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What happened in *What Happened A Five Act Play*: Gertrude Stein's Collaged Narrative

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Abstract

Existing scholarship has neglected Gertrude Stein's early theatrical works by overlooking the generation of what I call her hybrid genre of 'literary cubist theatre'. This essay analyses Gertrude Stein's first play *What Happened A Five Act Play* (1913) through the concept of 'literary cubism' (Steiner 103). It first draws on examples from Radio Free Stein's 2019 radio production of *What Happened*, and then compares it to close-readings of the original play-text. The examples show how Stein uses the technique of multiple character perspectives to create a non-linear, fractured plot. The plot is a collaged narrative, created by Stein as an alternative to the conventional linear dramatic structure. In turn, she creates a multi-dimensional space allowing the audience/readers to generate multiple interpretations, which subsequently 'rebalances' Stein's identity as an innovator within modernist playwriting. The article re-establishes her neglected experimental early plays with this new reading of *What Happened*, and argues for its innovation as part of a new hybrid genre of text-based theatre.

Gertrude Stein is an important modernist playwright. Although her theatrical works are given the blanket classification of 'closet dramas' (Puchner 101), I propose, in an attempt to rebalance the reputation of Stein's early theatre such as *What Happened A Five Act Play* (1913), that they are successful and performable pieces of 'literary cubist theatre'. Jane Palatini-Bowers refers to practitioners that stage Stein's play-texts as 'sympathetic directors' (109). Palatini-Bowers' comment refers to some of the most prolific contemporary and avant-garde practitioners that have staged Stein's work during their early careers, which has thus influenced their own practices. The performances and adaptations of her works include the Judson Poets' theatre company, which performed four of Stein's plays during the 1960s, as well as her other early work *In Circles* (1967); the Living Theatre produced Stein's *Ladies' Voices* (1916) in 1952; and Robert Wilson, who has 'acknowledged affinities with Gertrude Stein' (Innes 201), produced her later opera *Doctor Faustus*

Lights the Lights (1938) in 1992—which was also included in the the Wooster Group's *House / Lights* (1998). A variety of Stein's works were also adapted with compositions by John Cage in the 1930s and 1940s, before composing his renowned work *4'33* (1952); Anne Boggart adapted Stein's plays, texts and letters into the piece *Gertrude and Alice* (1999); and Katie Mitchell directed a showcase of Stein's play-texts in her production of *Say it with Flowers* (2013). Although some directors have only staged Stein's later works, they had to adapt and create their own innovative ways to stage performances of these experimental texts—'re-balancing' Stein's identity from a writer of 'closet dramas' (Puchner 101) to an innovator of a new genre of literary cubist theatre. Though her early play-texts have been deemed 'unperformable' (Palatini-Bowers 109) contemporary productions, such as the 2019 Radio Free Stein, prove otherwise.

The play-texts are indeed experimental and can be difficult to interpret—yet there have been five major stagings of Stein's first play, *What Happened A Five Act Play*. Its debut performance was in 1950 nearly forty years after it was written, being staged by Lindley Williams Hubbell.*[1] The other four productions were by Judson Poets' theater company* in 1963, Dance Opera for Montréal's Le Groupe de la Place Royale in 1978*, by Scott Osborne* in 2001, and most recently by Radio Free Stein in 2019. The latter was a radio play (recorded in Paris, where Stein spent most of her life), whereas the others—excepting Dance Opera's production—were staged in the USA. I analyse here the Radio Free Stein production in the following sections as it is the most contemporary production. As mentioned, Radio Free Stein adapted *What Happened* into a radio play which, arguably, follows Stein's own dramaturgy—as explained further below. The text itself is (as the title suggests) five acts, but is very short at four and a quarter pages in length.

1 Where the asterisk appears, the performances are documented by Sarah Bay-Cheng in her monograph *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-garde Theater* (2005). This information is taken from Appendix B: 'A Chronological List of Professional Productions' (147-165). The list contains production information up to the year of the book's publication in 2004 (and therefore does not include the Radio Free Stein production).

The non-linear, 'non-narrative' plot is told through various characters talking and recounting events that make it unclear and ambiguous 'what happens'. Conventional signals that aid in interpretation are removed: there are no stage directions, no character lists, no character names. It is unclear who is speaking and what their dialogue is within the text and this interpretation is left to the reader and director to decide, while the characters or voices are reduced to numbers. Martin Puchner notes that Stein 'does not "tell" what happened (diegesis) but instead aspires to represent' (106). The sporadic dialogue from the nameless and genderless characters represents what happened but also offers little context as to what the 'plot' is in the text. Therefore, it is unclear what happens in *What Happened*. However, as Alex Goody notes, *What Happened* was written by Stein in response to a dinner party that she attended and was hosted by the painter Harry Gibb in 1913. The focus of the play is the characters' language and dialogue as the main conveyor of meaning, and the audience/reader must attempt to piece together what has occurred at the dinner party.

Multiple Perspectives: Vocalisations and Multidimensional Space

Although the story in *What Happened* remains unclear due to the lack of textual conventions it would seem, as Goody states, that the play recounts what happened at the dinner party that Stein attended. Radio Free Stein's 2019 production of *What Happened* utilises the ambiguous meaning of the play and uses musical compositions and the actors' use of voice to help guide audiences through the plot to glean some intepreted meaning. Radio Free Stein is an interdisciplinary project established and directed by the academic Adam Frank. It aims 'to understand the relevance of music and sound to [Stein's] poetics, and to expand ways of integrating words with other sonic elements' (Radio Free Stein, 'What Happened').[2] The dialogue in the early play-texts, as noted above, is ambiguous and can be difficult to interpret for readers,

2 Snippets from the 2019 production of *What Happened* are available on *YouTube*.

directors, actors, and audiences. The performance focuses on the vocality and musicality of the language within the play-text. It has an accompanying composition that is played during some of the spoken dialogue. The musical compositions help contextualise the dialogue's plot as they suggest certain emotions to the listeners. The difference between physically staging the piece in a theatre space and producing an audio performance is the elimination of one of the audiences' senses and system of signs. Sight is removed and cannot be used to help navigate and interpret the obscure text. Keir Elam posits that usually there are three semiotic codes that are all simultaneously read and interpreted by an audience in a performance: 'kinesic, scenic [and] linguistic' (50). Kinesic refers to the signified meaning elicited by the proximity, use of space, and movement of the actor's body as the signifiers. Linguistic signs are the verbal cues signified by the actors' use of voice. The scenic code refers to any signifiers that are not the actors' body, use of space and proximity or voice—including lighting, set, sound effects or compositions and costume. In the Radio Free Stein production, there is no *mise-en-scène* for the audience and the kinesic code is completely removed. No actors' physicality, costume, set, props, or lighting can be interpreted by the audience. The most prominent theatrical code used here is the linguistic code. The scenic code is almost completely removed and its partial remains are the use of musical accompaniments in the production. The kinesic code and the majority of the scenic code aids the audience in their interpretation of the play, helping to physically locate it in a certain space and time period. In removing these codes, space and time become ambiguous in Radio Free Stein's production of *What Happened*. It is up to the audience—arguably more so than the four other adaptations listed above—to interpret where and when this play takes place.

Without supplying much in the way of the kinesic or scenic codes, the production primarily relies on the linguistic. Elaine Aston and George Savona describe the actor as a sign that the audience can interpret: 'as a public person, as the conveyor of the text, and as the site

of interconnecting sign-systems' (102). There are two linguistic signs present during performances. Firstly, the lexis of the word, which the playwright has written, can release a signified meaning. For example, the word 'depressing' (*What Happened* 208) expresses the signified meaning of someone experiencing a debilitating low mood. However, the signified meaning generated from the lexis is not created by singular words, but by the singular word's relationship with other words. Using the previous example, the complete line of dialogue is: 'Not any nuisance is depressing' (*ibid.*). The signified meaning of depressing has now changed, because of the other words that are placed and organised within the sentence. This shows that the characters are not experiencing anything that makes them busy, and they are expressing their dislike towards this experience.

The second linguistic sign is the vocalisation of the line; of course, how an actor chooses to speak the line affects the signified meaning. For instance, if the actor were to read: 'Not any nuisance is depressing' (*ibid.*) using a slow pace and low volume, it might signify that the character is experiencing sadness. If the actor chooses to vocalise the line in a different way—using high elation, fast pace, and loud volume—then the vocalisation would signify excitement or enthusiasm. The linguistic code then has a dualist nature because the written language is a set of signifiers, and the way that the written language is vocalised by an actor also *signifies*. The two signs, lexical and vocal, work in simultaneous harmony to convey a combined signified meaning to the audience. By choosing to focus on the linguistic code in their production, Radio Free Stein relies on the language, the actors' vocalisations, and the musical accompaniments to convey meaning and the ambiguous plot of the play to the audience. The focus on the linguistic sign in the Radio Free Stein production follows Stein's own dramaturgy by focusing on dialogue over plot in the early plays. Alexis Soloski argues that Stein:

> found it difficult to see and hear at the same time, both to observe the action and listen to the speech, so she

> invented plays in which the language doesn't distract from the action. ('Who's Afraid of Gertrude Stein?')

Choosing the format of the radio-play and using the linguistic code as the main conveyor of meaning follows Stein's notion of not distracting the audience from the action/plot which creates, as Adam Frank calls it, an 'emotional syncopation' ('The Expansion of Setting'). The Radio Free Stein production plays with the sonic element of the scenic code, experimenting with the musicality and verse present in the language as Frank adapts the play script into an almost-libretto with composer Samuel Vriezen, music director Didier Aschour, and sound engineer Benjamin Maumus. The music compositions, the vocalisations of the actors, and the language of the text are the main codes that the audience can use to interpret what happens in this production of *What Happened*.

In focusing on the linguistic code as the main representation of meaning, the production features multiple perspectives in the performance. The radio-play production includes the use of multiple character perspectives that are collaged together through the actors' vocalisations. The vocalisations play with the sonic features that are present in *What Happened*'s language. The title of the play is vocalised by multiple people, sometimes simultaneously, and others at staggered intervals. The title for instance is pronounced in various tones and at differing volumes, each actor uses a different emotion when verbalising the title. Some of the actors turn the title into a question with their inflection and use of their emotive tone. There are seven members of the ensemble that are present in the video recording of the production. There are seven cast members stood in an upright position. It appears that these individuals are the seven voices that state the play's title at the start of the performance. The use of multiple voices and the differentiation between their vocalisations presents to the audience multiple perspectives at once. The audience are at first assaulted with an almost choral cacophony of multiple, individual readings of 'what happened', which later evolves to simultaneous vocalisations, and

finally the staggered enunciations. The Radio Free Stein production uses multiple vocalisations to allude to the various meanings that can be elicited from the play's title alone.

What Happened creates a multi-dimensional space in which the audience/readers have no choice but to interpret the dialogue in any way they can to piece together the fractured plot. Roland Barthes argues that 'a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning […] but a multi-dimensional space' (1324). The language in the play-text does not restrict the audience to a flat singular restrictive section in which only a few possible meanings can be found; Stein creates a large multi-dimensional area that the audience and reader can explore while navigating various planes of meaning. In the early play-texts, such as *What Happened*, the readers and the audience experience—as outlined by Laura Schultz (2)—various possible outcomes. The audience and readers have interpretive freedom as the play-texts create a 'multi-dimensional' space, to use Barthes' term, that can be explored without authorial control. Stein's experimental early literary cubist pieces of theatre and the modern re-stagings by companies such as Radio Free Stein create an imaginative space that produces a multiplicity of interpretations and meanings. The audience attempt to fathom the 'essence', as Stein refers to it, of the play and in the case of *What Happened* what it was that actually happened (*Lectures in America* 119).

The Generation of Literary Cubist Theatre

Literary cubist theatre is a term that I use to classify Stein's early plays written from 1913-19, including her first play *What Happened.* Scholars coined the term 'literary cubism' to describe Stein's poetry, literary portraits and novels, but it has not been applied to her early theatre. Existing research has claimed that Stein's other literary works such as her early novels and poetry, written at the same time as her theatre pieces, are pieces of 'literary cubism'. Many scholars have argued that Stein's early works are influenced by cubism. For example, Charles

Altieri claims that only Stein's poetry has 'cubist elements' (241). Andrzej Wirth likens her later theatrical writing to cubist qualities or techniques, such as her landscape plays *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927) and *Listen to Me* (1936), using the comparative analogy describing the later plays as a 'sub-genre of the cubist period, the collage' (201). Steinian academics such as Marianne DeKoven (94), Stephen Scobie (105), William H. Gass (145), and Wendy Steiner (103) refer to her poetry, literary portraits, and novels as being pieces of literary cubism. Previous research has not considered the early play-texts to be pieces of literary cubism—despite the fact they were written at the same time as Stein's other literary cubist works.

The term 'literary cubism' acknowledges the difference of the artistic formats and outlines the difference directly within its neologism—and Stein's position as an innovator of this genre should be understood. Stein's works cannot be constituted as direct repetitions of cubism as her works have a different concept than that of, for example, Juan Gris and Pablo Picasso. Furthermore, as mentioned above, research to date has tended to focus on and apply the term to Stein's poetry, literary portraits, and novels. There is little research published that focuses on her 1913-9 play-texts in this regard. Some research on Stein's theatre from Leslie Atkins Durham (69), Betsy Alayne Ryan (86), and Sarah Bay-Cheng (22) mention the early play-texts but do not focus their analyses on them. Palatini-Bowers is the only critic with a dedicated monograph chapter for the early play-texts (111). I analyse *What Happened* through the concept of 'literary cubism' which has, until now, not been analysed using this lens.

Playing with Techniques: Literary Cubism, Multiple Perspectives and Collage Narrative

DeKoven acknowledges that Stein uses multiple-viewpoints within her literature, arguing that Stein fragments sentences and perception producing multiple perspectives (81). She contends alternative perceptions are created in Stein's works, with the generation of

multifocality in Stein's poem *Tender Buttons* (1914), for example. The technique of multiple perspectives can be identified in the theatrical works that were written during the same period. Carolyn Barros also acknowledges this within the later work of the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933),[3] observing that as 'Stein creates a multifaceted and multidimensional effect by drawing a collage of verbal portraits that cut into and across her modernist life-narrative' (187). Stein's early works feature multifaceted narratives then, as identified by DeKoven and Barros. Stein uses multiple character perspectives that become collaged together in *What Happened* as a non-linear narrative device. As a result, this ambiguity means that what happens in *What Happened* is generally unclear for an audience/reader.

Stein refuses to adhere to narrative cohesiveness in her early play-texts like *What Happened*. Instead, as Frank argues, she chooses to 'subordinate narrative' ('Loose Coordinations' 461). *What Happened* uses non-linear means to build the representation of what happened at the 'pleasant dinner party' that she attended before writing the play (Stein, *Plays* 118), using non-linear dialogue. The dialogue is constructed by multiple character perspectives and told only through fragmented framing. It is shown and told through multiple viewpoints, which become fluid and temporary, rather than singular and fixed. Stein presents characters and dialogue as being multiple and shared (examples of this are explored below). In her lecture 'Portraits and Repetition' (1935) she gives the anecdote of her aunts in Baltimore who are all repeating themselves by retelling the same story to her (although she does not tell us what the story was) as an example to explain her technique:

> When all these eleven little aunts were listening as they were talking gradually some one of them was no longer listening. When this happened it might be that the time had come that anyone or one of them was beginning

3 Alice B. Toklas was an American avant-garde writer who was Stein's life-long lover and partner—who also atteneded the dinner party dramatised in *What Happened*.

> repeating, this was ceasing to be insisting or else perhaps
> it might be that the attention of one of someone of them
> had been worn out by adding something. (*Lectures* 170)

Stein's aunts are no longer listening to each other and in turn repeat the same story; 'adding something' different to the same story becomes a repetition with a small difference. Stein, influenced by these aunts' multiple viewpoints of the same story with slight variations, is featured in her early theatre. A useful example of multiple perspectives is the dual stage directions and characters; in each of the acts in *What Happened* the number of speakers alters: for instance, '(Two.) (Three.)' in one section (206), and in the following passage there are '(The same three)' (206). As Stein states in her play's lecture, two speakers, then three, recount 'what happened' (*Lectures in America* 96). If '(Two.) (Three.)' could be interpreted as character names, they could also be interpreted as choral voices. Stein linguistically places multiple perspectives over another as the various characters or voices recount the same event, each providing their different account, and collages these all together to create the 'plot' of the play.

The audience does not hear a full account of what happened in *What Happened* at the dinner party that Stein attended. Instead, Stein presents multiple character perspectives in a fragmented manner—the fragmented narrative is then collaged together in acts and scenes to form the overall stage picture and the possibility of what did happen. An example of the intersection of planes to elicit multiple perspectives with *What Happened*'s dialogue is the play's opening:

> (One.)
> Loud and no cataract. Not any nuisance is depressing.
> (Five.)
> A single sum four and five together and one, not any
> sun a clear signal and an exchange. (205)

Speaker one elicits two signified images of the senses, hearing and seeing with the reference to eyes as a cataract, carrying the meaning of

a medical condition that affects the eyes. As cataract has two signified meanings, the second is the noise of a loud waterfall. Either of these images can be created for an audience member depending upon their stream of associated, signified meanings. The calm image of having no noise is presented, however, as a nuisance: the social experience of silence is worse than the hearing of loud noise. This image of the senses and experience of noise, or lack of, is then interrupted with the dialogue of 'five'. Five builds the image of a sum, possibly counting the amount of people in the room and notes that there are no current signals for social exchanges. The telling of what happened is then in constant flux; with the interruptions from the multiple speakers that recount their experiences. Each of Stein's multiple perspectives builds the overall dialogic 'plot' for the play, as each of the characters' sections and statements in the acts builds to the overall representation of *What Happened*. The acts then relate to one another and are of equal importance in the play's progression. Multiple perspectives allow for the movement away from 'telling another story' (Stein, *Plays* 118). These separated perspectives form together to create a fractured image of what has happened. Although the different witnesses recount various parts of what happened, and their accounts differ subjectively, they still contribute to build a non-linear and fractured image of the plot, which is an abstract representation of what happened at the dinner party that Stein and Toklas attended.

Multiple Interpretations of the Play-text

The relationship between words within her literary cubist theatrical works creates multiple viewpoints for the reader/audience. Cyrena Pondrom describes the ways in which Stein's wordplay functions in Stein's other early writing where 'vivid nouns dominate and the axis of combination is undermined with non-sequitur and logical fallacy' (xv). As Pondrom notes, Stein combines words, which then create playful meanings for the reader (xv). She experiments with the signified meaning that is elicited, with her rejection of grammatical ruling. An

obvious example of this within *What Happened* would be the exchange between '(Two.)' and '(Four.)' in ACT THREE:

> (Two.)
> A cut, a cut is not a slice, what is the occasion for representing a cut and a slice. What is the occasion for all that.
> A cut is a slice, a cut is the same slice. The reason that a cut is a slice is that if there is no hurry any time is just as useful.
> (Four.)
> A cut and a slice is there any question when a cut and a slice are just the same.
> A cut and a slice has no particular exchange it has such a strange exception to all that which is different. (207)

The language used has a meta-linguistic quality as Stein's wordplay creates language that is self-reflexively commenting upon its own usage. She uses cut and slice as both verbs and nouns throughout the passage above, demonstrating the various signified meanings that are elicited, depending upon the other combined words in the sentence and their arbitrary relationship. The grammatical play and meta-linguistic questioning also reveal signs to the audience member/reader, as they query the words' functions as actions at an occasion, such as a party. Stein includes the discussion of cake as it was written partly autobiographically, based on a dinner party she attended. She uses the language in this dialogue exchange to question how she can describe the action of the cutting or slicing of the cake, while also alluding to the image of the cuts and slices of cake that were present at the party as objects. The multiple meanings and images that are elicited are present due to the non-linear dialogue being presented through the multiple character perspectives of '(Two.)' and '(Four.)'.

Within the incorporation of multiple character perspectives that are collaged together as a narrative device and linguistic

experimentation Stein 'inverts the traditional descriptive relationship of word to object' (Dubnick 33). Stein actively plays with how language creates meaning with the signifier and signified. In doing so, as noted by Sara Ford in their study of the poem *Tender Buttons,* the same linguistic experimentation is present and 'creates new levels of possible interpretation over which [Stein] cannot maintain complete control' (51). By eliciting multiple meanings—rather than one that is clearly identifiable for the audience/reader—Stein relinquishes her authorial control. Additionally, Schultz notes that Stein writes 'plays that are open-ended and suggestive of as many possible realizations as there are readers' (2). Her claim supports the hypothesis that Stein creates multiple perspectives and 'open ended' interpretations for the audience/reader, due to the many signified meanings that can be elicited.

The multi-dimensional space that Stein creates in her early play-texts, such as *What Happened*, create endless staging and performing possibilities. Although the play is difficult to interpret due to the ambiguous plot and non-linear collaged narrative, it creates a strength as the text has no fixed meaning. The strength of the piece is also its crux and why it has previously been deemed by Martin Puchner as closet drama (101) and Palatini-Bowers as unperformable (109). However, the boundless stagings that are available to practitioners who approach the text allow them freedom to experiment with and use various formats. This extends to the Radio Free Stein production: adapting the play into a radio-play with musical accompaniments that help guide the audience through the plot of the piece, as based on the director Adam Frank's understanding and interpretation of the original text.

So, what happened in *What Happened a Five Act Play*? By removing what *did* happen, Stein makes the plot ambiguous and somewhat inconsequential. However, the play's strength is in how what happens unfolds through the literary cubist technique of multiple character perspectives. It is never clear what did happen due to the multiplicity of re-tellings—which allows for multitudinous adaptive possibilities, such as that of Radio Free Stein. Stein uses techniques

such as multiple character perspectives and successfully incorporates these into her early play-texts to create non-linear fractured plots. In *What Happened*, the plot is a collaged narrative and as a result Stein creates what I call a new hybrid genre of 'literary cubist theatre'. As Stein converts the cubist technique into her own technique, she creates her own method of theatre. Rather than simply being influenced by or 'copying' her cubist friends and contemporaries, she innovates a new genre of theatre. Furthermore, the production by Radio Free Stein's attempt to successfully stage Stein's early play-texts as performances 'rebalances' her theatrical code to focus on the linguistic code. This aligns, I suggest, with Stein's own dramaturgy, removing the need to watch the action and listen at the same time. The multiple vocalisations from the actors further produce and enhance various interpretations for the audience. The play's literary cubist technique of multiple perspectives creates several meanings and no fixed, singular one is produced—the audience must interpret their own meaning from the play. As Radio Free Stein's radio play demonstrates, the multifaceted interpretations of *What Happened* emerge from the play's ambiguous plot, allowing for various modern interpretations of the play by practitioners and directors.

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