

127 QUOTATIONS



Gertrude Stein

(1874-1946)

Gertrude Stein settled in Paris in 1903 and initiated Modernism as an art patron, collector, literary critic, and writer in her salon on the Left Bank. Her fiction *Three Lives* in 1909 originated the tradition of experimental prose that later influenced elite Postmodern stylists such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme and William Gass. During the 1920s, the peak of the Modernist movement, she was the main arbiter of taste in Paris, more prominent than Ezra Pound. James Joyce was a much greater exemplar of experimental fiction, but he kept to himself and his family except when hanging out at the bookshop Shakespeare and Company, where Sylvia Beach published *Ulysses* in 1922, or when out drinking with Ernest Hemingway. Stein became a friend and mentor of Sherwood Anderson, Godmother to Hemingway's first son, and a strong influence also upon Thornton Wilder, e.e. cummings and many others. She was so publicized she entered popular culture with her partner Alice B. Toklas—even the movies—as a goodhumored eccentric who looked, as Hemingway described her, like a Roman emperor. Yet she published more writing that almost nobody has ever read than any other American writer. Her most interesting experimental prose, such as “Picasso” (1909), is repetitive abstract Expressionist painting in words.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, me, genius, talking, education, skepticism, reality, art, 19th century, literature, conventional language, writing, abstract Expressionism, repetition, lack of plot, punctuation, America, other countries, Communism, destruction of the family, Socialism, tax the rich, disillusionment, Feminism, votes for children, history, money, relationships, men, Nature, war, age, death:

YOUTH

It has been said of geniuses that they are eternally young.

ME

I think the reason I am important is that I know everything.

I have noticed that in portraits of really great writers the mouth is always firmly closed.

I can climb about and remind you that a woman in this epoch does the important literary thinking.

Jacques [Lipchitz, while sculpting a bust of her], of course you don't know much about English literature, but besides Shakespeare and me, who do you think there is?

GENIUS

It takes a lot of time to be a genius, you have to sit around so much doing nothing, really doing nothing.

Generally speaking, everyone is more interesting doing nothing than doing anything.

One may really indeed say that that is the essence of genius, of being most intensely alive, that is being one who is at the same time talking and listening. It is really that that makes one a genius.

TALKING

I have the failing of my tribe. I believe in the sacred rites of conversation even when it is a monologue.

I talk a lot I like to talk and I talk even more than that I may say I talk most of the time and I listen a fair amount too.

There is a great deal of nonsense talked about the subject of anything.

The deepest thing in any one is the conviction of the bad luck that follows boasting.

If you are looking down while you are walking it is better to walk up hill the ground is nearer.

It is always a mistake to be plain-spoken.

EDUCATION

Dear Professor [William] James, I am so sorry but really I do not feel a bit like an examination paper in philosophy today.

I could undertake to be an efficient pupil if it were possible to find an efficient teacher.

Very likely education does not make very much difference.

I like a view but I like to sit with my back turned to it.

SKEPTICISM

I rarely believe anything, because at the time of believing I am not really there to believe.

Given any proposition, I cannot help believing the other side and defending it.

REALITY

There is no real reality to a really imagined life any more.

There is no there there.

Romance is everything.

ART

A diary means yes indeed.

Sculpture is made with two instruments and some supports and pretty air.

Picasso once remarked I do not care who it is that has or does influence me as long as it is not myself.

I read his poems and then I seized him [Picasso] by both shoulders and shook him good and hard. "Pablo," I said "go home and *paint!*"

The contemporary thing in art and literature is the thing which doesn't make enough difference to the people of that generation so that they accept it or reject it.

THE 19th CENTURY

The nineteenth century was completely lacking in logic, it had cosmic terms and hopes, and aspirations, and discoveries, and ideals but it had no logic.

LITERATURE

Poetry consists in a rhyming dictionary and things seen.

Literature--creative literature--unconcerned with sex, is inconceivable.

And then Walt Whitman came. He wanted really to express the thing and not call it by its name. He worked very hard at that, and he called it *Leaves of Grass*.

You have the complete other end of this thing in a poet like Longfellow, I cite him because a commonplace poet shows you more readily and clearly just what the basis of poetry is than a better one. And Longfellow knew all about calling out names, he on the whole did it without passion but he did it very well.

Hemingway, after all you are ninety percent Rotarian.

A masterpiece...may be unwelcome but it is never dull.

CONVENTIONAL LANGUAGE

I once said that nothing could bother me more than the way a thing goes dead once it has been said.

A vegetable garden in the beginning looks so promising and then after all little by little it grows nothing but vegetables, nothing, nothing but vegetables.

WRITING

Remarks are not literature.

A real failure does not need an excuse. It is an end in itself.

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

An audience is always warming but it must never be necessary to your work.

One of the pleasanter things those of us who write or paint do is to have the daily miracle. It does come.

Gertrude Stein never had subconscious reactions, nor was she a successful subject for automatic writing.

In a book I wrote called *How To Write* I made a discovery which I considered fundamental, that sentences are not emotional and that paragraphs are...emotional paragraphs are made up of unemotional sentences.

Everybody knows if you are too careful you are so occupied in being careful that you are sure to stumble over something.

The composition forming around me was a prolonged present.

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

He certainly very clearly expressed something. Some said that he did not clearly express anything. Some were certain that he expressed something very clearly and some of such of them said he would have been a greater one if he had not been one so clearly expressing what he was expressing. Some said he was not clearly expressing what he was expressing and some of such of them said that the greatness of struggling which was not clear expression made of him one being a completely great one. ["Matisse"]

One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming. ["Picasso"]

REPETITION

When I first really realized the inevitable repetition in human expression that was not repetition but insistence when I first began to be really conscious of it was when at about seventeen years of age, I...lived with a whole group of very lively little aunts who had to know anything.

Insistence is always alive and if it is alive it is never saying anything in the same way because emphasis can never be the same.

A bird's singing is perhaps the nearest thing to repetition but if you listen they too vary their insistence.

Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

LACK OF PLOT

A thing you all know is that in the three novels written in this generation that are the important things written in this generation, there is, in none of them a story. There is none in Proust in *The Making of Americans* or in *Ulysses*.

PUNCTUATION

A question is a question, anybody can know that a question is a question and so why add to it the question mark when it is already there when the question is already there in the writing. Therefore I never could bring myself to use a question mark, I always found it positively revolting, and now very few do use it.

The same thing is true of an exclamation. And the same thing is true of a quotation. When I first began writing I found it simply impossible to use question marks and quotation marks and exclamation points and now anybody sees it that way.

Semi-colons and colons had for me from the first completely this character the character that a comma has and not the character that a period has and therefore and definitely I have ever used them. But now dimly and definitely I do see that they might well possibly they might have in them something of the character of the period and so it might have been an adventure to use them. I really do not think so. I think however lively they are or disguised they are they are definitely more comma than period and so really I cannot regret not having used them. They are more powerful more imposing more pretentious than a comma but they are a comma all the same. They really have within them deeply within them fundamentally within them the comma nature.

A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it and to me for many years and I still do feel that way about it only now I do not pay as much attention.

If you want to take a breath you ought to know yourself that you want to take a breath.

One other little punctuation mark one can have feelings about and that is the apostrophe for possession.... One does do without it, I do, I most always do, but I cannot deny that from time to time I feel myself having regrets and from time to time I put it in to make the possessive case.

Prose capitals and small letters have really nothing to do with the inner life of sentences and paragraphs as the other punctuation marks have as I have just been saying. We still have capitals and small letters and probably for some time we will go on having them but actually the tendency is always toward diminishing capitals and quite rightly because the feeling that goes with them is less and less a feeling and so slowly and inevitably just as with horses capitals will have gone away.

And so in *Tender Buttons* and then on and on I struggled with the ridding myself of nouns, I knew nouns must go in poetry as they had gone in prose if anything that is everything was to go on meaning something.... I had to feel anything and everything that for me was existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself without at all necessarily using its name. The name of a thing might be something in itself if it could come to be real enough but just as a name it was not enough something.

AMERICA

America is my country and Paris is my hometown.

In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is.

Americans are very friendly and very suspicious, that is what Americans are and that is what always upsets the foreigner, who deals with them, they are so friendly how can they be so suspicious they are so suspicious how can they be so friendly but they just are.

OTHER COUNTRIES

In a war everybody always knows all about Switzerland, in peace times it is just Switzerland but in war time it is the only country that everybody has confidence in, everybody.

I know what Germans are. They are a funny people. They are always choosing someone to lead them in a direction which they do not want to go.

It is not what France gave you but what it did not take from you that was important.

In France one must adapt oneself to the fragrance of a urinal.

COMMUNISM

Communists are people who fancied that they had an unhappy childhood.

The more they were organized the more everybody liked the slavery of being in an organization.

In Russia they tried to decide that money was not money, but now slowly and surely they are coming back to know that money is money.

I don't envisage collectivism. There is no such animal, it is always individualism.

DESTRUCTION OF THE FAMILY

Every adolescent has that dream every century has that dream every revolutionary has that dream, to destroy the family.

SOCIALISM

So until everybody who votes public money remembers how he feels as a father of a family, when he says no, when anybody in the family wants money, until that time comes, there is going to be a lot of trouble and some years later everybody is going to be very unhappy.

In America where, ever since George Washington, nobody really can imagine a king, who is to stop congress from spending too much money. They will not stop themselves, that is certain. Everybody has to think about that now. Who is to stop them.

TAX THE RICH

Getting rid of the rich does end up very funny. It is easy to get rid of the rich but it is not easy to get rid of the poor.

One thing is sure until there are rich again everybody will be poor and there will be more than ever of everybody who is even poorer.

It is natural to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes to that siren until she allures us to our death.

DISILLUSIONMENT

Disillusionment in living is finding that no one can really ever be agreeing with you completely in anything.

FEMINISM

But the problem is that when I go around and speak on campuses, I still don't get young men standing up and saying, "How can I combine career and family?"

VOTES FOR CHILDREN

Just as everybody has the vote including women, I think children should, because as a child is conscious of itself then it has to me an existence and has a stake in what happens.

HISTORY

History takes time. History makes memory.

This is the lesson that history teaches: repetition.

It is the soothing thing about history that it does repeat itself.

Considering how dangerous everything is, nothing is really very frightening.

Is it worse to be scared than to be bored, that is the question.

Everybody thinks that this civilization has lasted a very long time but it really does take very few grandfathers' granddaughters to take us back to the dark ages.

It is extraordinary that whole populations have no projects for the future, none at all. It certainly is extraordinary, but it is certainly true.

MONEY

I've been rich and I've been poor. It's better to be rich.

The thing that differentiates man from animals is money.

A house in the country is not the same as a country house.

I do want to get rich but I never want to do what there is to do to get rich.

It is awfully hard for anybody to think money is money when there is more of it than they can count.

Money is always there but the pockets change; it is not in the same pockets after a change, and that is all there is to say about money.

Counting is the religion of this generation it is its hope and its salvation.

Oh, I wish I were a miser; being a miser must be so occupying.

RELATIONSHIPS

It is awfully important to know what is and what is not your business.

Do not forget birthdays. This is in no way propaganda for a larger population.

It is extraordinary that when you are acquainted with a whole family you can forget about them.

It is natural not to care about a sister certainly not when she is four years older and grinds her teeth at night.

What is marriage, is marriage protection or religion, is marriage renunciation or abundance, is marriage a stepping-stone or an end.

The minute you or anybody else knows what you are you are not it, you are what you or anybody else knows you are and as everything in living is made up of finding out what you are it is extraordinarily difficult really not to know what you are and yet to be that thing.

When they are alone they want to be with others, and when they are with others they want to be alone. After all, human beings are like that.

Before the flowers of friendship faded friendship faded.

Silent gratitude isn't very much to anyone.

It is very easy to love alone.

MEN

Let me listen to me and not to them.

There is no such thing as being good to your wife.

Men and girls, men and girls: Artificial swine and pearls.

Men cannot count, they do not know that two and two make four if women do not tell them so.

There is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it fathers are depressing.

The two things most men are proudest of is the thing that any man can do and doing does in the same way, that is being drunk and being the father of their son.

It is funny that men who are supposed to be scientific cannot get themselves to realize the basic principle of physics, that action and reaction are equal and opposite, that when you persecute people you always rouse them to be strong and stronger.

Well, I've always told you, Bennett [Cerf, her publisher, on his national radio program], you're a very nice boy but you're rather stupid.

NATURE

Nature is commonplace. Imitation is more interesting.

Name any name and then remember everybody you ever knew who bore that name. Are they all alike. I think so.

The earth is the earth as a peasant sees it, the world is the world as a duchess sees it, and anyway a duchess would be nothing if the earth was not there as the peasant sees it.

Supposing everyone lived at one time what would they say. They would observe that stringing string beans is universal.

WAR

War is never fatal but always lost. Always lost.

You are all a lost generation. [Quoted by Hemingway, opening of *The Sun Also Rises*]

AGE

We are always the same age inside.

One does not get better but different and older and that is always a pleasure.

There is a difference between twenty-nine and thirty. When you are twenty-nine it can be the beginning of everything. When you are thirty it can be the end of everything.

You'll be old and you never lived, and you kind of feel silly to lie down and die and to never have lived, to have been a job chaser and never have lived. [echo of Henry James]

DEATH

[Just before she died she asked Alice B. Toklas]: What is the answer? [Alice did not reply. Gertrude laughed and said]: In that case, what is the question? [Then she died.]

There ain't no answer. There ain't gonna be any answer. There never has been an answer. That's the answer.

Do you know because I tell you so, or do you know, do you know.

