

LOOKING TO WRITE GRADES 7-12

The Poetry of Gertrude Stein



INTRODUCTION

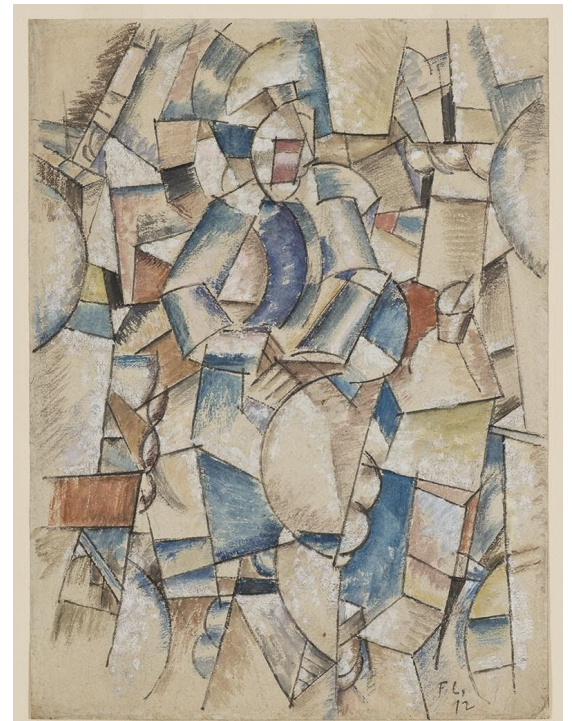
“I began to play with words then. I was a little obsessed by words of equal value. Picasso was painting my portrait at that time, and he and I used to talk this thing over endlessly. At this time he had just begun on cubism.”—Gertrude Stein

Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) was a friend and patron of the two artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. In addition to being an important poet and writer, she also had an extensive art collection and hosted literary salons. The poems printed below are taken from her 1914 collection, *Tender Buttons*, and show the profound effect modern painting had on Stein’s writing. In these small prose poems, images and phrases come together in often surprising ways—similar in manner to Cubist painting.

Stein’s writing, characterized by its use of words for their associations and sounds rather than their meanings, received considerable interest from other artists and writers.

LOOKING CLOSER

Cubist artists rejected the belief that art should copy nature. Instead, they often reduced and fractured objects into geometric forms. Study this 1912 drawing by the French artist, Fernand Léger from SBMA’s collection. Its title is [Study for the Woman in Blue](#). How has Léger imagined the woman in blue? What forms do you see?



Fernand Léger, *Study for the Woman in Blue*, 1912. Gouache on paper. SBMA, Gift of Leigh B. Block, 1985.17.

This lesson was prepared by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Education Department, 2021.

READ: POETRY BY GERTRUDE STEIN

In the introduction to *Geography and Plays* (1922), Sherwood Anderson wrote that Stein's writing "consists in a rebuilding, and entire new recasting of life, in the city of words." In the poem below, titled *CHICKEN*, Stein explores the chicken in a rhythmic, repetitious play of words and sounds.

CHICKEN.

Pheasant and chicken, chicken is a peculiar third.

CHICKEN.

Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third, alas a dirty bird.

CHICKEN.

Alas a dout in case of more go to say what it is cress. What is it. Mean. Why. Potato. Loaves.

CHICKEN.

Stick stick call then, stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken. Sticking in a extra succession, sticking in.

Read the next poem, *A Carafe*. Here, Stein creates with language the same kind of multifaceted way of seeing a common object that Cubist artists created visually. The object itself, a carafe, is closely aligned with the bottles and glasses often found in Cubist paintings.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

ACTIVITY: WRITE A "CUBIST" POEM

Try your own version of a Stein inspired "cubist" poem. Deconstruct regular sentence order. Use verbs as nouns. Fracture, rearrange and repeat parts of the sentence. Repeat sounds and words. Try to capture the essence of an object, rather than a logical representation.