Gertrude Stein spent most of her life in Paris. While in France, she met her life partner, befriended famous artists, and developed into an influential literary figure and feminist.

Born into a wealthy family in Pennsylvania, Gertrude Stein grew up in Oakland, California. As an undergraduate she attended Radcliffe College, now incorporated into Harvard University, and studied under psychologist William James. She spent much of 1899-1901 at Johns Hopkins University Medical School, but did not earn her degree.

Stein moved to Paris in 1902 and became an avid art collector. She turned her house into an informal salon. It soon became a hotspot for famous artists and writers, including Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Henri Matisse and Thornton Wilder. Hemingway viewed Stein as his mentor and Picasso became her close friend. Stein later called Paris a city of “The Lost Generation.”

In 1907, Stein met her life partner, Alice B. Toklas. Together during World War I, Toklas and Stein drove supplies to French hospitals. After the war, Stein received a medal for her contributions.

Stein wrote her first book, “Q.E.D.,” in 1903, but did not publish a novel until “Three Lives” (1909), a work heavily influenced by her former professor James and writer William Henry. Unique because of its similarity to Cubism, Stein’s writing delved into a literary area previously unexplored. “Tender Buttons,” a short collection of feminist poems published in 1914, resembled Pablo Picasso’s artwork, albeit in a different form. In 1926, Stein explained the connection during lectures at the University of Oxford and Cambridge University. She published her lectures as a book, “Composition and Explanation” (1926).

In 1932, “The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,” a book that told Stein’s life story, excited the American public. It was her first best seller. Several of her works were adapted by composers, including Virgil Thomson, who based his operas “Four Saints in Three Acts” and “The Mother of Us All” on Stein’s texts.

Complex and progressive, Stein’s writing transformed American literature and contributed to the feminist movement. A monument on the upper terrace of Bryant Park in New York City honors her memory.

**One of the few openly
gay feminists of the
early 20th century,
Gertrude Stein was a
highly respected critic
and avant-garde writer
who revolutionized
modern art and literary
movements.**

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