



The Construction of Identity in Gertrude Stein's 'The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas'

Anne Decker

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Seminar paper from the year 2012 in the subject American Studies - Literature, grade: 1,0, Dresden Technical University (Anglistik und Amerikanistik), course: Writing and Rewriting American Autobiography, language: English, abstract: The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, published in 1933, was the first book of Gertrude Stein to receive wide public attention and become a commercial success. Though the title declares Alice B. Toklas the alleged subject of the autobiography, it is in fact the story of Gertrude Stein's life. Until the composition of The Autobiography, Stein's work had only been supported by a small circle and had been rejected by the Anglo-American press and publishers. The unprecedented success of her autobiography has mainly been attributed to its reader-friendly language which stood in sharp contrast to the experimental nature of her earlier writing which seized the understanding of many. But there is a second reason for the sudden triumph of her writing. Around the turn of the century, the interest in the author-figure increased significantly and with it the number of writer's autobiographies. According to Louis Kaplan's bibliography of American autobiographies, between 1880 and 1920 only 113 autobiographies were written by journalists or authors. In the following twenty years, "authors produced ten times as many." By dedicating a piece of writing to the genre of the autobiography, which is strongly linked to celebrating someone's personality, Gertrude Stein could be confident to receive attention. Her name had already been circulating frequently in the popular press. The American expatriate author, who spent most of her life in Paris, "was considered a rite of passage into the modernist movement" and was known for her collection of modern art and her weekly salons. It was the curiosity in her personality and in that of the well-known guests at the Saturday salon at the Rue de Fleurus which boosted The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. With its name-dropping, characterisations, and the gossip about the people who came and went at the Saturday salons, it nourished the appetite of the American audience for the lives of famous people, such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Henri Rousseau, Guillaume Apollinaire, Paul Cezanne and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Stieglitz, Carl van Vechten, and Ernest Hemingway. As The Autobiography can be considered a response to the overall interest of the readers in personalities, it is worth studying how the text depicts identities. This focus of inquiry centres on the author-figure Gertrude Stein as well as all the other representatives of the Parisian avant-garde scene.

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