We’re All Strangers, But It’s Okay: The Experience of Modernity in Gertrude Stein’s *Portrait of Constance Fletcher* and Dorothy Parker’s *Such a Pretty Little Picture*
“The meaning is that the precious picture is the bargain that has not met the ancient day when there is everything to say. [...] They are not separated. [...] They were the three and they were not employed in looking. [...] [T]hey had the time to address what they did address when they would address one another. They did not all listen.”

- Gertrude Stein, Portrait of Constance Fletcher

“It was about a man who lived in a suburb. Every morning he had gone to the city on the 8:12, sitting in the same seat in the same car, and every evening he had gone home to his wife on the 5:17, sitting in the same seat in the same car. He had done this for twenty years of his life. And then one night he didn’t come home. He never went back to his office any more. He just never turned up again.”

- Dorothy Parker, Such a Pretty Little Picture

We’re all strangers, but it’s okay. That is essentially what I argue Gertrude Stein and Dorothy Parker are proclaiming through Portrait of Constance Fletcher (1911) and Such a Pretty Little Picture (1922), respectively.1 Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) and Dorothy Parker (1893-1967) were two American modernist writers who reached their literary peak in the first decades of the twentieth century, at a moment in history marked by stark lifestyle changes as a result of a number of factors, including urban and suburban expansions, an ever-increasing flow of information following the industrial revolution that radically changed the pace of life, and a progressive disenchantment with the world after the First World War and the Great Depression. This period in time has been named the modern period or ‘modernity,’ and while the term has been employed to qualify many epochs throughout history during which a drastic break from the past and its traditions occurred, I will be using the term in this essay to signify the sociological, cultural, and political changes that arose at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the

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Modernist artists such as the painter Egon Schiele, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, and the writers James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf – and Stein and Parker of course – are therefore dubbed as such because one cannot dissociate their work from the modern environment in which it was produced.

While there does not seem to be any concrete evidence as to their ever meeting, it is very likely that Stein and Parker crossed paths at some point as they had several friends in common such as Ernest Hemingway (who interestingly turned his back on both of them at some point in their friendship). Additionally, both Stein and Parker had a strong connection to Europe where the modernist movement was in full swing as well: Stein moved to Paris in 1903 and stayed there until her death in 1946, and Parker, a cosmopolitan New Yorker, travelled to the continent several times in her lifetime, choosing to settle in Paris for approximately six months in 1926 at the Hôtel Lutétia located only a few blocks away from Stein’s literary salon at 27, rue de Fleurus. Stein was famous for her salon frequented by painters such as Pablo Picasso and writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, for being an avid collector of modern paintings, and for her own writing of which she proclaimed “the newness and difference is fundamental.” Stein was also well-known for being openly lesbian, her partner Alice appearing in a number of her works including *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Parker’s wit, her best-selling poetry, and her place at the Algonquin Round Table earned her celebrity status in New York, as well as her

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2 In the introduction to the first chapter of his book *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (2008), Jonathan Flatley writes: “The very origin of the word “modernity,” from modernus, meaning “now” or “of today” (as opposed to “of yesterday”) implies a problematic sense of anteriority, the sense that the past is lost and gone. […] Perhaps since the word’s first usage, around the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire, and at least since the *Querelle des Anciens et Modernes*, modernity signified an epochal shift, the sense that we live in a historical moment that in its totality is somehow categorically different from the periods that preceded it.” (28)


three failed marriages, two of which were to the same man. She never had any children (Parker is known to have had an abortion in 1923), and by the mid-1930s, she and her husband Alan Campbell (who had a reputation for being bisexualy inclined, a reputation that Parker herself took part in propagating) moved to Hollywood to work as screenwriters. Evidently, both Stein and Parker were illustrations of the more progressive values and lifestyles of the modern era.

Nonetheless, Stein and Parker have yet to be discussed alongside one another, and the vocabulary employed to talk about their work within academic circles could not be more different. Critics, including Alison Rieke, Linda S. Watts, Marianne DeKoven, and Wendy Steiner, most often characterize Stein’s writing as “radical” and “experimental,” while Parker’s style is frequently described as “linear” (in other words more conventional). Stein has long entered the modernist canon (as all critics, whether favorable or unfavorable to her work, are in agreement concerning the importance of Stein’s place there), whereas Parker’s critics still spend a lot of time defending both her place within the canon and her status as a highbrow modernist writer. For instance, while Rhonda S. Pettit (one of Parker’s most prominent scholars) staunchly

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6 The Algonquin Round Table, as described by Rhonda S. Pettit, author of A Gendered Collision: Sentimentalism and Modernism in Dorothy Parker’s Poetry and Fiction, was “a luncheon and cocktail coterie of New York writers, critics and actors that included Parker as one of its few female members” that met daily at the Algonquin Hotel (9). Some of the regular attendees included Alexander Woollcott, Robert Benchley, Charles MacArthur, and Harpo Max, and throughout the group’s existence (from 1919 to 1929), many members would collaborate with one another artistically.


9 Authors who were contemporary to Stein also recognized her impact on modernist literature, as is shown in Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature (1988) in which Ira Bruce Nadel and S. C. Neuman state: “Writers as various as Ford Madox Ford, E. M. Forster, Robert Graves, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and Edith Sitwell, Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, Scott Fitzgerald, Thornton Wilder, Dashiell Hammett, Mina Loy, Laura Riding and Edmund Wilson acknowledged – sometimes gladly, sometimes grudgingly, and with varying combinations of admiration, bewilderment and malice – the energy and influence she exerted on modernism” (xvii); For a discussion
defends that Parker belongs in the modernist canon, she argues that Parker’s writing is influenced by nineteenth century decadent literature. Moreover, Parker’s famous wit has lead critics to see humor appear in her work very often, while the possibility of a humorous undertone in Stein’s writing has been vastly overlooked. In fact, the only source I have come across in which the scholar alludes to a humorous aspect in Stein’s style (Linda S. Watt’s *Gertrude Stein: A Study of the Short Fiction*) declares that “[o]thers who have sought to read Stein’s work, even some sympathetic readers, have either failed to appreciate its humor or found themselves unsure how to react.” The authors themselves also seem to be portrayed as polar opposites in the way critics present them, with Stein often compared to a “Buddha,” imposing, serene, and always engaged in thought, and Parker often referred to as a sharp, dramatic, coquettish woman with a drinking problem and suicidal thoughts. I intend to demonstrate that Stein and Parker shared many of the same preoccupations concerning the impact of modernity on human experience, and that not only is their work less dissimilar than one might initially think, but also that one gains insight into their work when examined alongside one another.

I have chosen *Portrait of Constance Fletcher* by Stein and *Such a Pretty Little Picture* by Parker for several reasons. To begin with, *Portrait of Constance Fletcher* is often said to be a prime example of Stein’s work as it encapsulates a combination of Stein’s two or three writing styles (depending on the critic) in one text, leading me to believe that it is appropriately

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representative of her oeuvre as a whole.\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Such a Pretty Little Picture}, Parker’s first short story, appeared in the literary magazine titled \textit{Smart Set} in December 1922, and has not received much critical attention, as scholars have favored her more famous short fiction such as \textit{Big Blonde} which won the O. Henry Award in 1929 or \textit{The Waltz} (1933). Yet, it is my view that \textit{Such a Pretty Little Picture} is Parker’s best piece, as it illustrates Parker’s deeply evocative, witty vision of the modern world at its finest. Also, \textit{Such a Pretty Little Picture} is the only short story by Parker in which the narrative, though mediated by an omnipresent narrator, is told through a man’s perspective. The reason for the subsequent permanent switch is not known, and, in my opinion, is not of utter importance, however it speaks to the singularity of the piece. The similarity in plot of these two texts is the primary reason behind my decision to draw an association between them, which brings me to an important aspect of my essay, as I will be defending a reading of Stein’s \textit{Portrait of Constance Fletcher} that goes against most critics’ assumptions about Stein’s work.

Indeed, the vast majority of published criticism on Stein’s writing argues that one cannot extract a narrative thread from it, and that one should be focusing on the syntactical patterns instead, thereby reducing Stein’s varied body of work to just one long experiment with language: Marianne DeKoven, a prominent Stein scholar, writes that when it comes to experimental writing (in which she includes Stein, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett), no “thematic synthesis” can be generated, and specifically concerning \textit{Portrait of Constance Fletcher}, Carolyn Faunce Copeland claims that it “carries no story line at all.”\textsuperscript{14} I disagree with these statements, and intend to counter them by presenting a close reading of Stein’s \textit{Portrait}, through which I demonstrate that

\textsuperscript{13} Wendy Steiner, Carolyn Faunce Copeland, and Marianne DeKoven defend that there are two styles, and Michael J. Hoffman argues that there are three.

form and content should not be approached as independent from one another when studying Stein’s work, as I believe that the alienating quality of Stein’s style is inseparable from the themes she is discussing. Through this close reading, I also intend to show that beyond providing some kind of portrayal of Constance Fletcher (a fellow writer and a good friend of Stein and Toklas), Stein is creating a portrait of a shattered marriage and family whose dysfunctional qualities stem from modernity’s impact on human interactions and relationships.15 This idea pervades in Parker’s Such a Pretty Little Picture as well, in which Parker creates a devastating portrait of the Wheelock family, perhaps not a portrait in the Steinien sense (for Stein’s literary portraiture is famously overt), but a portrait nonetheless in the manner in which she depicts the estranged interactions between Mr. Wheelock, his wife Adelaide, their daughter Sister, and the painfully routine-based lives they lead. The dynamics within the Wheelock family are presented as inextricably linked to the modern environment in which they live, and both Stein and Parker seem to illustrate the corrosive conditions they have witnessed develop as a consequence of modernity, rendering marriage, family life, and human relationships more generally, devoid of meaningful affect. Marriage and the family, I argue, are the vehicle through which Stein and Parker present their commentary on the state of human relationships at large, as the marital and familial bonds, based on common-sense understanding, are expected to be founded on the strongest ties of love and affection, yet, in Stein’s Portrait and in Parker’s Picture, the family members might as well be strangers.

Nonetheless, Stein and Parker are not condemning modernity as completely nefarious, nor are they conveying that modernity is the source of all woes. Indeed, the underlying tone and subtle humor in both texts suggest an overall sense of acceptance in the face of such a rapidly

15 Copeland, Carolyn Faunce. Language & Time & Gertrude Stein. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1975, 60. (This is where I found the information concerning Constance Fletcher’s identity.)
changing environment, and even perhaps an element of beauty to it. Furthermore, modernity as an obvious source of inspiration for artists, including Stein and Parker, seems to hold an undeniably generative quality and creative force, as their pieces show. Georg Simmel (1858-1918), a German philosopher and sociologist whose theories on modernity I will be employing in my analysis of Stein and Parker’s texts, parallels this attitude toward the modern era since, even though Simmel’s influential essays map out the various pathologies that have emerged as a result of it, such as the “blasé outlook,” he explicitly distances himself from thinkers who have a “hatred” toward the epoch, as he writes that “personalities like Ruskin and Nietzsche” have a “passionate hatred” for the “metropolis, […] hatred of the money economy and of the intellectualism of existence.”

I believe that Simmel’s essays in which he describes his observations, and that have come to be regarded as manifestos on modernity, help us to understand the quintessentially modern behaviors that Stein and Parker are staging.

Additionally, in *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*, David Frisby compares and contrasts these three important sociological figures’ approaches to modernity, and writes that “of the three writers, Simmel’s inclusion requires least justification.” Frisby also indicates that “[o]ne feature which the works of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin have in common, at least with regard to their investigations of the social dimensions of modernity, is the expression of a strong aesthetic interest in literary and artistic modernism that reacts upon and informs their vision of modernity.” Simmel is therefore not only a principal figure of authority in the study of modernity, but also one who is interested in

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the literature of the time, and whose work is influenced by literary modernism, making him very well-suited to elucidate Stein and Parker’s writing. *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) and *The Stranger* (1908) will be the two essays by Simmel that I will be employing in my analysis of Stein’s *Portrait* and Parker’s *Picture*. I will also be referring to other theoretical writings on modernity in my analysis, including Linda Nochlin’s *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, and Jonathan Flatley’s *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*. In order to demonstrate that Stein and Parker’s essays convey the message that we’re all strangers, but it’s okay, I will begin by providing a close reading of Stein’s piece followed by a reading of Parker’s, while highlighting their central themes. I will then proceed to explain the ways in which Parker’s *Picture* sheds light on the humorous and playful undertones in Stein’s *Portrait*, arguing further that the humor in Stein and Parker’s texts propose acceptance as an answer to the drastic changes brought about by modernity and the resulting feeling of loss, and end by elaborating on this concept of acceptance as “aesthetic” approach to dealing with such losses.\(^{19}\)

In the lecture “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein shares that she “began to make portraits of anybody” by asking “How do you like what you have. This is a question that anybody can ask anybody. Ask it. […] How do you like what you have is one way of having an important thing to ask of any one.”\(^{20}\) Clearly, Stein finds this question to be thought-provoking, and is perhaps “an important thing to ask” because “How do you like what you have” essentially forces one to think about what it is they consider they “have,” an answer that Stein believes to be revealing, and that provides her with interesting material to work with in creating her portraits. In *Portrait of


Constance Fletcher, Constance’s answer has to do with “family living,” a concept that unravels as the portrait evolves.

The portrait begins with Stein looking back to a time when a certain “she” was “quite a young one.” The pronoun “she” will continuously appear throughout the first part of the portrait and re-appear sporadically thereafter. While the name “Constance” is never mentioned, I am taking the liberty to assume that “she” refers to Constance, an assumption that many critics have made in the past, including Carolyn Faunce Copeland who mentions that the “referent of the pronouns” in this portrait is the title’s “Constance Fletcher.” Yet, it is important to acknowledge that the fact that the name “Constance” is only mentioned in the title allows for the pronoun “she” to be simultaneously invoking Constance Fletcher or any anonymous “she.” Constance is presented as a person who is hyper-aware of her thoughts as she is said to be “one thinking about this thinking,” and her thoughts at this point are uniquely concerned with “family living.” As a “young one,” Constance already seems to be thoughtfully engaged in the way she was experiencing family life, since “When she was a young one she was thinking about having family living.” This hyper-awareness in youth is emphasized by the fact that Stein repeats the phrase “She was knowing, when she was a young one” twice in the first few paragraphs of the portrait, producing the eerie sense that Constance might be presaging the dysfunctional “family living” the portrait later reveals she goes on to “have.” Also, throughout the first part of the portrait, Stein can be viewed as stylistically simulating the cycle of “having had family living” in the past and “having family living” in the present through the repetitive motions of her sentences such as “She was thinking and feeling having had, having family living.”

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change in verb tense from “having had” to “having” appears directly next to one another makes the passage of time between then and now all the more evident. The cyclical quality attributed to “family living” through Stein’s style might be said to carry a mechanized feel to it, an important theme that will develop further throughout the portrait, as well as in Parker’s Such a Pretty Little Picture. The name “Constance” reinforces this idea as it itself conveys a cyclic nature. Wendy Steiner writes that the first few paragraphs of Portrait of Constance Fletcher establish Constance “as one who has had ‘family living,’ and who still has it and who knows that she has it,” yet, these passages at the very beginning of the portrait already foreshadow that Constance’s current “family living” is not the same as the “family living” of her childhood.24

When Constance becomes “later a little an older one,” the subject of love enters her thoughts. Stein writes:

She could be then one being completely loving. She was filled then, completely filled then, she was then feeling in being loving, she was then thinking in being loving. She was completely filled then. [...] She was full then, she was filling in then in being one living in loving, in living in thinking in being loving, in living in feeling being one being loving.25

The insistence upon the word “then” implies a rupture between that moment in time during which Constance was “being loving” and the present. Indeed, this passage foreshadows the terrible experience of love that Constance will shortly thereafter be described to have in the present. The rhythm of this passage is striking, as one cannot help but speed up the tempo of one’s reading as the sentences unfold despite the various commas. The rapid pace and the repetitive nature of the passage provoke the reader to feel as though s/he is reciting a kind of incantation, leading me to think that Stein is stylistically imitating Constance’s youthful impassioned, spellbound state of “living in feeling being one being loving” which will greatly contrast the style she employs when

depicting Constance’s shattered marriage and family life. Along with “being loving,” the notions of “filling in,” being “full,” and “being filled” emerge at this point in the portrait, and the rapid pace at which the passage is read incites these words to blur together, leading the idea of “full”-“fill”ment (fulfillment) to transpire, which again will contrast with the rest of the portrait in which Constance, her partner, and their child will be presented as distant and detached from one another. Furthermore, the fact that Stein begins to associate the pronoun “she” with the word “one” is immensely significant here, as soon afterward Stein will only refer to Constance with the number “one.”

A drastic change in style occurs in the portrait following the previously quoted passage. Stein no longer employs gerund endings as often, and the “she” of the first few paragraphs disappears. While many critics have acknowledged and examined this stylistic shift, only Marianne DeKoven has ventured to provide an explanation for it: “Stein probably put this portrait aside, returning to it months later with a changed style.”26 Not only do I find this explanation in the form of a speculation to be unhelpful, but I also find it reductive in the way it conveniently relies on the passage of time to interpret creative intention. I therefore choose to disregard DeKoven’s statement, and to continue studying the portrait as one uninterrupted piece. Along with the writing style, the tone of the narrative shifts tremendously at this point as well. Stein slowly introduces the image of a second human figure, albeit a severely disjointed image: “There is an expression when contemplation is not connecting the object that is in position with the forehead that is returning looking.”27 The words “not connecting” indicate a disruption in subject/object relations, a concept that Georg Simmel explains is a fundamental aspect of the quintessentially modern “blasé outlook,” a notion that he introduces in his essay The Metropolis

and Mental Life. Indeed, Simmel writes that the “essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things. Not in the sense that they are not perceived, as is the case of mental dullness, but rather that the meaning and the value of the distinctions between things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as meaningless.” 28 The “expression” that Stein mentions in this sentence evokes the “blasé attitude” as described by Simmel, since the “forehead,” while apt to perform the act of “contemplation,” cannot draw a connection between itself and the “object that is in position,” suggesting a certain “indifference” toward the object, to use Simmel’s term. The fact that the human figure is referred to only as a “forehead” accentuates the supremely modern characteristics of this sentence that are simultaneously symptomatic and representative of the era during which it was written, as the synecdoche echoes the fragmentary quality of the portrait on the whole, resonating with Stein’s stylistically cubist tendencies that highlight her modern concerns. 29 For Linda Nochlin, as the title of her book The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity suggests, fragmentation as an artistic technique symbolizes modernity par excellence, particularly “anatomical fragments” through which she believes “the coherence of the body is totally shattered.” 30 While Nochlin is an art historian and her work examines paintings rather than texts, her understanding of this technique is indisputably applicable to literature. Fragmentation is also extremely important in Simmel’s work as David Frisby explains that “the starting point of [Simmel’s] analysis of modernity […] commences with

‘the fortuitous fragments of reality’ (emphasis added).”31 Additionally, the disjointed figure of the “forehead,” along with its blasé quality, presages the machine-like description of the body that Stein provides soon afterwards.

Following the introduction of a second human figure with the image of the “forehead,” Stein renders this presence more and more explicit as the portrait develops. The subsequent paragraphs feature the word “union” several times, and shortly afterwards the reader is told that “They are not separated.”32 Constance, or “she,” is reintroduced into the portrait and the marital bond that ties “They” together becomes clearer as Stein elucidates the decrepit state of their marriage. Stein shares that they “were equal to enough so that all the separation made them remain,” implying that “she” and her partner still form a “union” and are not “separated” only because of a certain sense of obligation, or perhaps out of “habit,” a word that appears a few paragraphs later to describe the “measure of all who are together.”33 The punctual shift in focus from “They” to “all who are together” coincides with the idea that the “she” from the portrait can refer to the title’s Constance Fletcher just as it can be referring to a more general “she.” Also, “They” can simultaneously be referring to Constance and her husband, as it can refer to any couple of the period. Habit will reappear in Parker’s Such a Pretty Little Picture as an extremely important theme tied with routine and the cyclical in order to expose the ways in which these notions are inextricably linked with modern life, rendering human connections devoid of meaningful affect as a consequence of the environments brought about by modernity, an idea that is intimated in this portrait as well. Indeed, the feeling of alienation that was already hinted at with the fragmented image of the human figure as a “forehead” becomes more and more tangible.

33 Stein, 163.
as it begins to be associated with the couple – which as far as human interactions go is understood to be a relationship based on principles of the utmost love and affection – and becomes even more tangible once a child enters the narrative, exposing a dysfunctional family in which the family members might as well be strangers to one another.

Stein provides a striking indication that the marriage is shattered when she writes, “She did not animate what was mechanical.”\textsuperscript{34} This sentence holds a sexual connotation as it insinuates that “She” either did not want or did not succeed in arousing “what was mechanical,” which can be understood as the male sexual organ. The reduction of the male reproductive organ to a mere mechanism renders intercourse an automated process between two bodily machines as opposed to a romantic, physical act of love, and equates human reproduction to a mere mechanical reproduction, “in the age of technological reproducibility.”\textsuperscript{35} Daniel H. Borus writes, “Such objects as automobiles, electric lighting, skyscrapers, telephones, and movies – none of which had existed half a century earlier – dominated the American landscape by the second decade of the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{36} In a moment in history when machines are rapidly becoming more prominent and technological advancements constantly introduce new ones, the image of the body as a mechanism can be understood to be a commentary on, or perhaps even a denouncement of, the times and their effect on the human experience. In \textit{Fragments of Modernity}, Frisby states that one of Simmel’s principle preoccupations concerning modernity lies in the “preponderance that the technical side of life has obtained over its inner side” to which Frisby later adds that “[t]he

\textsuperscript{34} Stein, Gertrude. \textit{Geography and Plays}. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993, 162.
external world becomes part of the inner world.”37 In other words, Simmel observes that the modern individual has internalized the heavily machine-based reality that emerges as a consequence to modern times, a notion that Stein evocatively illustrates in her text.

Moreover, as a consequence of the human “mechanical” reproduction, Stein introduces a “They” that no longer refers only to Constance and her partner, but also to a child. Indeed, Stein writes “They were the three” directly after the previously quoted passage.38 As foreshadowed in the first part of the portrait though, Constance’s current “family living” is depicted as tainted, and as the reasons for this are gradually exposed to the reader, it becomes clear that the marriage that is illustrated in this text, and the nuclear family stemming from it, suffer from the pathologies that arise as a consequence of the modern era. The first thing we are told concerning this family is that “They were the three and they were not employed in looking,” followed by “they had the time to address what they did address when they would address one another. They did not all listen.”39 Evidently, communication, in the form of perception, speech, and listening, is lacking in this family as “they were not employed in looking,” “they would address one another” only occasionally as is insinuated by the conditional words “when they would,” and indeed in the rare occasions when they did speak to one another, “[t]hey did not all listen.” This lack of communication establishes a tremendous feeling of alienation within the family, one that seems paradoxical when “family living” should be equated with “being completely loving.”40 In The Metropolis and Mental Life, Simmel claims that in modern times, “production for the market […] is for entirely unknown purchasers who never appear in the actual field of vision of the producers

39 Stein, 162-163.
40 Stein, 158.
themselves” leading to an “imponderability of personal relationships.” While this commentary (which is evidently rooted in Marxist theory) relates to the “money-economy” (Simmel’s term) that emerges at this moment in history, its basic observation concerning “personal relationships” is applicable to other areas of life, notably family dynamics as depicted by Stein in which the different members of the family are portrayed in such a way that they more closely resemble strangers than anything else.

The feeling of alienation brought about by the lack of communication in the Fletcher family is exacerbated when one looks back to a moment earlier on in the portrait when Stein writes, “The meaning is that the precious picture is the bargain that has not met the ancient day when there is everything to say.” In a text where the writing style can itself be alienating to the reader, a quality that I think Stein is very conscious of and that is meant to mirror the content of her writing, the words “The meaning is” stand out enormously, and impose significant weight to the idea that follows. The words “precious picture” resonate with the title of Parker’s short story Such a Pretty Little Picture in the sense that an ironic tone can immediately be detected, and the fact that in both instances the authors are referring to “family living,” and by extension human relationships at large, in the epoch of modernity intensifies this connection. Indeed, by “precious picture” I think that Stein is referring to the portrait that she is creating of the marriage, and the nuclear family from which it stems, one that is anything but “precious.” Stein situates this “precious picture” in the present when she writes “did not meet the ancient day,” the present being the year 1911 when Stein wrote the portrait, drawing a distinction between “family living” in the “ancient day” and “family living” today. The words “ancient day” refer to a time in the past with such vagueness that one can only assume that this “ancient day” stands in contrast to the

modern epoch. In other words, attempting to situate the “ancient day” does not seem necessary or productive since what matters is that the “ancient day” was a time that was different from the modern period during which the portrait was written. Moreover, the word “bargain” that Stein associates with the “precious picture” carries a negative connotation, insinuating that today’s “family living” is a lesser, cheaper version of the one that existed in “the ancient day,” a notion that can also be viewed as a commentary on the economic developments of the period as described by Simmel earlier. The final idea of the sentence, “when there is everything to say,” explicitly relates to the lack of communication and feeling of alienation that reign in the Fletcher family where, on the rare occasion when there is “[n]o silence,” words are reduced to “sounds […] that they might be hearing.”

Furthermore, just as the human figure was disembodied and rendered a mechanism earlier on in the portrait, the Fletcher family, “[t]hey were the three,” is reduced to a most basic form nearing the end of the text when Stein associates Constance, her partner, and their child with the numbers “One,” “Two,” and “Three” respectively. The reader had seen Stein begin to do this with “she” and the number “one” earlier on in the portrait, but at this point in the narrative when the structure of the text is more fragmented than ever, Stein broadens the numerical association to the rest of the family in this manner:

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One.
[...]
Two.
[...]
Three. 44
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The numbers appear abruptly on the page with a few sentences separating them from one another; the distance between each number can be understood as structurally symbolizing the distant

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44 Stein, 163-164.
nature of the relationship between these family members. To impose a numerical association onto
human beings is a striking gesture on Stein’s part as it depersonalizes the members of this family
to an extreme extent, reducing “family living” to a cold, mathematical construct by which a
“One” and a “Two” produce a “Three.”

It is important to remember here that, in my view, Stein (and Parker subsequently) are
employing marriage and “family living” as a vehicle to represent all human interactions in the
modern era: Stein and Parker use the Fletchers and the Wheelocks as emblems to convey the
extent to which individuals’ connections to one another at this moment in time are reduced to
distant and estranged exchanges, even in the context where one would most expect to find
meaningful relations. In this way, Stein and Parker’s texts echo Simmel’s essay titled The
Stranger in which he writes that the “state of being a stranger […] is a specific form of
interaction” that emerges in the epoch of modernity based on “repulsion and distance.”
Nonetheless, Simmel attributes an “objective” quality to the modern stranger as he interacts in
this form with people, objects, places, and the world at large, which is a characteristic that does
not transpire in Stein and Parker’s writing. Simmel’s stranger is also just one particular social
type that arises out of the modern environment according to Simmel (one that seems to be
exclusively male), whereas I believe that Stein and Parker are showing that all individuals have
become strangers to one another.

Indeed, Parker’s Such a Pretty Little Picture depicts the dysfunctional Wheelock family
(composed of Mr. and Mrs. Wheelock and their daughter, Sister) whose surname already
describes their situation very fittingly. A few critics have commented on this idea, such as
Rhonda S. Pettit who states that the name “suggests never-ending entrapment,” and Sondra

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45 Simmel, Georg. The Stranger (1903), in Simmel, Georg, On Individuality and Social Form, Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1971, 143-144.
46 Simmel, 146.
Melzer writes that the surname “Wheelock” proposes that “[f]rustrated and imprisoned in his life, […] Mr. Wheelock is bored by his meaningless job in the city, bored by his domineering wife and bored by his dull clod of a daughter.” As previously mentioned, Mr. Wheelock is the protagonist of this short story, and we are told at the start of the narrative that “from the first he had nearly acknowledged to himself that he did not like Sister as a person,” and that he “had never felt any fierce thrills of father-love for the child.” Already, the narrator’s trenchant yet subtle sense of humor transpires, as the words “fierce thrills” seem amusingly inappropriate in conjunction with “father-love,” and the free indirect style mediated by this narrative voice leads the reader to understand that the “fierce thrills” are what Mr. Wheelock believes a father is expected to feel toward his daughter. The fact that “father-love” is employed instead of just ‘love,’ and that the term is hyphenated, add to the idea that it is a sentiment alien to Mr. Wheelock, since the hyphenation gives it an almost scientific quality that renders the emotion an odd phenomenon rather than a familiar sentiment. Already, Parker establishes that the Wheelocks are not tied with the strong affective bond that is expected in a family.

The fact that Mr. and Mrs. Wheelock call their five-year-old daughter “Sister” is significant. The reasoning behind the name, we are told, is that Mrs. Wheelock always expected her daughter to have a sibling: “She had been known as Sister since her birth, and her mother still laid plans for a brother for her.” The name “Sister” therefore points to a sort of automatism, as it implies that directly after child number one, child number two should be produced. This idea goes along with the mechanical quality Stein attributed to the Fletcher family in associating them with the numbers “One,” “Two,” and “Three.” In these two texts, Stein and Parker can be said to

49 Parker, 4.
show a parallelism in their appraisal of human relations as utterly impersonal. A further distortion of family roles appears when the narrator reveals that Adelaide began calling her husband “Daddy since some eight months before Sister was born.” Mrs. Wheelock’s repeated use of the word “Daddy” throughout the narrative to refer to Mr. Wheelock, even in instances when Sister is not around, comes across as tremendously unsettling since, once again, the relationship between the family members has been perverted. Indeed, every time Mr. or Mrs. Wheelock says “Sister” when alluding to their child, and every time Mrs. Wheelock calls her husband “Daddy,” the distortion of family roles is brought to the reader’s attention, accentuating the alienating feeling that reigns among them. Nonetheless, the narrator’s sharp humorous tone creates a certain distance between the narrator and the narrative, which in turn creates a comforting distance for the reader.

The dynamic between the narrator and the narrative, which influences the reader’s relationship to the text, is particularly interesting as the narrator’s tone is at once humorous and blasé, and perhaps also humorous because blasé. In employing the word ‘blasé’ here, I am still referring to Simmel’s theory on the modern outlook on life, but focusing more precisely on its jaded aspect, a quality of Simmel’s “blasé attitude” that Parker introduces in the narrative voice. Only one critic, Jessica Burstein, has drawn the connection between Parker’s narrators and Simmel’s theory. In her article, she states that Parker’s work often presents an “artfully arranged ennui” that can be tied back to Simmel’s theory on the blasé, and alluding to the speaker of a specific poem by Parker, Burstein writes that “this is the voice of experience […] the voice having experienced everything, my dear, even death.”

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itself mimics the blasé tone, is true for the narrator of *Such a Pretty Little Picture* as well. For instance, when narrating one of the most crucial parts of the short story, during which Mr. Wheelock is thinking about a newspaper article he had come across, the narrator keeps a matter-of-fact tone that pervades throughout Parker’s *Picture*:

> It was about a man who lived in a suburb. Every morning he had gone to the city on the 8:12, sitting in the same seat in the same car, and every evening he had gone home to his wife on the 5:17, sitting in the same seat in the same car. He had done this for twenty years of his life. And then one night he didn’t come home. […] The last man to see him was the conductor on the 5:17. “He come down the platform at the Grand Central,” the man reported “just like he done every night since I been working on this road. He put one foot on the step, and then he stopped sudden, and he said ‘Oh, hell,’ and he took his foot off of the step and walked away. And that’s the last anybody see of him.” […] [Mr. Wheelock] did not think the man’s sitting in the same seat in the same car need have been stressed so much. That seemed unimportant. […] Mr. Wheelock was absorbed in that moment when he had said “Oh, hell,” and walked off. “Oh, hell” seemed to Mr. Wheelock a fine thing for him to have said, a perfect summary of the situation.  

This passage is crucial to the narrative, as for a large part of the remainder of the short story, Mr. Wheelock daydreams about how he would proceed if he were to imitate the man from the newspaper article, thinking about the things he would do differently, the timing of the “Oh, hell,” and where he would go if he were to, essentially, abandon his family. The passage also depicts the painfully routine-based life of the modern individual at this time period, and its potential consequences as portrayed by Parker in this text. The short and to-the-point sentences are both humorous and blasé. For instance, “That seemed unimportant” is humorous because what it refers to is clearly important, and Mr. Wheelock is oblivious to it, and the sentence is also blasé in its matter-of-fact, almost bored tone, which is amusing in itself as well. The intermingling of humor and the blasé precludes complete investment on the part of the narrator, and in turn on the part of the reader in respect of the devastating account embodied in this text. This detachment carries an

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undertone of acceptance that is reassuring to the reader, an idea that I will explore in more detail further on.

Parker’s use of humor in *Such a Pretty Little Picture* introduces a new dimension to Stein’s *Portrait*, since it illuminates the humor that exists in Stein’s text as well. As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, I have found only one critic, Linda Watts, who addresses the subject of humor in Stein’s work. Watts argues that Stein’s writing is filled with humor but most people either do not see it or do not know how to react to it, and states that it “should in no way diminish the sense of [Stein’s] literary importance to acknowledge that she frequently accomplished her work through the definitive devices of performative humor: asides, raucous one-liners, parody, wordplay, and free association.”

Parker’s *Picture*, which deals with the same thematic concepts as Stein’s *Portrait of Constance Fletcher* (alienation, lack of meaningful communication, estrangement, etc.) helps elucidate the underlying humorous tone present in Stein’s writing. Indeed, humorously short, matter-of-fact sentences or “raucous one-liners” as the ones found in Parker’s text can also be found in Stein’s. For instance, two sentences after the passage where Stein introduces a second human figure through the image of the “forehead that is returning looking,” Stein writes “That is a cruel description.” The fact that the passage is said to be a “description” creates a sense of distancing from the narrative, and the same matter-of-fact tone that one encounters in Parker’s short story is found here as well. There is something humorous in the unexpected removal from the narrative in those words, and in writing that the description is “cruel,” Stein somehow makes it less so.

In other instances, the humor stems from passages that can simply not be tied to the rest of the narrative in any way, such as the out-of-the-blue phrase “That was the origin of the

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penguin.” Like “This is a cruel description,” this is a short sentence that asks to be read in a humorously serious, monotonous tone. The fact that these types of interjections repeatedly appear in the midst of an intense portrayal of human estrangement makes them all the more humorous, and once again create a distancing with the narrative. Parker’s subtly poignant wit exposes the playful quality that exists in such one-liners as the ones present in Stein’s text as well, and invites a reader of both texts to go back to Stein’s work and savor these types of passages fully in the light of Parker’s style. Another example would be the insertion of “If they move in the shoe there is everything to do. They do not move in the shoe” as a disruptive element in the narrative. A few critics have commented on these two sentences present in Stein’s Portrait, including Marianne DeKoven who writes that these sentences are “joyous” and carry a “nursery-rhyme quality,” yet DeKoven does not mention the dry humor that radiates from such interjections. The effect of the underlying humor in these texts by Stein and Parker is to, as previously mentioned, create a certain acceptance in regard to the experience of modernity and the way it impacts human relationships.

Many modernist authors have written about the consequences arising from the modern era’s drastic shifts away from the past, and have done so with a view to triggering different reactions. Some authors use the art of writing to expose their indignation or as an outcry condemning modernity as the source of all modern ills, while others use it as a manifesto calling for a revolution or rebellion of some sort. Yet Parker and Stein do not do either of these things. Their vignettes into the dysfunctional lives of the Fletcher and Wheelock families resulting from

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55 This interjection appears a few sentences after the passage in which Stein writes “The meaning is that the precious picture is the bargain that has not met the ancient day when there is everything to say,” which I have examined earlier in this essay. Ibid, 161.
58 Examples of such authors include Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot, and later George Orwell.
the modern environment are devastating, but both Stein and Parker choose to insert splashes of humor into their texts that ultimately say “it’s okay.” The humor acts as a reliever of tensions, and intimates a certain resignation, suggesting that since modernity cannot be changed, it is better to poke fun at it than to further dramatize the situation – this is what I mean by ‘acceptance.’ Further, the artistic medium of literature exposes the beauty that may lie in this resignation, and somewhat paradoxically reveals the beauty that modernity can generate.

In *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, Jonathan Flatley defines melancholia as “an emotional attachment to something or someone lost,” and explains that pervasive feelings of melancholia arose as a result of modernity. He writes that the drastic transformations brought about by modern times have changed the “quality and scope of loss,” and highlights a few of these experiences, including a change in “the nature of work” turning the work environment into a “brutalizing and dangerous” place where workers are isolated from one another following industrialization, an “upsetting break in the experience of space and time” engendered by new technologies, and colossal displacement due to “massive emigrations” leading people to consider themselves “permanent foreigners.” At the end of his enumeration, Flatley asserts that “[o]ne could continue. I have here by no means exhausted the ways modernization has been experienced as loss.” I believe that the estranged human interactions depicted by Parker and Stein is part of the types of losses that Flatley points to. Flatley himself touches on this idea when he refers to Walter Benjamin and writes: “A range of historical processes, such as urbanization, the commodity, new forms of technologized war, and factory work required people to shield themselves from the material world around them, to stop being

60 Flatley, 29-30.
61 Flatley, 31.
emotionally open to that world and the people in it.” Flatley’s point that modernization led “people to shield themselves” from both “the world and the people in it” resonates in Stein and Parker’s representation of estrangement and alienation.

Flatley suggests that “one of the central problems of modernity is the attempt to grapple with these losses.” As a result, he is interested in the “shared approach to aesthetic activity as a response to the losses generated by the experience of modernity” reflected in three modernist texts (by Du Bois, James, and Platonov) that Flatley examines and which he believes present melancholia as uplifting. It is Flatley’s view that those three texts show melancholia as an enriching experience in the way they focus on the “shared historicity” of melancholia, turning this feeling into a collective experience as opposed to an individual one inducing isolation and depression. Similarly to Flatley, I am interested in the “aesthetic” approach that Stein and Parker have towards loss. However, unlike Flatley, whose central aim is to attenuate the negative perception associated with melancholia and to show that it can at times be a positive experience, I do not argue that Stein in her Portrait and Parker in her Picture propose that one should approach estrangement as positive. I simply propound that Stein and Parker offer acceptance as a way of coping with the loss caused by the absence of meaningful interactions, as evidenced by their sprinkling those writings with humorous matter-of-fact statements, as discussed in this essay.

To conclude, Gertrude Stein and Dorothy Parker, two extraordinary writers (in every sense of the word) who have long been kept apart from one another in critical conversations, are not as dissimilar as one might think, especially when one pays attention to the playful tone displayed in their texts. Through Portrait of Constance Fletcher and Such a Pretty Little Picture, 

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63 Flatley, 30.
64 Flatley, 9.
65 Flatley, 84.
one can see that Stein and Parker share the same concerns regarding the violent impact of modernity on human relations at the turn of the century, and the loss of meaningful interactions it provoked. Distinguishing themselves from many other authors who were their contemporaries, and who address the woes of the experience of modernity in their writing through indignation or by suggesting resistance, Stein and Parker propose acceptance as a sustainable response. It is interesting to note that Stein and Parker, two female writers, had a very different way of dealing with modernity than some of their male contemporaries. For instance, when looking at T.S. Eliot as an archetypal male modernist writer, it becomes evident that his rapport with modernity involves utter hopelessness. Indeed, in late June 1918, a few months before the end of the First World War, T.S. Eliot is recorded to have written that the “strain of life is very great and I fear it will be for the rest of the lives of anyone now on earth. I am very pessimistic about the world we’re going to have to live in after the war.”66 T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) has also been said to be “one of the first canonical works of modern Anglo-American literature to envision a dying society.”67 One could speculate that Stein and Parker’s lifestyles influenced their way of looking upon modernity: as two very openly progressive women, it is not surprising that they would tend to be more readily accepting of radical change. Moreover, the dry wit and absurd-like comments present both in Stein’s *Portrait* and in Parker’s *Picture* are elements that can be viewed as inscribing these two authors as precursors of absurdist writing such as that of Samuel Beckett. Yet, unlike absurdist writing of the following decades, which broadly speaking creates a sense of existential desolation, the absurdist quality in Stein and Parker’s texts, as I have discussed, creates a reassuring sense of acceptance. With their powerful renderings of

estrangement combined with the humorous, detached delivery of the narrative, these two texts by Stein and Parker, read side by side, prepare us to confront the reality of modernity with a degree of acceptance that is a viable alternative to hopelessness.
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Additional Works Consulted


