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Hello, my name is Kelsey Radomski. I am a recent graduate from SUNY Fredonia. With the help of many critics, I have compiled a strong list of examples as to how Stein, Woolf, and Winterson have used the texts *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, *To the Lighthouse*, “A Sketch of the Past,” *The Passion*, and *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* to challenge heteronormative society and subvert traditional understandings of time, memory, and language to create identity.

Most of us are inclined to think that our identity is shaped by our sex, gender, nationality, family, and even life stories or experiences. These women embraced the ideas of nonlinear narrative and non-traditional characterization to show that identity can be shaped by much more than simply what you look like or who your family is.

Nonlinear narrative is exactly what it sounds like: any story or account of events that does not go in consecutive order from beginning to end. Scholar Phoebe Stein Davis states that in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude Stein manipulates the readers’ sense of time by repeating events in multiple chapters to reveal the constructed nature of memory. Typically, we catalog one memory at a time, and our brain tries to keep these memories in chronological order. Though the chapters in Stein’s book are organized sequentially from past to present, she manipulates the comfort of such order by repeating the telling of certain events and creating a repetitive loop instead of a straight line of moments, making her representative of a biography unique.

Virginia Woolf inserts moments of what she calls “non-being” into passages of her novel *To the Lighthouse*. These moments accurately show that who we are as people is displayed through our every-day actions rather than the extraordinary events that make a story exciting. The section “Time Passes” in the novel shows examples of this “non-being” by illustrating common actions such as cleaning the empty summer home. The passage is filled with images of stillness and immobility but represents the notion that time is always progressing. This duality creates a paradox of time stopped yet always continuing on.

She also subverts time by beginning the novel with James’ childhood wish to visit the lighthouse and ending it with the first and only time James will go to the lighthouse with his father, Mr. Ramsay. This beginning and ending in what appears to be the same spot in the story causes every event in between to seem obsolete. Because of this return to James’ initial wishes at the end of the novel, Woolf makes the plot seem to never have moved forward in time at all.

In the heteronormative society we live in today, as well as during Woolf’s time, men act like “men” and women act like “women.” This male/female binary is thought to be the norm, hence we use the word “heteronormative.” Jeanette Winterson manipulates heteronormative characterization in her novel *The Passion* through the relationship between protagonists Henri

and Villanelle. Though she births Henri's child, Villanelle remains independent all throughout the novel. She is the masculine counterpart to Henri's more feminine character. This subversion of gender roles and norms gives Winterson's characters unique identities.

Stein, Woolf, and Winterson also create identity through the subversion of the genres of autobiography, memoir, and fiction. Stein entitles her work, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. This choice forces the audience to ask whose perspective is being used. The word "autobiography" suggests that it is Alice's perspective but Stein is the actual author. Stein uses the text to discuss her own memories, opinions, and emotions all in the third person narrative. In this way, she entirely subverts the genre of autobiography to talk about herself under someone else's name. She causes the reader to question the objectivity of a genre that is usually very decided.

Winterson also manipulates the idea of biography because her work of fiction is told from the perspective of Henri's journal entries. In her work, scholar Maria Del Mar Asensio Arostegui states that Henri has made Napoleon Bonaparte a construct. He has made Napoleon into a person he is not, something bigger than what he really is in reality. Winterson has subverted the heteronormative construction of story by forcing the reader to acknowledge that while Henri invented Bonaparte, Henri is also an invention himself, by Winterson. In this way, the reader must understand that Henri has subconsciously turned Bonaparte into something bigger, but also understand that Winterson has made up Henri as well.

Villanelle also tells stories within the text that contain many fantastical elements. Neither of the two is subjective, enforcing Winterson's point that readers must acknowledge how biased the concept of "story" really is. A story is only as honest as the person who tells it.

The breaking down of language is another way both Stein and Woolf challenge heteronormative ideals. For example, take this sentence from *The Autobiography*, which comments on Stein's writing style: "Haweis...did however plead for commas. Gertrude Stein said commas were unnecessary, the sense should be intrinsic and not have to be explained by commas and otherwise commas were only a sign that one should pause and take breath but one should know of oneself when one wanted to pause and take breath."

Now let me reread that same sentence exactly as it's written on the page. It seems like a mouthful, right? By denying use of commas and altering her sentence structure, Stein is breaking the foundations of traditional language to form a more "natural" structure that relies on independent thought from the reader. The reader must actively put in his/her own pauses, rather than having them put on the page there ahead of time. In this way, Stein forces readers to become active participants in the reading and interpreting of her text.

Woolf also challenges traditional language in the section "Time Passes" of *To the Lighthouse* by putting the deaths of main characters in brackets or parentheses. A bracket is symbolic in the way that it is often overlooked in a passage. By putting the major events inside brackets, Woolf is minimalizing them. This action puts the focus on the "cotton wool" of

ordinary, every-day life. This balance between mundane actions and the painful moments experienced during wartime help to give the reader a sense of stability.

While Stein, Woolf, and Winterson have used these texts for creating the identities of their characters, they have also used them to help define their own identities. In *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?*, Winterson states that language is not a hiding place, it is a finding place. She writes, “We get our language back through the language of others.” Literature and writing offer a way of escaping reality as well as a way to discover one’s beliefs, opinions, and emotions. For example, much of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s characterization is based off of Woolf’s own parents. Through the outlet of writing a story, she “ceased to be obsessed” and haunted by her mother and father by “rubbing out their memory” onto the page.

Had Woolf not written *To the Lighthouse* or her memoir, it’s difficult to say if she would have developed her thoughts about her parents so clearly and found a sense of calm after each of their passing. In her memoir, she writes, “I feel that I have had a blow...it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me...it gives me...a great delight to put the severed parts together.” The act of writing lets her take away the pain of memory and instead find happiness.

*To the Lighthouse* repeats the phrase, “Women can’t paint, women can’t write.” It is a notion carried on from Woolf’s family and from her transition from the Victorian era in youth to the Edwardian age as a grown woman. A woman could not be taken seriously when painting and writing, but Woolf’s constant production in diaries, in essays, in letters, in novels has disproved this ridiculous idea. She has published her own work and the work of others, especially of other women. Through the power of writing and language, she has reclaimed her own identity and says, “I can and I have.”

Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, and Gertrude Stein are three remarkable women who have dared to go beyond the boundaries of common identity. They have fought concepts of what is normal, what is “right,” and the way things are supposed to be and as a result have produced truly limitless work of how a person is known and how they know themselves. So, who are you?

1<sup>st</sup>: 7:50

2<sup>nd</sup>: 9:03

3<sup>rd</sup>: 9:28