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Examining Literary Scholarship Through a Rhetorical Lens: Extending the Interpretive Map of

Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*

A Thesis in English

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## Chapter I: Introduction

American Modernism is a literary era that stands out as producing some of the most challenging texts in the last century. With Modernism came the advent of the psychoanalytic lens in literary criticism, a mourning for the “loss” of traditional literary value, and a belief in deep structures in writing. American Modernist works, such as T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” and Ezra Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” have consistently remained in the spotlight of literary criticism, and despite the wide variety in the interpretations of these works, their value and contribution to literary tradition is seldom disputed. This is not so for all of their contemporaries, most notably Gertrude Stein. Though Stein is considered a prominent figure in the American Modernist movement, her works deviate from the consistent paths of interpretation that are used to examine the work of her contemporaries. According to Shirley Neuman,

Outside the growing body of academic Stein criticism, Gertrude Stein’s public presence, her reputation in any segment of the culture which is aware of her at all, seems to have little to do with her work. Unlike the writers and artists with whom she is generally grouped, she not so much as a writer as a ‘personality,’ the center of one of those nodes of celebrity which are equated with the avant-garde in highbrow mythology. (8)

In addition, Neuman notes that scholarship on Stein’s reputation focuses less on Stein herself and more on the famous men--Picasso, Hemingway, etc.-- that she was known for associating with. Her writing is rarely examined on its own for its embodiment of Modernist values or for its contributions to the literary era--the focus of the majority of Stein scholarship (i.e. Dubnick, Wight, Kley, etc.) is what or who influenced her. Thus, although her name is strongly associated with Modernism, Stein is simultaneously marginalized from the literary era.

The treatment of Stein's *Tender Buttons* exemplifies her being simultaneously celebrated and marginalized by critics. *Tender Buttons* has been a source of controversy in academia for over a century (Poetzsch). Published in 1914 at the height of the Modernist movement, the text's bizarre use of grammar, structure, and lexical meaning confronts the boundaries of what critics consider meaning to be and raises questions of whether or not texts have meaning at all. *Tender Buttons*' experimentation with (or downright disregard for) the conventions of writing are confusing to say the least and frustrating to many, so it has become an undervalued text of the Modernist movement. It is not difficult to presume why--despite Stein's significant contributions to the Modernist literary era, there seems to be a reluctance amongst critics to engage with her works (*Tender Buttons* in particular) to the same extent as the difficult works of her contemporaries. Though *Tender Buttons* is better received today than it was when it was originally published, scholarship around the text is not as extensive as that of her Modernist contemporaries. The text can and should be re-examined not only to show how engagement with Stein's work extends the study of her contemporaries, but also to provide a more complete vision of Stein's place in the Modernist movement.

In fact, *Tender Buttons* scholarship is unique not only compared to the scholarship of Stein's contemporaries, but also compared to that on her other works. Many have speculated as to why this is so, but Margueritte S. Murphy sums it up neatly with the questions: "Is Stein playing a trick on her readers, giving them patent nonsense, even silliness, in the name of literature, or does *Tender Buttons* engage in a complex semantic game that allows 'reading between the lines' for subtexts, other 'stories' embedded in the text?" (138). *Tender Buttons* scholarship is so varied and contradictory because there simply is no consensus on whether the text has meaning or whether critics are analyzing it in vain.

Much of the trouble with interpreting *Tender Buttons* is the forced reconciliation between attempting to make sense of the text while simultaneously acknowledging and valuing its difficulty. As a result of this, most critics turn to Stein—her biography, her intentions, etc.—to produce meaning. What is particularly fascinating about interpretations of Stein’s *Tender Buttons* compared to those of other works of the time—by Stein and others—is how inseparable she is from her work. Throughout the decades, Stein scholarship has been consistent in that it heavily relies on her biography to substantiate interpretive claims.<sup>1</sup> Markus Poetzch points out that, “Stein’s teasingly elusive presence in the text became, and indeed continues to be, inextricably tied with questions of meaning” (946). In addition, he argues that, “Stein’s critics consistently invoke notions of deliberateness, of an underlying strategy, of some irreducible kernel of ‘sense.’ What precisely is meant by ‘sense’ and how it may be traced in the text are questions, however, upon which little consensus has been reached” (947). Stein herself and her intentions for the text are almost always critical components in unpacking *Tender Buttons*. In this way, interpretations of *Tender Buttons* rely as much on extratextuality as on the text itself (Poetzch 948).

*Tender Buttons* has been unpacked through several distinct interpretive trends over the decades. The first wave primarily focused on Stein herself through the psychoanalytic lens of literary criticism. Poetzch examines scholarship demonstrative of this trend by critic Mabel Dodge. Dodge’s assertions about meaning depend on descriptions of Stein’s writing process, the physical spaces in which she produced writing, and the invocation of other avant-garde geniuses. According to Poetzch, “In the psychoanalytic thrust of its reasoning and the myth-making sweep of its generalizations, this [Dodge’s scholarship] is in many ways a showpiece of early twentieth-century literary criticism” (950). Rather than emphasizing authorial intent, psychoanalytic

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to Appendix I.b for additional data

interpretive tactics like Dodge's focus on what Poetzch calls "authorial control" (950). Every word, line, and thought from *Tender Buttons* is analyzed in an effort to gain insight into Stein's genius. While the psychoanalytic lens in literary criticism was primarily utilized during the Modernist period, traces of it echo in subsequent interpretive trends. Though later scholarship doesn't make as many interpretive leaps to get to the heart of Stein's genius, the notion that one can gain a better understanding of *Tender Buttons* through understanding Stein as a writer has persisted.

The psychoanalytic trend utilizes the theories of Sigmund Freud and later theorists to interpret literary texts. Critics who use psychoanalysis<sup>2</sup> to form interpretation rely on the assumption that literary works express the psychology (secret desires, anxieties, etc.) of the author. Psychoanalysis connects the author's life—childhood experiences, sexuality, etc.—to the themes, characters, and overall meaning of the text (Tyson 12). Thus, interpretations that rely on psychoanalysis are often biography-dependent, as the author's own life is scrutinized to decode hidden meanings within texts.

Overlapping with the psychoanalytic trend are structuralist tactics that are utilized in the criticism and interpretation of Modernist texts. Structuralist scholarship of *Tender Buttons* treats the text as though it is a code to be cracked. Many critics that I explore (i.e. Kaufmann, DeKoven, Kley, Dubnick) use structuralism to some extent while forming their analysis. Structuralist critics operate under the assumption that the deep structures of *Tender Buttons* can be studied to yield insights into meaning and meaning-making. This scholarship of *Tender*

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<sup>2</sup> Recent scholarship that involves psychoanalysis focuses more on how texts work as a symptom of culture. Thus, the psychoanalytic strategies of some critics (i.e. Wight) are outdated and ultimately point to the intentional fallacy described by I.A Richards, Barthes, and Foucault.

*Buttons* emphasizes the system of signs that make up language, and how those signs shape our understanding of the text's meaning.

Feminist theory and gender studies are also critical to Stein scholarship. In general, feminist criticism explores "the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson 82), while gender studies emphasize the instability of categories such as sex and gender. Feminist and gender studies approaches to *Tender Buttons* emphasize how the text subverts patriarchal and logocentric writing in order to make political points about patriarchy and sexuality. Stein scholarship that uses these lenses aims to put forth a new perception of *Tender Buttons*, one that expands the scope of *Tender Buttons* scholarship to include concepts and terminologies that explore how Stein undermines the sexual, social, and psychological oppression of women. Gender studies lenses acknowledge that society's notions of gender are determined by culture, and that gender issues are present, either explicitly or implicitly, in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature. These lenses also examine and challenge long-held notions of masculinity and femininity.

What is interesting about the interpretive trends that surround this work is that, although they are vastly different in what they assert about meaning (of the text, or meaning itself), they operate under similar theoretical assumptions. Through these theoretical assumptions, critics try to impose a sense of order on Stein's work. The majority *Tender Buttons* scholarship before the 1990s displays intentionalist and biographical leanings, focusing on what Stein was *trying to do* by writing the text. However, the intention that they claim to find through their interpretation stems from different places.

By attempting to re-order Stein's chaos, early *Tender Buttons* criticism focuses on how to draw meaning from the structure rather than exploring how critics' recognition and preconceived notions of the structure unconsciously influences how they read the text. In other words, many *Tender Buttons* critics are more concerned with what meaning they can draw from the unconventional aspects of the text (grammar, style, structure), rather than exploring the meaning-making process. In addition to responding to certain patterns of writing that they habitually recognize, critics also draw their interpretations from presuppositions about where meaning comes from (the author, the grammar/structure of the text, themselves as critics, etc.) In a way, critics' interpretations are self-fulfilling prophecies: the intentions of Gertrude Stein that they look for (and apparently find) are perceived as intentions because critics bring what they are looking for to the text. In other words, as far as Stein's intentions go, critics pick up on aspects of the texts that align with their own expectations.

Current Stein scholarship tends to operate through a self-referential postmodern lens, as well as through reader-response theories. It emphasizes an acknowledgement of its own interpretive methodologies, as well as the unavoidably subjective nature of interpretation. In addition, although attention to Stein's "intention" is still noticeably present in most Stein scholarship, the focus has shifted to acknowledge that the reader has a role in the creation of meaning.

Under the postmodern shift, some scholars effectively unpack *Tender Buttons*, emphasizing the impossibility of singular meaning, and acknowledging how meaning is manipulated by power structures (Kaufmann; Murphy; DeKoven). Yet, what is missing from these interpretations is a focus on how imperative the structure of *Tender Buttons* is to how we read it through a rhetorical lens. Specifically, I will examine *Tender Buttons* scholarship in

connection with Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theories on terministic screens and Stanley Fish's literary theories on interpretation. My aim is to focus not so much on Stein's subversive intentions or effects, but on how critics and interpretive periods take on the difficulty of her writing through their theoretical assumptions about textual features and through the terministic screens of interpretive trends.

Burke's "terministic screens," are filters that are composed of terms through which people perceive and understand the world; they shape what we perceive to be observations of reality. Burke emphasizes that the terms that we use not only affect the nature of our observations, but our "observations" are but implications of the particular terminology through which observations are formed (46). Terministic screens shape our perspective of reality in that they reflect, select, and deflect. They are reflective of our reality in that they select (or direct our attention to) certain details and deflect our attention away from others. Critics selectively use terministic screens by focusing on, or selecting, what aspect of a text is most fitting with their interpretive strategies. They use these screens to deflect by ignoring aspects of texts that do not match up with their theoretical assumptions. What I mean by "theoretical assumptions" are the interpretive habits and expectations described by Stanley Fish that literary theorists inevitably use when engaging in the act of interpretation. Fish argues that we are taught to recognize textual features, and that we "naturally" pick up on them while we read. Moreover, he explains that critics often point to patterns and claim that they are available independently of (prior to) interpretation. These patterns vary according to the procedures that yield them: they may be statistical, grammatical, etc., but whatever they are, they do exist by themselves but are constituted by an interpretive act, even if it is unacknowledged (479).

One can see this at work in the scholarship that I examine in the following chapters. Critics pick up on certain features, such as intention, structure, grammar, etc., and suggest that these structures are “in” the text, when in fact, critics are predetermining the outcome of interpretation. The following chapters will explore *Tender Buttons* scholarship in light of Burke’s and Fish’s theories in an effort to put a rhetorical lens on literary scholarship. Through examining the scholarship behind *Tender Buttons* and the theoretical assumptions behind it through a rhetorical lens, one can explore the shifting trends in literary interpretation and how difficult texts such as *Tender Buttons* challenge the norms of those trends. This kind of exploration leads to an awareness of contradictions that exist between certain schools of criticism. For example, as I will explain in Chapter III, feminist *Tender Buttons* scholarship brings to light unresolved contradictions between postmodern interpretive tactics and feminist criticism.

Among the interpretive lenses used to understand *Tender Buttons*, one that stands out distinctly is that of Cubism. Stein’s well-known close relationships with experimental artists such as Pablo Picasso have contributed to the importance of Cubist interpretation in Stein criticism since the publication of *Tender Buttons* in 1914. Marjorie Perloff (1979), Randa K. Dubnick (1984), and Antje Kley (2004), describe the pieces in *Tender Buttons* as “verbal still-lives,” and use the Cubist and Surrealist art movements to make sense of the text. There is an interesting connection between Cubism and structuralist interpretive strategies that *Tender Buttons* scholarship demonstrates. Despite the shift away from structuralism throughout the past few decades, Cubist interpretations have persisted as a method of assigning sense and meaning to *Tender Buttons*. Cubist art is often scrutinized for the hidden meanings underneath the abstract structures in the painting. Structuralist interpretive tactics uncover hidden meaning, or deep

structures, within texts. Cubist scholarship often refers to *Tender Buttons* as a “code” or “riddle,” and seeks to uncover hidden structures within the text to ascertain meaning. For example, Antje Kley’s scholarship uses structuralist interpretive strategies to compare the hidden structures within *Tender Buttons* to the hidden structures in Cubist artworks.

Moreover, critics have used a Cubist lens that sees *Tender Buttons* as a Cubist structure. Criticism that uses this angle of the Cubist lens involves a structuralist focus on both physical structure and grammar. Among other strategies, the Cubism chapter explores the structuralist interpretive tactics that Cubism/Stein scholarship follows, as well as the theoretical presuppositions, interpretive strategies, and terministic screens that are utilized to connect Cubism with *Tender Buttons*. The Cubist lens is interesting in that, more than any other lens, it demonstrates *Tender Buttons*’ resistance to follow general shifts in interpretive strategies throughout the decades. Kley, Dubnick, and Perloff’s writing demonstrate three different decades in literary criticism, utilizing interpretive strategies that are atypical to the scholarship trends at the time of their writing. I will explore how literary scholarship trends overlap and borrow from one another as critics connect *Tender Buttons* with Cubism. The Cubist lens emphasizes Stein’s biography, her so-called intentions for *Tender Buttons*, and how to decode the deep structures of the text that are reminiscent of Cubist art. In Chapter II, I suggest that critics use their structuralist assumptions, as well as the aesthetics and effects of Cubism, to find not only meaning within the chaos of *Tender Buttons*, but also to assign authorial intent.

Some *Tender Buttons* interpretations consider how the text contributes to and repositions the perception of feminism and gender, both in Stein’s time and today. Similar to Cubist scholarship, feminist and gender studies scholarship utilizes interpretive strategies from various schools of criticism, such as psychoanalysis, biography dependence and postmodern strategies.

The scholarship that I examine in Chapter III embodies different aspects of feminist theory and gender studies, yet use similar--in some places identical--terminology. Some scholars, such as Doris T. Wight (1986), use biographical strategies to argue that Stein represents herself as male through her description of objects in *Tender Buttons*, thus challenging conventional notions of how masculinity and femininity are presented in literature. Others, like Lisa Ruddick (1990), assert that the text is Stein's vision of the making and unmaking of patriarchy. More recent scholarship, like that of Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick (2014), explores how *Tender Buttons* reconfigures our expectations about language and its ability to articulate perceptions of reality to examine how female identities, lesbian desire, and domestic space are imbricated. Through an exploration of feminist and gender studies scholarship, one can explore how critics understand the terminology of these movements, what underlying assumptions critics have about gender and sexuality, and how the discourse on feminism and gender studies shifts depending on interpretive strategies and terministic screens.

Unsurprisingly, many critics center on the language of *Tender Buttons*, particularly its "subversive" aspects. Many critics use deconstruction and reader-response theories to examine the language of the text. Marianne DeKoven (1981) explores how Stein's writing subverts the coherent meaning that those who study literature expect to find. She asserts that, "Stein's experimental writing, or the ideal instance of it, is incoherent rather than unintelligible. Meaning is present, but it is multiplied, fragmented, unresolved" (DeKoven 83). Edward Michael Kaufmann (1989) also focuses on the political subversiveness of Stein's language, asserting that Stein's true purpose for *Tender Buttons* was to subvert the non-sense that language has become since its encasement in print. Marguerite S. Murphy (1992) focuses on the description and semantics of the text's language to provide a foundation for her feminist reading. Overall, this

scholarship demonstrate that, unlike other Modernist writers, Stein does not convey meaning in a traditional sense but instead forces readers to examine how language constructs what we know about meaning. In other words, how do readers arrive at meaning through the perceptual habits that certain language structures (patriarchal, logocentric, etc.) reinforce, and how does *Tender Buttons* allow us to break free of these perceptual habits? Examining languages lenses of *Tender Buttons* is essential, as Stein is a marginalized figure in the Modernist literary era. The unconventional use of language by her contemporaries, such as Eliot, Pound, and Joyce, is much more in the spotlight of past and present literary scholarship. Thus, exploring how Stein uses language situates her as a valuable experimenter of language of Modernist period.

There is no doubt that Gertrude Stein was an influential figure in the Modernist movement. However, what interested me about her work, particularly *Tender Buttons*, is how little recognition it receives in comparison to that of her contemporaries. Modernism is valued for its breaking away of traditional writing patterns and because the texts that emerged during this time challenged readers to perceive meaning with unique approaches. *Tender Buttons* is arguably the most innovative and challenging text of its time, yet it is overshadowed by experimental works of her male contemporaries. Thus, my choice to study Stein rather than her more famous contemporaries aims to emphasize her contributions to Modernism. Another factor that influenced me to undertake this project is the manner in which Stein is tied to her work. As noted above, Stein is made out to be a celebrity figure, and the interpretations of her works often circle back to her, no matter the decade that her work is being interpreted or the interpretive lens that is being used. My scholarship points to the limitations and contradictions that arise from this tendency, and posits my own theory as to how *Tender Buttons* should be approached. Finally, while Stein scholarship that emphasizes her rhetorical affect in connection with her literary affect

has recently begun to emerge (Kirsch 2014), my scholarship on Stein seeks to put a rhetorical lens on literary scholarship. Burke's and Fish's theories are ideal for this pursuit, as they both assert in their own ways that interpretation and/or perceptions of reality are actually predetermined by the reader and/or observer. Studying *Tender Buttons* in connection with Burke's terministic screens and Fish's interpretive strategies has led me to conclusions, which I will explicate further in Chapter V, about the reciprocal relationships between the lenses that critics use to understand *Tender Buttons* and the text itself. In other words, it is not only valuable to study how critics use Cubism, feminism and gender studies, and language to understand *Tender Buttons*, but also critical to examine how critics use *Tender Buttons* to understand these concepts. Through this examination, we can better understand earlier readings of Stein and their assertions about where meaning comes from in *Tender Buttons*, and what that meaning "does" to readers. Moreover, while we value what past critics have contributed to *Tender Buttons* scholarship, we can also question and challenge the limitations of previous analyses and move towards a more complete understanding of how Stein's work allows us to reconsider how we comprehend the world.

## Chapter II: Cubist Lenses

### II.1: Introduction

Stein's well-known close relationships with experimental artists such as Pablo Picasso have contributed to the importance of Cubist interpretation of *Tender Buttons* since its publication. Despite the great shifts in literary criticism throughout the decades, Cubist interpretation has persisted as a method of assigning sense and meaning to the text. Marjorie Perloff (1979), Randa K. Dubnick (1984), and Antje Kley (2004), describe the pieces in *Tender Buttons* as "verbal still-lives," and use the Cubist and/or Surrealist art movements to make sense of the text. Critics using Cubist lenses tend to explore Stein's biography (i.e. her relationship with art and artists of the time) and her so-called intentions for *Tender Buttons* to the end of answering the question: What does *Tender Buttons* mean? What has been less explored is how readers use the aesthetics and effects of Cubism to find not only meaning within the disorder of *Tender Buttons*, but also to assign authorial intent. If we consider the interpretive strategies that are used in forming Cubist interpretations of *Tender Buttons* through the lens of postmodern theorists such as Stanley Fish and Kenneth Burke<sup>3</sup>, the focus shifts from: What does *Tender Buttons* mean? to How do readers produce meaning from *Tender Buttons*? Examining questions about what meaning is and where it comes from allows readers to explore the possibility of *Tender Buttons* as a theory that suggests that readers assign meaning to works of literature through their recognition of textual features and from using the terministic screens of their disciplines. In addition, we can explore *Tender Buttons* as a text that critics not only unpack through Cubism, but also as an instrument that influences their understanding of Cubism. I also

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this chapter, there is repeated information from the previous chapter about Burke's and Fish's theories. This repeated information is geared towards readers only turning to one chapter, rather than reading the entire thesis.

address in this chapter how *Tender Buttons* resists the shifts that have occurred in interpretive trends over the decades. Specifically, I examine how Cubist scholarship exemplifies strategies relating to structuralism, intentionalism, and biographical focus, even in more recent scholarship.

## **II.2: What are Cubist Lenses?**

What I mean by “Cubist lenses” is the terminology, concepts, and interpretive strategies used by critics that primarily focus on aspects of *Tender Buttons* that connect with Cubism. These lenses rely on theoretical premises about how we understand Cubist art, how we understand words and their associations, and what “meaning” is in the first place. Cubist lenses in particular relate to Burke’s theories of terministic screens. “Terministic screens,” a term developed by Burke, are filters that are composed of terms through which people perceive and understand the world; they shape what we perceive to be observations of reality. Terministic screens are made visible via specific language choices of the critic. As Burke notes, terministic screens shape our perspective of reality through reflective, selective, and deflective habits. They are reflective of our reality in that they select (or direct our attention to) certain details and deflect our attention away from others. While “Cubist lenses” is a broad term that I use to describe the terms, concepts, and interpretive strategies used to interpret *Tender Buttons*, I use the concept of terministic screens to highlight terminology that critics use that point to their use of a Cubist screen. In other words, if Cubist lenses are what critics use to focus on Cubist aspects of *Tender Buttons*, terministic screens are the terms and theories through which critics make sense of what they see in the Cubist structure or Cubist sensibility of the text.

In addition, Cubist lenses work through what Fish calls “theoretical assumptions” and “interpretive strategies.” “Theoretical assumptions” are the interpretive habits and expectations described by Fish that literary theorists inevitably use when engaging in the act of interpretation.

“Interpretive strategies” describe how critics act upon their assumptions to find what they are looking for in texts. While Cubist lenses provide a focus to scholarship, and terministic screens provide a filter through which critics select the terms and theories of the Cubist focus, interpretive strategies are what critics use to understand the terms and theories in connection with the text. Cubist lenses, terministic screens, and interpretive strategies work together to influence the outcome of interpretation. As I will explore in this chapter, interpretation is largely predetermined in that lenses, terministic screens, and interpretive strategies encourage critics to find what they are looking for.

Cubist lenses draw together a series of interpretive screens and strategies. One facet a Cubist lens (Perloff’s) regards *Tender Buttons* as a Cubist work (a series of verbal still-lives), using structuralist interpretive strategies to compare the hidden structures within *Tender Buttons* to the hidden structures in Cubist artworks. Another aspect of a Cubist lens (Dubnick’s) suggests that *Tender Buttons* is a work that should be studied in a similar way as Cubist art, a strategy that draws upon a reader-response lens. This form of a Cubist lens emphasizes that readers are meant to take what they will from *Tender Buttons*, just as viewers of Cubist art can come away with many different perceptions. A third mode of a Cubist lens (Kley’s) regards *Tender Buttons* as a product of Cubist sensibility, and uses intentionalist and biographical strategies to connect the intentions of the Cubist art movement to the intentions of *Tender Buttons*. Finally, critics have used a Cubist lens that sees *Tender Buttons* as a Cubist structure. Criticism that uses this angle of a Cubist lens involves structuralist and post-structuralist strategies, with a focus on grammar. Critics seldom stick to just one facet of any lens—this is particularly true for Cubist lenses. In the following sections, I will explore how Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley use different facets of Cubist lenses to unpack *Tender Buttons*.

### II.3: Scholarship

Cubism is a lens through which scholars have been interpreting *Tender Buttons* since its publication. Thus, a wide array of interpretations has stemmed from using the Cubist art movement as an interpretive lens. The scholarship section of this chapter is meant to provide an overview of some of the more notable Cubist interpretations that have arisen throughout the decades. Examining scholarship produced between 1979 and 2004 allows for an exploration on how Cubist scholarship has evolved over the decades. Marjorie Perloff's 1979 scholarship was critical in my exploration, as it is widely cited by Stein scholars, particularly scholars that utilize Cubism to understand *Tender Buttons*. Dubnick's analysis is also thought-provoking in that it analyzes specific forms of Cubism (analytic and synthetic) in depth and compares them to the structures she finds within *Tender Buttons*. Kley's scholarship provides an interesting outlook on how people perceive and understand art such as Cubism compared to how people arrive at meaning with texts like *Tender Buttons*. All three scholars and their scholarship reflect different uses of a Cubist lens, but there are interesting commonalities between the three that I will explore in this chapter. Ultimately, the scholarship analyzed in this chapter provides a comprehensive view of the different focuses a Cubist lens can take, and the strengths and limitations of such focuses.

Perloff uses art as a lens to decode the "verbal still lifes" of *Tender Buttons*. She examines *Tender Buttons* in connection with Surrealism and Cubism, primarily referencing Marcel Duchamp as an influence on Stein. Perloff makes frequent comparisons between Cubism and Surrealist art and the content of *Tender Buttons*. For example, she argues that, "In *Tender Buttons*, objects--a carafe, an umbrella, a red stamp, a handkerchief--are not only fragmented and decomposed as they are in Cubist still-life; they also serve as false leads, forcing the reader to

consider the very nature of naming” (40). Perloff asserts that Stein does not spell anything out for the reader; she wants us to be able to fill in the gaps in whatever way suits us (41). She goes further to suggest that it is more productive to look at *Tender Buttons* as a whole, rather than to try to establish a fixed meaning for any of the pieces. She concludes that, “Perhaps the best way to think of a text like this one is to compare it to an X-ray. Words are related so as to show what is there beneath the skin, what is behind the social and artistic surface” (42). She further asserts that the linguistic codes of *Tender Buttons* are tentative and buried and that her Surrealist transformations of events must be taken literally as vivid if indefinable presences (42).

Dubnick’s book, *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism*, compares analytic and synthetic Cubism to Stein’s works. She forms a Cubist interpretation with structuralist theories to get at how Stein achieved “obscurity.” For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on Dubnick’s second chapter, “The Second Obscure Style: ‘Tender Buttons’ and Synthetic Cubism.” The kind of obscurity that Dubnick examines in this chapter centers on nouns and lists. Dubnick’s analysis draws upon Saussurian linguistics, primarily through her usage of the theory of signifiers and the signified. Specifically, she analyzes *Tender Buttons’* use of words and how that affects what Saussure calls “the signified,” or the mental impression or association of the “thing” and the signifier, or “sound-image,” the mental “linguistic sign” given to the “thing.” Dubnick asserts that by the time Stein was writing *Tender Buttons*, her focus was on “the word itself:” with the mental images called up by and associated with words (signifieds), and with the qualities of words as things in themselves (signifiers) (32). Dubnick compares Stein’s focus on representation and mental associations to the shift occurring in Cubist painting at the same time, specifically the shift from analytic to synthetic Cubism. Synthetic Cubism is generally considered to run from about 1912 to 1914. It is different from analytic cubism in that it flattens

out images and does away with allusion to three-dimensional space, rather than breaking down objects viewpoint-by-viewpoint, into a fragmentary image. Dubnick addresses specific commonalities between synthetic Cubism and *Tender Buttons*. Finally, Dubnick contends that Stein forces the reader to pay attention to the word, and thus makes the word seem new again. Moreover, by presenting each word in an unusual context, she directs attention not only toward its sound but also toward its sense, as the reader is forced to grapple with each word one at a time (44).

Kley draws connections between Cubism and *Tender Buttons*, using the term “verbal-still lifes” to describe the writing. She explores how and to what effect *Tender Buttons* adopts and transforms Cubist techniques in writing in addition to Stein’s use of Cubist visual aesthetics as a medium for a conceptual dialogue with the visual arts on the dimensions of time and space (517). Kley notes that Cubist artists, especially Pablo Picasso, were a great inspiration to Stein, and that Stein admired the new analytical and inventive mode of realism that Cubism offered (519). According to Kley, *Tender Buttons* is made up of “verbal still lifes,” which project various non-referential or associative perspectives seemingly disconnected from the control of the conscious mind. Kley identifies similarities between how Cubist art explores painting as means to understand the geometrical laws of space and how *Tender Buttons* explores writing and grammar as the means for making sense in language. Kley suggests that Stein’s aim was to communicate the depth of human experience without pretending that a medium that could mirror this experience existed, a goal that was similar to that of the Cubist painters of her time. Kley concludes that, “Stein's prose poems support the pursuit of an intimate comprehension of both the limiting and enabling laws of language” (523).

So far, this chapter has laid out three approaches to interpreting *Tender Buttons* through the lens of Cubism. In the following sections, I will explore the differences and the commonalities between the interpretive lenses used by Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley. In addition, I examine the terministic screens and interpretive presuppositions of the critics. My process involves close reading of the scholarship described above, and applications of Fish's and Burke's theories. Ultimately, through examining Cubist scholarship of *Tender Buttons* we can explore how critics ascertain meaning from structure, how cultural movements such as Cubism are used to assign meaning and values to words, and how mediums such as painting and writing can subvert the habits that power structures impress upon language. In addition, as I explore in my concluding chapter, analyzing scholarship of *Tender Buttons* through Burke's and Fish's theories point to the value of *Tender Buttons* as a means for understanding how critics interpret Cubism. While critics analyze *Tender Buttons* through Cubism, they are simultaneously interpreting Cubism through *Tender Buttons*. Close examination of these pieces of scholarship in connection with Burke's and Fish's theories reveals what seems to be irresistible tendencies of Stein scholars, as well as the limitations and contradictions of such tendencies.

#### **II.4: Cubist Terministic Screens**

Perloff's, Dubnick's and Kley's reordering of the chaos of *Tender Buttons* exemplify how readers assign meaning to texts based on the terministic screen of Cubism. They each refer to *Tender Buttons* as a series of "verbal still lifes," and reference specific works of art by Surrealist and Cubist artists to compare to Stein's writing. Though they are all concerned with structure and grammar, Perloff is particularly drawn to how phrases in *Tender Buttons* can be

connected with specific works of art by artists that influenced Stein. For example, Perloff asserts that "A Substance in a Cushion"<sup>4</sup> marks a move toward Surrealism<sup>5</sup> because it takes ordinary objects and puts them in extraordinary situations, treating these things as if they had a life and volition of their own (41). Perloff sees similarities between Duchamp's *The Bride of 1912*<sup>6</sup> and *Tender Buttons*, asserting that the inanimate objects in both assume an erotic energy. According to Perloff, "The 'substance in a cushion' can refer to a woman's genitalia, and 'a violent kind of delightfulness' then turns out to be sexual pleasure" (41). Perloff had already formed an analysis of *The Bride of 1912* as erotic and sexual. Because she connects *Tender Buttons* so closely with Cubist and Surrealist aesthetics, we can see the influence her preconceived notions had on her interpretation of "A Substance in a Cushion." She sees, in the so-called "linguistic codes" of *Tender Buttons*, the same kinds of aesthetics and affects presented in Surrealist and Cubist art. Perloff's comparison of *The Bride of 1912* and "A Substance in a Cushion" points to her usage of Cubism as a terministic screen, as she uses language that demonstrates the similarities between what Cubism and *Tender Buttons* are able to *do*. Specifically, Perloff examines how Cubism and *Tender Buttons* "force" us consider the very nature of naming" (40). For example, Perloff argues that the title of Duchamp's piece is enigmatic, as the images seem to have nothing to do with a bride. The form that Duchamp creates is neither fully human nor simply a machine-- it is somewhere in between. "A Substance in a Cushion" presents a similar dilemma for readers because it makes us wonder where the cushion is that is mentioned in the title. A cushion is mentioned in the third paragraph: "A cushion has that cover," and again, in more ambiguous phrasing in the fifth: "In any kind of place there is a top to covering." However, it is clearly not

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to Appendix II.a to view full piece

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Perloff addresses Surrealism as much as Cubism in her scholarship and uses both movements to analyze *Tender Buttons*. These connections are further explored in chapter V.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to Appendix II.b to see *The Bride of 1912*

the focal point of the poem. Perloff's language choices demonstrate her use of a Cubist terministic screen. Her description of *Tender Buttons* as a description of "verbal still lifes" and the comparative language she uses to associate *Tender Buttons* with Duchamp's art reveals a terministic screen that is heavily influenced by Perloff's perception of Cubism and Surrealism. Perloff's use of a Cubist terministic screen allows us to consider how critics are influenced by the screens they use to analyze texts (in this case, the screen of Cubism), *in addition to* how the act of interpreting texts unconsciously influences how critics understand the screen they utilize. I address this concept more completely in Chapter V, but in short, Perloff's understanding of Cubism is just as much influenced by *Tender Buttons* as her understanding of *Tender Buttons* is influenced by Cubism.

Dubnick's language usage also reveals a Cubist terministic screen through which she understands *Tender Buttons*. In a similar fashion as Kley and Perloff, Dubnick compares the intended effect of *Tender Buttons* with what Cubist artists were trying to accomplish. Dubnick notes that Stein herself referred to her writing as "portraits," "still lifes," and "landscapes" but asserts that rather than being a source for her ideas, Stein saw Cubist artists as, "a group with similar concerns and perceptions about what art was and should be for the twentieth century. Like Stein, the Cubists were interested in the process of direct perception" (17). In addition, Dubnick points out that similar to Cubist artists, Stein does not describe objects in a conventional way to the reader, though she is still concerned with the object as her "model." She, "inverts the traditional descriptive relationship of word to object. Rather than the word evoking the mental image of the object, the object evokes words (e.g. associations) that the writer arbitrarily assembles into an independent linguistic object related to, but not descriptive of, the model of referent" (33). Dubnick's use of the Cubist terministic screen heavily relies on perception, and

suggests that people perceive the pieces in *Tender Buttons* in a similar way as people perceive Cubist art. With books, the conventional way of ascertaining meaning is for the reader to think of objects when reading the words on the page. However, as Dubnick points out, Stein subverts this expectation with her dictionary-like text by having the reader call upon their own knowledge and associations of words to suit the objects listed in text. Similarly, Cubist art does not clearly articulate specific images through which viewers are supposed to make specific connections. The viewer calls upon their own perceptive habits to connect words and ideas with the art. As with Perloff, Dubnick's language makes evident her use of a Cubist terministic screen. She references Stein's perception of the pieces in *Tender Buttons* as "portraits," "still lifes," and "landscapes," and uses language that compares how people read *Tender Buttons* and how they read Cubist art. However, Dubnick's Cubist screen is unique in that she applies the terminology of a specific form of Cubism (synthetic) to *Tender Buttons*. Thus, Dubnick's use of a Cubist terministic screen is more sophisticated than Perloff's because she is able to differentiate between different Cubist aesthetics, (flat images rather than three-dimensional space) to interpret *Tender Buttons*. Dubnick's analysis of *Tender Buttons* has a circular relationship with her understanding of Cubism. Her connections between the aims of Cubist artists and Stein's aims for *Tender Buttons* inform one another, as do her connections between how people perceive *Tender Buttons* and how people make sense of Cubist art. Exploring these connections is important to literary criticism, as it allows us to understand the inevitability of terministic screens influencing our interpretations and challenges the notion that readers can read without screens at all.

Kley's use of a Cubist terministic screen is evident when she compares what she perceives to be Stein's purposefully constructed grammatical structure of *Tender Buttons* to the intentions of Cubist art. Kley views Stein's poems as an exploration of writing and grammar to

the end of making sense in language, just as Cubist art is an exploration of painting and the laws of space (522). Specifically, Kley argues that, “As much as did the Cubist painters, Stein attempted to render the depth of human experience without pretending to have recourse to a transparent medium which would allow her to simply put a mirror to it” (522). In addition, Kley contends that the way that Stein uses structure and grammar in her “verbal still lifes” recognizes the limitations of language, and tries to subvert those limitations to get her message through to the reader. Kley agrees with Jayne L. Walker’s assertion that both *Tender Buttons* and Cubist art feed on, “‘the transformative power of juxtaposition’: ‘language brings things to mind by calling their names, and sounds and syntax can create relationships among them that are as complex and multiple as the ones in cubist collage’ (Walker qtd. in Kley 523). In other words, both Cubist art and *Tender Buttons* draw attention to the impossibility of singular meaning. Kley’s use of a Cubist screen is evident in her assertions that the relationship between language and perception in *Tender Buttons* is multifaceted just as the relationship between a Cubist collage and perception are. While Kley’s Cubist screen uses the context of the Cubist movement to inform her own process of drawing meaning from Stein’s work, the reverse is also true. Kley contends that *Tender Buttons* forces readers to really look at words, rather than only through them. In the same way, she understands Cubist art as something that forces viewers to really see, rather than passively perceive. In other words, Kley’s understanding of both Cubist art and *Tender Buttons* challenges the passivity through which people perceive art and language. Studying this challenge is critical, as it also relates to the passive tendencies through which critics interpret texts. Critics often engage in interpretive tactics without acknowledging that these tactics heavily influence the outcome of interpretation. While recognizing how critics interpret cannot bring absolute

objectivity to interpretation, it can at least lead to understanding of why we interpret the way that we do.

## **II.5 Interpretive Strategies**

The following section will build off of my previous examination of terministic screens. While I have used the theory of terministic screens to explore the language that critics use to understand Cubism, as well as the terminology of theorists relevant to Perloff's, Dubnick's, and Kley's analysis, I now focus on the strategies that Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley utilize in combination with these screens. In other words, while I have just focused on specific terminologies and theorists, I now focus on how broader interpretive trends such as intentionalism and structuralism are utilized by these critics. Considering the interpretive strategies that critics apply when using Cubist lenses to interpret *Tender Buttons* allows us to see how critics pick up on the terminology and theories from their terministic screens to their interpretation. Critics use interpretive strategies that line up with their theoretical assumptions and terministic screens. For example, critics using a Cubist terministic screen who assume that structure is imperative to the meaning of texts will use interpretive strategies, such as structuralism, to identify similarities between Cubist structure and the structure of *Tender Buttons*. Through an exploration of Cubist lenses in connection with Fish's theories on the predetermined nature of interpretation, we can explore how critics interpret Cubism in connection with *Tender Buttons* (both the goals of the movement and its terminology) and what underlying assumptions critics reveal about the relationship between structure and meaning.

### **II.5.a: Intentionalism**

Assertions about structure and authorial intent are often presented in Cubist approaches to *Tender Buttons* in ways that support one another. Kley, Dubnick, and Perloff often make claims

about the structure of *Tender Buttons* and connect that structure to the intentions of either Stein herself or the Cubist art movement as a whole. In other words, critics often see the structure of *Tender Buttons* as something that is purposefully constructed by Stein, similarly to how Cubist artists structured their artwork. Critics often contend that Stein's structuring of the text leads to the reader being "forced" to do certain things that Stein wants us to do—such as confront our own assumptions about language, perception, and/or reality. Considering the connection between authors' intent and form in light of Fish's theories is especially useful, as it reveals how constructed interpretation truly is. Fish asserts that intention and understanding are two ends of a conventional act, each of which necessarily stipulates the other (476). In addition, he points out that words like "encourage" and "disallow" imply agents, and it is only "natural" to assign agency first to an author's intentions and then to the forms that assumedly embody them (477). However, rather than an author's intentions or the forms that they use in a text forming interpretation, interpretation creates intention and its formal realization by creating the conditions in which it becomes possible to pick them out (477). *Tender Buttons* is a challenging text, no matter the lens that is used to unpack it. Thus, it makes sense that critics use strategies focusing on intentions and forms that align with the particular lenses and screens that they apply.

Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley all display intentionalist leanings in their interpretations of *Tender Buttons*, addressing what Stein was trying to do by writing the text. For example, Perloff uses biographical information--the historical context of the Surrealist movement-- as well as Stein's intended meaning for *Tender Buttons* to form her interpretation. Perloff sees Stein's intended focus of *Tender Buttons* as change. Perloff suggests that Stein was very much concerned with how the structure of language could be played with to affect meaning, and that Stein articulates the relationship between structure and meaning through the frequent tension

between the changing and the unchanging as well as the tension between similarity and difference within the text. Perloff also addresses what Stein “allows” the reader to do through her unconventional writing style, or what Stein is “forcing” the reader to do through the text’s difficulty. Perloff’s analysis demonstrates her presupposition that the author has some sort of control over how the reader receives a text. In other words, Perloff assumes that an author’s intentions for their text is always relevant to how it is interpreted, rather than acknowledging that the reader assigns their own meaning to the text through their theoretical assumptions. Although Perloff makes it clear that she doesn’t believe a single, correct meaning can be found in *Tender Buttons*, through her assertions about how Stein’s intentions and biography affected the creation of *Tender Buttons* and readers of the text, Perloff reveals an interpretive presupposition that meaning is, at least in some ways, tied to the author.

Dubnick also addresses Stein’s aim for *Tender Buttons*, asserting that, “Stein’s intention in writing *Tender Buttons* was to capture immediate experience as consciousness grapples with it” (43). Dubnick notes that because of the challenges that the text presents, the reader must put forth a lot of effort to try to understand the content, which is not only an exhausting task, but one that over-distances them from the work itself. All of this effort, Dubnick contends, is futile, because *Tender Buttons*, “demands to be dealt with on its own terms” (43). Dubnick contends that the way Stein uses language in *Tender Buttons* makes it almost impossible to read the work for the conventional discursive content. According to Dubnick, Stein’s use of language is purposeful: Stein doesn’t want the reader to be able to use their typical thought processes to read her work; rather, readers should recognize and grapple with their own perceptions of experience. Similar to Perloff, Dubnick reveals an interpretive strategy that emphasizes authorial intent in

relation to the reader. Dubnick's focus on authorial intent demonstrates her positioning of Stein, and her status as the author, as an authority figure.

Kley's assertions are based largely on the text's structure, but also draw upon biographical information. In particular, she references the intentions of the Cubist art movement that influenced Stein and connects them with the intentions of *Tender Buttons*. For example, Kley asserts that, "As much as did the Cubist painters, Stein attempted to render the depth of human experience without pretending to have recourse to a transparent medium which would allow her to simply put a mirror to it" (Kley 522). First, Kley cites Stein's admiration for Cubist artists and artwork. She specifically references Stein's friendship with Picasso, and quotes Stein's respect of Cubist style. In addition, Kley brings up Stein's own attitudes towards language's connection to meaning and perception. She suggests that Stein's portrayal of inanimate objects enabled her to take joy in everyday life from different perspectives and separated her from representing things as she cognitively knew or remembered them. Thus, Kley is very much concerned with what influenced Stein's creation of *Tender Buttons*. Through her analysis, she suggests that in order to be able to understand *Tender Buttons*, readers must have an understanding of Stein herself, and what drew her to her unconventional writing style. Kley's suggestion here is indicative of critics' tendency to focus on Stein as a celebrity figure, rather than on her work itself. Because *Tender Buttons* is an unconventional text, and Stein is perceived as an unconventional author, critics assume that Stein's life is always relevant to interpretation.

Perloff's, Dubnick's, and Kley's analyses are especially interesting to examine for their use of intentionalist strategies because they demonstrate what seems to be an inevitable tendency to appeal to Stein when interpreting *Tender Buttons*. Although the three pieces of scholarship come from three different decades (the 70's, 80's and 2000's), and despite the heavy shift

towards postmodern literary analysis (which typically does not emphasize the author) in that time frame, Stein remains heavily present in *Tender Buttons* interpretations. As I explore in the chapter conclusion, the tendency of critics to make Stein inseparable from her work is an indication of much of the trouble with interpreting *Tender Buttons*-- the forced reconciliation between attempting to make sense of the text while simultaneously acknowledging and valuing its difficulty. As a result of this, most critics turn to Stein--her biography, her intentions, etc.--to produce meaning. While I have just examined how Stein herself is a major factor in Cubist interpretations of *Tender Buttons*, I now turn to how critics use aspects of the text, such as physical structure and grammar, to understand the text. However, Stein is not excluded from the analysis of the structure and grammar. Critics tend to not only focus on how the grammar and structure of the text are formed, but make assertions about *why*. The answer for most critics, as I will explore, lies in Stein.

### **II.5.b: Focus on Grammar and Physical Structure**

In addition to appealing to Stein, critics often resort to analyzing the structure and the grammar of *Tender Buttons* in an attempt to make the text compatible with their interpretive strategies. This section draws upon Fish's theories on grammar and writing patterns to assert that Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley are finding and responding to patterns in a manner that they were taught to recognize. According to Fish, when looking at grammar we are accustomed to noticing verbs, nouns, deep and surface structures, etc. depending on the interpretive approach we have been taught to use. In other words, we notice grammar if grammar is important to the interpretive approach we have been taught to use. Regarding patterns in texts, Fish asserts that, "what is noticed is what has been made noticeable, not by a clear and undistorting glass, but by an interpretive strategy" (1987). For example, Perloff in particular notices the construction of

sentences: “Pronouns have no referents. Prepositional and adverbial modifiers are used misleadingly ... aphorisms are created out of elements that don't cohere ... parts refer back to no wholes” (41). Perloff argues that the reader is unable to define words in the text such as, "delightfulness," "pleasure," and "nonsense," because the context provides no specifying limits that allow us to place these abstractions (41). Here, Perloff's reading of *Tender Buttons* displays the idea that language is impossible to pin down. Grammar is deceptive in that when it is used conventionally, readers assume that it is articulating clear and logical meaning. Perloff's analysis suggests that Stein's unconventional use of grammar and word use demonstrates how it's extremely difficult to articulate meaning because language, not people, is what is actually speaking. As Perloff argues against the idea that there is a single meaning that can be attributed to *Tender Buttons*, she implies that language is impossible to dissect in a way that only yields one answer. Through her analysis of grammar and word use, Perloff reveals her interpretive strategy of considering the instability of language and the impossibility of certainty.

Dubnick also pays attention to structure, drawing connections between the structure of synthetic Cubist art and the structure of *Tender Buttons*. Dubnick contends that with synthetic Cubism, “as in Stein's second obscure style, the relationship between signifying element and subject matter may be tenuous” (40). Moreover, while selection is extended in synthetic Cubism, as in Stein's second kind of obscurity, combination (contiguity) is suppressed. Dubnick suggests that all Cubist art implies a tension between the two-dimensional picture plane and the three-dimensionality of space represented...synthetic Cubism emphasizes the surface of the picture plane, sometimes in a very witty reminder to the reader that the depth of the painting is an illusion (40). Dubnick's strategy of analyzing the physical structures of synthetic Cubist art and *Tender Buttons* demonstrates her theoretical assumption that physical structure is imperative to

how we interpreting texts and that meaning is tied to structure. Interpretive strategies that focus on structure rely on the assumption that readers gain meaning from texts not just from word usage, themes, symbols, etc., but also from physical features of texts. Dubnick takes this more literally than most critics with her assertions about synthetic Cubist art compared to *Tender Buttons*. For her, the structure of *Tender Buttons* leads readers to see how the meaning that we can supposedly easily decode from language is not as self-evident as it appears. Dubnick's focus on structure suggests that arriving at meaning does not simply involve a conscious effort to understand how a text uses themes, language, etc., but also the unconscious influence of a text's physical appearance.

Kley views the pieces in *Tender Buttons* as, "an exploration of writing and grammar as the means for making sense in language" (522). For Kley, aspects of grammar and structure such as continuity and similarity are things that she has been conditioned to notice while interpreting a text. For example, Kley picks up on similarity in "A Carafe" and uses particular words and phrases in the piece to support her ideas. For example, "'A kind in glass' stresses similarity, 'a cousin' is of the same family, but not of the same parents, 'nothing strange' promises familiarity, 'a single hurt color' might be a transcription for relation by blood, whereas 'an arrangement in a system to pointing' suggests the deliberate production of an artifice which assumes systematic function: that of pointing, of directing attention" (521). Kley suggests that through these different degrees of similitude, objects lose their solidity, singularity, and definition; thus, clear and precise categories of perception and knowing are thus playfully undermined and washed away (521). Kley goes on to state that "A Carafe," in the form of a riddle, displays Cubist confusion of its material, displaying words as things and words as signifiers of things. In

A CARAFE, THAT IS  
A BLIND GLASS

A kind in glass and a  
cousin, a spectacle and  
nothing strange a single  
hurt color and an  
arrangement in a  
system to pointing. All  
this and not ordinary,  
not unordered in not  
resembling. The  
difference is spreading.  
(Stein 245)

other words, the text makes the medium its message. Kley's analysis suggests that the piece encourages the reader to recognize that there are multiple realities. Analyzing the text through strategies that focus on grammar and structure leads her to assert that Stein's anti-representational arrangements are playful puzzles that impel us to look at the words, rather than through them. Kley's focus of structure and grammar enables her to notice how Stein uses these aspects of language in her "verbal still lifes" to demonstrate the limitations of language, to subvert those limitations to articulate the complexity of "the human experience"<sup>7</sup> to the reader.

I notice in Kley's scholarship in particular a tendency that critics demonstrate when analyzing the grammar and structure of *Tender Buttons*. Kley frequently addresses what *Tender Buttons* as a whole, or the grammar and structure of *Tender Buttons*, "forces" or "impels," readers to do. In other words, she awards the text agency rather than acknowledging her own role in interpreting the Cubist aspects of *Tender Buttons*. Much of *Tender Buttons* scholarship emphasizes the subversive effects of the text, and critics see the subversive aspects of *Tender Buttons* as being "in" the text. In other words, critics suggest that *Tender Buttons*, in a way, speaks for itself. Examining the agency that critics award *Tender Buttons* is valuable because we can reconsider how we locate subversive features in complicated texts and recognize how significant the reader's role is in creating subversiveness.

### **II.5.c Structuralist Strategies**

Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley refer to *Tender Buttons* as a series of "codes" and "riddles." Their scholarship reveals structuralist presuppositions, as these terms imply that they are looking for deep structures to unpack within the text. Structuralism relates texts to larger structures,

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Kley does not specify exactly what she means by "the human experience" though her scholarship implies that she is referring to how people perceive and interact with the world around them.

which can include genres, narrative structures, motifs, or patterns. Structuralism criticism generally operates under the assumption that texts have hidden meaning that can be uncovered through looking for themes and patterns. Considering Perloff's, Dubnick's, and Kley's scholarship in light of Fish's theories reveals how structuralist strategies often point to the predetermined nature of interpretation. Fish asserts that the patterns that our ears hear and that our eyes see are the patterns that our perceptual habits make available (1987). Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley pick up on patterns relating to grammar and the physical structuring of the text as a result of decoding supposed hidden meanings within the text. Their realizations are not self-evident, rather, they are the result of their interpretive tendencies to look for codes within the text. Though Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley arrive at various conclusions about the connections between *Tender Buttons* and Cubism/Surrealism (some of which are consistent to all three pieces of scholarship and some of which differ from one another), they all view these art movements as a way to understand the complexity of the text. This is not to say that they are asserting that they have found the "key" that unlocks the mystery of *Tender Buttons* once and for all--they all acknowledge that singular meaning is an impossibility with *Tender Buttons* and that the reader plays an important role in forming interpretations--but they all pick up on certain patterns within the "codes" and "riddles" of the text which leads them to use art as a lens through which to form their interpretation. Examining Perloff's, Dubnick's, and Kley's interpretation emphasizes that there is no such thing as a "neutral reading" of a text. Applying Fish's theories demonstrate that critics attempting to make sense of *Tender Buttons* formed their interpretation because of the reading strategies they were taught and the textual features they were trained to notice. In a way, Perloff's, Dubnick's and Kley's interpretations were self-fulfilling prophecies because the

intentions of Stein and the structures within the text that they were looking for (and apparently found) are perceived as such because that was specifically what they sought out.

## II.6: Conclusion

Perloff's, Dubnick's, and Kley's interpretations use language that indicate their use of terministic screens of Cubism, and were formed by using particular interpretive strategies relating to structure and authorial intention. My analysis reveals how Cubist scholarship in particular is demonstrative of the contradictions that arise in the interpretation of texts that do not adhere to conventional structure or language. The Cubist approach is interesting in that it requires critics to tie in some biographical information. Considering Stein's relationship with Cubist painter Pablo Picasso along with Stein's open admiration for the Cubist style, it would be remiss to ignore her biography. Yet the majority of Cubist scholarship does not stop there. Critics frequently connect the Cubist movement with Stein's personal aims for the text, suggesting that readers must have an understanding of Stein as a writer in order to have an understanding of *Tender Buttons*. The text's unconventional style presents an overwhelming task for critics, as they attempt to unpack aspects not only relating to grammar and structure, but also the very concept of meaning. Thus, Stein is perceived to be the most stable foundation for interpretation. However, Perloff's, Dubnick's, and Kley's scholarship is not backward or unevolved; on the contrary, their writing points to a fascinating resistance of Stein scholarship to follow shifts in interpretive trends from structuralism and internationalism to postmodernism and poststructuralism. Perloff's, Dubnick's, and Kley's scholarship draw upon the terminology of the Cubist art movement and the aesthetics of Cubism in order to make sense of the text. Typically, when studying literary scholarship from different decades, we can expect to pick up on interpretive strategies that are representative of the trends of that time. However, Perloff's,

Dubnick's, and Kley's scholarship, although produced in different decades, share many commonalities. In some ways, we *can* see this shift with these pieces of scholarship--for example, Kley's analysis from the 2000's takes more of a postmodern approach than Perloff's and Dubnick's, by highlighting the reader's significant role in the interpretive process. Yet, the commonalities outweigh the differences. All three critics bring in Stein and her intentions for *Tender Buttons* as much of the foundation for their analysis. They emphasize that Stein was trying to do something by writing *Tender Buttons*, and that the unusual style she uses in the text forces readers to confront their own ideas about meaning and perception. In addition, the critics all refer to *Tender Buttons* as some sort of set of "codes" or "riddles," revealing a tendency to look for deep structures within texts. Considering how Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley all assert that there is no single, correct meaning to *Tender Buttons*, I question how productive it is to describe the pieces in *Tender Buttons* as such. To call something a "code" or a "riddle" implies that there is something to be cracked, some secret meaning that can be uncovered. Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley suggest (to varying degrees) that *Tender Buttons* is not "about" any one particular thing--the reader plays a major role in meaning making. Thus, the critics' labeling of the pieces in *Tender Buttons* as "codes" and "riddles" is contradictory to their assertions about meaning in *Tender Buttons*. Along with the emphasis on authorial intention, labeling *Tender Buttons* as a code or a riddle is indicative of the challenge of *Tender Buttons*. Even critics who go (or attempt to go) in a more postmodern direction often end up using interpretive strategies that contradict this aim. Contradictions between postmodernism and intentionalism and structuralism are not unique to Cubist criticism of *Tender Buttons*. As I will explore in the following chapter, feminist and gender studies criticism also highlights the difficulty of using contemporary interpretative tactics with texts such as *Tender Buttons*.

### Chapter III: Feminist and Gender Studies Lenses

#### **Introduction:**

The scholarship examined in this chapter utilizes the lenses of feminism and gender studies and expands the scope of *Tender Buttons* analysis to include concepts and terminologies that explore how Stein confronts the sexual, social, and psychological oppression of women. Gender studies and feminist lenses acknowledge that society's notions of gender are determined by culture, and that gender issues are present, either explicitly or implicitly, in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature. This lens also examines and challenges dominant norms of masculinity and femininity. Some feminist scholars, such as Doris T. Wight (1986), use biographical strategies to argue that Stein represents herself as male through her description of objects in *Tender Buttons*, thus challenging conventional notions of how masculinity and femininity are presented in literature. Others, like Lisa Ruddick (1990), show that the text is Stein's vision of the making and unmaking of patriarchy. More recent scholarship, like that of Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick (2014), explores how *Tender Buttons* reconfigures our expectations about language and its ability to articulate perceptions of reality to examine how female identities, lesbian desire, and domestic space are imbricated. Examining their scholarship in connection with the theories of Stanley Fish and Kenneth Burke<sup>8</sup> yields insights on interpretive tendencies, such as a focus on biography, that are

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout this chapter, there is repeated information from the previous chapter about Burke's and Fish's theories. This repeated information is geared towards readers only turning to one chapter, rather than reading the entire thesis.

demonstrative of these lenses as they pertain to *Tender Buttons* scholarship. In addition, studying Wight's, Ruddick's, and Goodspeed-Chadwick's scholarship reveals the strengths and contradictions that arise from using feminist and gender studies lenses in readings of *Tender Buttons*. As I will explore throughout this chapter, feminist and gender studies lenses rely on heavily on authorial intent and biography to validate their claims about Stein's views on sexuality, femininity, and patriarchy. Yet critics that use these lenses do not shy away from using postmodern and poststructuralist strategies that often conflict with intentionalism and biographical focus. Among other things, this chapter will explore the contradictions between feminist and gender studies interpretive strategies and postmodern interpretive tactics. First, however, I explicate what I mean by "feminist and gender studies lenses" by exploring the assumptions, interpretive strategies, and goals of the scholarship that uses them.

### **What are Feminist and Gender Studies Lenses?**

Feminist and gender studies scholarship, as all other lenses of scholarship, is complex and multifaceted, so it follows that the interpretations that emerge from using these lenses are also so. There are several major facets of feminist and gender studies lenses worth noting. First, these lenses challenge the "natural" order and sense of patriarchy. They contest the logocentric patterns of patriarchal writing. Feminist and gender studies lenses also examine androcentrism in culture and literature, and seek to reposition women in valuable roles in society. Another common use of feminist and gender studies lenses involves challenging the norms of gender, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity in order to shed light on how these concepts are created by power structures. Finally, feminist and gender studies lenses often appeal to the author. Cubist lenses and language lenses also appeal to the author, yet biography and authorial intent are rarely the foundation of interpretation in scholarship that uses these lenses. Feminist and gender studies

lenses are often centered around details about the author, such as their biography, intentions, or psychology. For example, Wight puts Stein at the center of interpretation, positing that Stein, although female physically, thinks of herself as male in *Tender Buttons*. She contends that *Tender Buttons* is a reflection of Stein's inner conflict between her physical female self and the male self that she projects through her descriptions of objects in the text. This angle of feminist and gender studies lenses relies quite heavily on Stein's biography, drawing upon Stein's relationship with Alice Toklas to interpret the pieces in *Tender Buttons*.

Another facet of feminist and gender studies lenses (Ruddick's) suggests that, through *Tender Buttons*, Stein corrects and contests androcentric notions of the Bible, and unlocks a suppressed women-affirming story in its patriarchal symbols. This facet uses a combination of poststructuralism, feminist psychoanalysis, and feminist theology to argue that *Tender Buttons* is Stein's fully developed vision of the making and unmaking of patriarchy. Psychoanalytic lenses are used frequently in *Tender Buttons* scholarship that uses feminist and gender studies lenses. As feminist and gender studies lenses focus on concepts that are often relevant to authors' lives (gender, sexuality, etc.) the psychoanalytic lens is useful because it draws upon authors' biographies and experiences to reinforce claims about hidden meanings within texts. Feminist psychoanalysis often draws upon Julia Kristeva's theories of "jouissance," which I explicate further into the chapter, to demonstrate how and why women need to write with their own language to write their experiences, rather than the "language of the father." Theological feminism challenges the phallogocentric writing and androcentric interpretation of the Bible. In addition, theological feminism resituates women's roles in religious texts and in religious discourse, seeking to subvert religion's marginalization of women. Ruddick's use of theological feminism utilizes the concept of Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a historical movement (which

originated in the first and second century CE, but resurged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century) associated with a repudiation of matter. As I will explore further on in the chapter, Ruddick contends that it is also a movement which has much to do with Stein's intellectual turns in *Tender Buttons*. Ruddick describes Stein as a gnostic reader and a gnostic writer. She (Stein) reads a buried truth in the Bible and writes her subversive thinking in a way that readers can learn to follow. Ruddick's feminist, theological interpretations are influenced by Mary Daly, a feminist philosopher and theologian. Daly is relevant to Ruddick's analysis, as she is a major influence in much of feminist theology and Ruddick directly references her scholarship on the Bible to form her analysis. Daly's theories attempt to explain and overcome androcentrism (the focus on men) in Western religion, as well as reshape discourse about God and religion for female liberation.

Finally, poststructuralist analysis is used in Cubist, language, and feminist and gender studies scholarship. Post-structuralism falls under the umbrella of postmodernism, and emerged in reaction against structuralism. Post-structuralism rejects the systems put forth by structuralist critics and asserts that such systems are constructed; thus they cannot be trusted to develop meaning. It challenges the sign = signifier + signified formula put forth by Saussure and asserts that language systems are inadequate for communicating stable meaning. With all lenses of *Tender Buttons* scholarship, poststructuralist strategies are used to emphasize the multiplicity of meaning and acknowledge the impossibility of objective, logical "truth." Poststructuralism in *Tender Buttons* scholarship often appears in the form of multiple interpretations of the pieces within the text, and an acknowledgement that the text's meaning is what the reader brings to it. Finally, a feminist and gender studies lens has been used to examine how Stein's works invite or display an investigation of the process of naming female bodies and their environments, and how

Stein is instrumental in reshaping and remaking identities through discursive formulations (Goodspeed-Chadwick 11). This angle of feminist and gender studies lenses draws upon the aims of feminist ideology and Hélène Cixous's postmodern feminist theories on women's writing. Specifically, Goodspeed-Chadwick is drawn to Cixous's argument that women's writing or "écriture féminine" can never be pinned down. Goodspeed-Chadwick contends that *Tender Buttons* anticipates Cixous' notion of "white ink," which encompasses motherhood, sisterhood, multiplicity, sexual desire, love, the semiotic, and the female body (18-19). Cixous's notion of "white ink," urges women to write in their own language about their lives. Cixous's influence enables Goodspeed-Chadwick to explore Stein's technique of naming and claiming, and how this technique affects the perception of concepts and manifestations of female identities, lesbian desire, and domestic space.

An important strength of feminist and gender studies lenses is that they lend a new perspective to *Tender Buttons* scholarship, one that goes beyond the obvious difficulty of the language to acknowledge Stein's marginalized role as a queer woman. One potential limitation, or at least contradiction, that becomes apparent when studying scholarship of these lenses is the combination of heavy reliance on authorial intent and biographical information with postmodern interpretive tactics. Contradictions between feminist scholarship and postmodernism are nothing new in literary scholarship about works from female authors, but, as I explore in my conclusion, it is especially interesting to explore in light of Stein. The following section will examine three pieces of scholarship that use feminist and gender studies lenses, and the following sections will unpack the terministic screens and interpretive presuppositions that were utilized to form these interpretations.

### **Scholarship**

For my study, I have chosen scholarship from three decades (the 80's, 90's, and 2010's) that effectively and interestingly demonstrate how critics use feminist and gender studies lenses. Wight's scholarship is demonstrative of an extreme interpretation of gender studies in connection with *Tender Buttons*. Her scholarship is useful to examine for how far biography can go to substantiate claims in interpretation, and for its unique application of Greek studies. Ruddick's scholarship is both fascinating and useful to examine for its blending of feminist psychoanalysis and feminist theology. Her exploration of *Tender Buttons* is demonstrative of a contradiction that exists between poststructuralism and the structuralist leanings of Gnosticism. Finally, Goodspeed-Chadwick's analysis of *Tender Buttons* is valuable to study for its examination of *Tender Buttons* as a subversive text that changed discourse surrounding women and femininity. Though feminist and gender studies lenses often overlap, there are differences worth noting. While feminist screens concentrate on women's issues, such as psychology of women, women's history, literature, etc, gender studies screens are concerned with both women and men, and the construction of both gender identities. For example, Wight's scholarship focuses on female sexuality, but also addresses the concept of male gender identity (specifically, Stein's male self in *Tender Buttons*).

Wight's scholarship blends together feminist thought and reflections about gender and sexuality. Her analysis focuses on both Stein's male self and female self. Wight compares Stein to the Greek seer Tiresias, and suggests that, like Tiresias, Stein is of "ambiguous sex." She contends that Stein, "although clearly female physically in real life," (34) thinks of herself as male in *Tender Buttons*. In addition, Wight connects *Tender Buttons* to Cubism, referring to biographical instances in Stein's life frequently throughout her analysis, including her relationship with Picasso. She asserts that Stein, like Cubist artists, sought to render the rhythms,

sounds, shapes, and colors of the external world. Wight's assertion, in combination with her claim that *Tender Buttons* is a presentation of women as aesthetic objects, leads her to refer to the pieces within *Tender Buttons* as "still-lives." Wight argues that a part of Stein both partakes of and criticizes the "glory" of the male spirit in still-lives such as "Glazed Glitter," while another part of her feels the debasement, yet sensual appeal of the female, in still-lives such as "A Substance in a Cushion." According to Wight, "Stein's chief endeavor in writing *Tender Buttons* was to effect a reconciliation between the competing claims within her thinking and feeling, in the dualism in her own subjective being that she projects onto the shifting external objects of her contemplation" (34). In other words, *Tender Buttons* is a reflection of Stein's inner conflict between her physical female self and the male self that she projects through her descriptions of objects in *Tender Buttons*. Wight suggests that Stein's inner conflict between her male and female self is connected with lesbian desire, specifically desire that Stein had for Alice Toklas. In fact, Wight picks up on erotic preoccupations in every part of *Tender Buttons*--from the individual phrases to whole paragraphs-- and connects them with Sigmund Freud's conclusions about how human desire is all-pervasive in the human unconscious (34). Wight's scholarship relies on biography, and uses structuralist tactics that unpack messages about gender identification and lesbian desire. Wight also tackles issues of how women are presented in society and what they are valued for. As I will explore further on in the chapter, Wight also examines Stein's descriptions of femininity and presentation of women as aesthetic objects. Specifically, she addresses how women are sexualized and prized for the status of their virginity, and unpacks the symbols of their sexualization.

Ruddick's book on Stein's works involves an extensive exploration of the Bible and its patriarchal symbols in connection with *Matisse, Picasso, and Gertrude Stein* and *Tender*

*Buttons*. For the purpose of this chapter, I will limit my analysis of her writing to her assertions about Gnosticism, patriarchy, and feminism. Ruddick asserts that *Tender Buttons* is far more intellectually cohesive than has been supposed, and that its linguistic play points in the direction of gnostic feminism. Ruddick utilizes interpretive strategies demonstrative of the influences of Kristeva and Daly to suggest that Stein corrects and contests biblical representations of women, and unlocks a suppressed, women-affirming story in its patriarchal symbols (3). Ruddick identifies the themes of patricide, paternal inheritance, and mother-love in *Tender Buttons*, and suggests that Stein “takes us into the deep background of the world of the fathers, exploring its machinery but also the alternative possibility of a ‘left hop,’ a sinister leap to an anti-patriarchal wisdom” (6). Ruddick finds a set of powerful feminist reflections in the *Tender Buttons*, and asserts that the text represents Stein’s fully developed vision of the making and unmaking of patriarchy. According to Ruddick, Stein develops the idea that patriarchy constitutes itself by a sacrifice, real or mythic. Moreover, *Tender Buttons* suggests that once male dominance is recognized as being dependent on sacrifice, we are in the position to undo sacrifice and subvert patriarchal thinking. We can reverse sacrifice by reviving what sacrifice kills, or deciding to see what sacrifice makes invisible (191). As I will explore in the following sections, Ruddick’s scholarship blends together theories of feminist theology and feminist psychoanalysis and poststructuralism.

Goodspeed-Chadwick’s scholarship focuses on Stein’s technique of naming and claiming through a feminist lens, and seeks to examine how female identities, lesbian desire, and domestic space are imbricated (9-10). Goodspeed-Chadwick argues that interpretations focusing on *Tender Buttons* as an exploration of language and its possibilities and those that understand the work as an analysis of gender relations need not be mutually exclusive. These two focuses would

seem to be mutually exclusive, as scholarship that primarily focuses on language (often through postmodern screens) reject the biographical focus that scholarship that analyzes gender typically takes. However, Goodspeed-Chadwick notes that several of Stein's works invite or display an investigation of the process of naming female bodies and their environments, and that Stein is instrumental in reshaping and remaking identities through discursive formulations (11).

Ultimately, Stein's works allow for "identification and a sense of community for lesbians, women, and others in the literary imagination and the real world" (11-12). Goodspeed-Chadwick asserts that *Tender Buttons* reconfigures our expectations in connection with language and its ability to refer to and articulate reality (16). Goodspeed-Chadwick concludes that Stein's style in *Tender Buttons* and in her other experimental writing may disturb and cause a disturbance because it promotes and sanctions multiple ways of living and loving (19). As Stein was writing at a time when few were challenging the norms of how female bodies, identities, and sexualities were categorized, her writing had a transformative effect on the world. Her unconventional style allowed for feminist discourse to spread.

### **III.1: Terministic Screens:**

This section's focus relates feminist and gender studies lenses to Burke's theories of terministic screens. While "feminist and gender studies lenses" is a broad term that I use to describe the terms, concepts, and interpretive strategies used to interpret *Tender Buttons*, I use the concept of terministic screens to highlight terminology of specific feminist and gender studies theories and theorists. In other words, if feminist and gender studies lenses are what critics use to focus on sexuality, gender, patriarchy, etc. in *Tender Buttons*, terministic screens can be identified through the terms and theories through which critics make sense of what aspects they pick up on. In addition, feminist and gender studies lenses work through what Fish

calls “interpretive strategies.” While feminist and gender studies lenses provide a focus to scholarship, and terministic screens provide a filter through which critics select the terms and theories of feminism and gender studies, interpretive strategies are what critics use to understand the terms and theories in connection with the text. Feminist and gender studies lenses, terministic screens, and interpretive strategies work together to influence the outcome of interpretation. As I will explore in this chapter, interpretation is largely predetermined in that lenses, terministic screens, and interpretive strategies encourage critics to find what they are looking for.

I now explore the terministic screens used by critics to form interpretations of *Tender Buttons*, with this chapter focusing on the terministic screens utilized with feminist and gender studies lenses. “Terministic screens,” a phrase developed by Kenneth Burke, are filters that are composed of terms through which people perceive and understand the world; they shape what we perceive to be observations about reality. Burke emphasizes that the terms that we use not only affect the nature of our observations, but our “observations” are but reflections of the particular terminology through which observations are formed (46). Terministic screens shape our perspective on reality through reflective, selective, and deflective strategies. Terministic screens are reflective of our reality in that they select (or direct our attention to) certain details and deflect our attention away from others. Critics selectively use terministic screens by focusing on, or selecting, aspects of texts most fitting with their interpretive strategies. They use these screens to deflect by ignoring aspects of texts that do not match up with their theoretical presuppositions. It is impossible to approach a text without using a terministic screen. In fact, Burke states that, “We must use terministic screens since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another” (50). The process of using

terministic screens is often unconscious, and rarely brought to the surface to be explored. Illuminating such processes reveals the unavoidably subjective nature of interpretation. Subjectivity in interpretation is widely recognized in contemporary literary theory, but Burke's rhetorical theories explicitly uncover the process through which critics form interpretation. Understanding the processes of terministic screens cannot eradicate the subjectivity of interpretation, yet it can lead to insights of where interpretation comes from and what influences it.

### **III.1.a: Gender Studies**

Wight's scholarship demonstrates her use of a gender studies screen, as demonstrated by her presuppositions about sexuality. For example, Wight's assertion that Stein presents herself as male in *Tender Buttons* even though she is "clearly female physically in real life" (34) demonstrates her belief that gender and sex are separate concepts. Wight defines Stein's sex by her physical body, and her gender by how Stein perceives herself and how she challenges the norms of femininity and sexuality. Her perception of sex versus gender is demonstrative of a gender studies lens of previous decades, although gender studies today generally rejects biology as a stable foundation for determining sex. In addition, Wight draws upon Greek studies to ground her assertions about sexuality and gender in *Tender Buttons*. Early sexuality and gender studies were deeply involved in Greek studies, and Wight makes connects and justifies her assertions about sex and gender through Greek mythology. For example, Wight forms connections between Stein and the Greek seer, Tiresias, to reinforce her arguments about sexuality. Tiresias is presented in Greek mythology as a man who was transformed into a woman by Hera as punishment for harming a pair of mating snakes. Tiresias spends seven years as a woman, gets married, and has children. He is eventually able to transform back into a man

through another encounter with mating snakes (depending on the version, Tiresias either kills the snakes or leaves them be). Wight has a unique yet potentially problematic (which I will address in the concluding chapter) interpretation of the myth, and asserts that Tiresias is not sexless; instead, as Tiresias knows herself to be erotically drawn to women rather than to men, she comes into the position of Sappho (34). According to Wight, “The Sapphic passion --in Gertrude Stein’s case her desire for Alice Toklas--is one of the ecstatic messages expressed cryptically in the tiny exploding still-lives and in similar imagistic passages within the more abstract meditations of *Tender Buttons*” (34-35). Wight uses terminology relating to Greek mythology throughout her scholarship. The title of her article, “Woman as Eros-Rose in Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and Contemporaneous Portraits” refers to Eros, the Greek god of sexual pleasure. According to Wight, Alice Toklas is Stein’s “Eros-rose” (rose being a symbol for secrecy) and her presence is behind all of the portraits in *Tender Buttons*. The term “Sapphic passion” that Wight uses refers to Sappho, the Ancient Greek lyrical poet. The adjective “sapphic” is used by Wight to describe lesbian love and sex. Though the vocabulary and narratives of Greek mythology are not necessarily commonly used in gender studies screens, Wight uses these terms in ways that overlap with the concerns of gender studies. Greek mythology is very much concerned with sex, sexuality, and gender, concepts that Wight often picks up on in *Tender Buttons*. For example, Wight’s analysis of “Red Roses” emphasizes female sexuality and female genitalia, and contends that the piece “Red Roses” is a description of intercourse and its aftermath. She interprets phrases in the piece such as “a pink cut” to be describing the female sex organ. The word “cool” could mean “unstimulated” while the word “rose” could mean “excited” or “swollen.” Wight’s focus on the aspects of female sexuality and eroticism is

RED ROSES.

A cool red rose and a pink cut pink, a collapse and a sold hole, a little less hot. (Stein 258)

demonstrative of a goal of gender studies criticism: to examine and reposition the discourse about sexuality to acknowledge the unstable foundations society uses to categorize it.

Specifically, Wight's scholarship suggests that Stein challenges the foundations of the beliefs that female sexuality is impure, and that descriptions of female sexuality shouldn't be in public discourse. Wight's analysis of "Red Roses" emphasizes that Stein uses female-centered sexual imagery rather than conventional language that emphasizes male sexuality and female purity.

Wight's gender studies screen has significant overlaps with the feminist screens utilized by Ruddick and Goodspeed-Chadwick. However, the gender studies screen that Wight uses is separate from feminist screens in one key aspect. While feminist screens concentrate on women's issues, such as psychology of women, women's history, literature, etc, gender studies screens are concerned with both women and men, and the construction of both gender identities. Wight's scholarship focuses on female sexuality, but also addresses the concept of male gender identity (specifically, Stein's male self in *Tender Buttons*).

### **III.1.b: Feminism**

Goodspeed-Chadwick uses a feminist terministic screen, one that connects the concerns of twentieth and twenty-first century feminism to the meanings within *Tender Buttons*. Feminist terministic screens often explore how females identify themselves, and how society structures and reinforces what constitutes "female identity." In addition, feminist screens challenge traditional notions of gender and sexuality, leading Goodspeed-Chadwick to examine lesbian desire in connection to Stein and *Tender Buttons*. Finally, feminist screens challenge the roles that have been forced upon women in patriarchal structures. Goodspeed-Chadwick's analysis demonstrates how Stein repositions discourse relating to the domestic sphere. The term "domestic sphere," describes a space in which patriarchal structures confined women, a space

that emphasized “feminine responsibilities” such as childcare and housekeeping. Feminist screens challenge or subvert discourse about such spaces in order to free women from these constraining roles. Goodspeed-Chadwick asserts that Stein links together three important feminist concerns: What does feminist writing look like? How can lesbian desire be inscribed? What role can the domestic sphere play in literary production and in the literary imagination? (19). According to Goodspeed-Chadwick, the piece “Sugar”<sup>9</sup> intersperses remarks about Stein’s writing and lesbian desire within the domestic sphere. Goodspeed-Chadwick connects the line, “The teasing is tender and trying and thoughtful,” with the aforementioned feminist concerns:

On one hand, it seems to express Stein’s literary approach, especially with the "tender" of the title invoked. On the other hand, it can also speak to the inscribed physicality of the poem in connection with female bodies in domestic space—as the entire work elevates the ordinary domestic sphere and the female bodies occupying it to avant-garde literary experimentation and modernist intellectualism. (19)

Goodspeed-Chadwick’s focus on feminist concerns in connection to *Tender Buttons* positions Stein as a feminist writer. Her scholarship posits the feminist idea that, “Women who understand themselves as occupying subject positions outside of dominant, privileged terms would need to write in a different language, but such a practice is indicative of the ushering in of social change” (11). Goodspeed-Chadwick suggests that by renaming and redefining things that are dismissed as ordinary (in both literary studies and the material world), Stein constructs female identities, lesbian desire, and domestic space in ways that reshaped the discourse on these topics. Here, we can see not only how Goodspeed-Chadwick uses feminist lenses and screens, but also how she

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<sup>9</sup> See appendix III.a for full piece

interprets Stein's uses of feminist lenses and screens in *Tender Buttons*. In other words, Goodspeed-Chadwick is using a feminist lens and feminist screen to interpret *Tender Buttons* while simultaneously contending that Stein uses these lenses and screens to write *Tender Buttons*. Thus, Goodspeed-Chadwick's analysis is demonstrative of how the lenses and screens we use to interpret texts predetermine the outcome of interpretation. Goodspeed-Chadwick finds in *Tender Buttons* a redefinition of female identifies, lesbian desire, and domestic space, and attributes these findings to Stein's feminist intentions, pointing to the circular nature of intention and interpretation.

### **III.1.c: Psychoanalytic and Theological Feminist Screens**

Ruddick's scholarship brings together two branches of feminism: feminist theological criticism and feminist psychoanalysis. These two branches, used in connection with one another, offer a unique facet of a feminist screen. Theological feminist screens challenge the phallogocentric writing and androcentric interpretation of the Bible. In addition, feminist, theological screens resituate women's roles in religious texts and in religious discourse, seeking to subvert religion's marginalization of women. Ruddick's feminist, theological interpretations are influenced by Mary Daly, a feminist philosopher and theologian. Daly is relevant to Ruddick's analysis, as she is a major influence in much of feminist theology and Ruddick directly references her scholarship on the Bible to form her analysis. Daly's theories attempt to explain and overcome androcentrism (the focus on men) in Western religion, as well as reshape discourse about God and religion for female liberation. Psychoanalytic feminist screens draw attention to the oppressive characteristics of patriarchal and logocentric writing. Feminist screens that draw upon psychoanalysis often draw upon the theories of Kristeva to demonstrate how and why women

need to write with their own language to write their experiences, rather than the “language of the father.”

The influence of Kristeva and Barthes in Ruddick’s scholarship is evident. Barthes contends that there are two effects of texts: plaisir (translated as "pleasure") and jouissance. He further distinguishes texts as "readerly" or "writerly." The pleasure of the text connects to the readerly text, which does not challenge the reader's position as a subject. The writerly text provides “jouissance,” which disregards literary codes and allows readers to break out of their subject positions (DeKoven 92). According to Ruddick, Stein’s work anticipates the theories of Daly and Kristeva. Ruddick combines psychoanalytic feminism and theological feminism in her analysis to explore how eros (sexual attraction) and patriarchy constantly conflict with one another in *Tender Buttons*. According to Ruddick, Stein thinks of the Bible as distorting but secretly containing the truth; readers who are party to the secret know how to read it subversively to get back its spiritual meaning (230). Ruddick suggests that Stein’s reading of the Bible, “rereads a received message, seeing that it conceals but contains a saving wisdom. The phallus contains a mother, if we know how to get her back from the symbol” (230). Ruddick analyzes *Tender Buttons* through the psychoanalytic-linguistic vocabulary of a recovered jouissance (physical or intellectual pleasure) and of a hermetic vocabulary of recovered wisdom. She is particularly interested in the constant ambiguity in *Tender Buttons*, and asserts that the text is constructed in such a way that it “collapses into single words both the paternal taboo and its violation by the sexual body” (207).

For example, in Ruddick identifies the many contradicting meanings that Stein's "Red Roses" can be construed to have. Ruddick asserts that the "collapse" mentioned in "Red Roses" could be referring to orgasm or to the erasure of pleasure (206). Ruddick contends that the moment the texts tells of oppression, it simultaneously tells of erotic energies that defy repression (206). The ambiguity in the text challenges the mode of signification associated with the father because ambiguous and difficult texts defy the notion of monologic meaning, which is deeply rooted in Western, patriarchal writing. Ruddick utilizes Kristeva's theories about pluridimensional jouissance in experimental texts and draws upon Kristeva's assertion that "The jouissance of the 'polymorphic, orgasmic body, laughing and desiring' is defined and repressed as the female 'other' by patriarchal culture. The rebellion of that repressed other, which releases jouissance, takes place in experimental writing" (DeKoven 92). In other words, "jouissance" results from disregarding literary codes and often results from creating and reading experimental texts, which break free of patriarchal and logocentric writing patterns. Similarly, Ruddick picks up on instances in *Tender Buttons* that multiply meaning through puns and syntactical

RED ROSES.

A cool red rose and a pink cut pink, a collapse and a sold hole, a little less hot. (Stein 258)

incompletion. The “rubbed” in “Suppose an Eyes” can mean either “stroked” or “rubbed out,” while the phrase “go red” can mean “become red” or “redness, depart” (206). The phrase “go red” is also an example of syntactical incompletion, because the reader is not given enough information to determine whether red is a noun or an adjective. Thus, the phrase could mean that red (the noun) is being told to go away, or it could mean (if being used as an adjective) that someone is being told to turn red (206-207). Ruddick selectively focuses on phrases within *Tender Buttons* that have multiple meanings, which reinforces her assertions about how Stein subverts patriarchal and logocentric writing. Her analysis lends itself to the feminist goal of reexamining and repositioning how female sexuality is presented in literature, particularly the Bible. Ruddick explains that, “An opaque sentence, viewed from a Kristevan perspective, is a piece of music or primary process that lets drive back into the linguistic surface; such a sentence is an experience for the reader, not primarily a communication. But from a hermetic perspective, the same sentence is a message to be deciphered” (251). The overlap between psychoanalysis and poststructuralism is something that Ruddick acknowledges is complex, and may even seem contradictory at times. Poststructuralist criticism does not consider the author as absolute authority, and emphasizes the reader’s role in interpreting texts and producing meaning. Conversely, psychoanalysis very much emphasizes the personal experiences of the author, and puts these experiences at the forefront of interpretation. However, Ruddick asserts that the overlap works because a text can be simultaneously polysemous and cryptic. She contends that *Tender Buttons* does have multiple meanings, but those meanings are coded in

SUPPOSE AN EYES.

Suppose it is within a gate  
which open is open at the  
hour of closing summer  
that is to say it is so.

All the seats are needing  
blackening. A white dress  
is in sign. A soldier a real  
soldier has a worn lace a  
worn lace of different  
sizes that is to say if he  
can read, if he can read he  
is a size to show shutting  
up twenty-four.

Go red go red, laugh  
white.

Suppose a collapse in  
rubbed purr, in rubbed  
purr get.

Little sales ladies little  
sales ladies little saddles  
of mutton.

Little sales of leather and  
such beautiful beautiful,  
beautiful beautiful. (Stein  
260-261)

such a way by Stein that only readers who engage with her work in a certain way can uncover them.

As I have explored, Wight, Ruddick, and Goodspeed-Chadwick all use language that demonstrate terministic screens of gender studies and feminism (psychoanalytic and theological). Examining these screens yields useful insight on both *Tender Buttons* scholarship and feminist and gender studies scholarship in general. Though these critics demonstrate both overlapping and differing terministic screens relating to feminist and gender studies lenses, there is a commonality worth noting: All three critics select aspects of *Tender Buttons* that subvert or reposition sexuality, gender, and concepts of the feminine in feminist manners. Wight suggests that Stein subverts the conventional notions of how sexuality is expressed in literature. Goodspeed-Chadwick asserts that Stein's writing constructs female identities, lesbian desire, gender, identity, desire, and domestic space in ways that challenge and reshape the discourse on these topics. Ruddick contends that Stein's writing invites exploration to "the world of the fathers" in a way that allows us to examine how it works and how to move away from this world and into an anti-patriarchal wisdom. In other words, Wight, Ruddick, and Goodspeed-Chadwick assert that *Tender Buttons*, or Stein through *Tender Buttons*, is *doing* something. Their assertions award *Tender Buttons* and Stein agency, rather than acknowledging their own construction of meaning in the text. In the following sections, I go a step further in my analysis of these critics' interpretations through exploring the interpretive strategies and theoretical presuppositions utilized by the critics, in connection with Fish's theories on interpretation. Specifically, I tackle how critics understand and apply the terminologies and concepts of their interpretive screens through strategies that affect the nature of their interpretation. My examination reveals how lenses, screens, and interpretive strategies work together in the circular act of interpretation.

### III.2: Interpretive Strategies:

The following section will build off of my previous examination of terministic screens. While I have used the theory of terministic screens to explore the terminology of movements such as feminism and psychoanalysis, as well as the terminology of theorists relevant to these movements, I now focus on the strategies that Wight, Ruddick, and Goodspeed-Chadwick utilize in combination with these screens. In other words, while I have just focused on specific terminologies and theorists, I now focus on how broader interpretive trends such as intentionalism, structuralism, and postmodernism are utilized by these critics. Considering the interpretive strategies that critics apply when using feminist and gender studies lenses to interpret *Tender Buttons* allows us to see how critics pick up on the terminology and theories from their terministic screens to their interpretation. Interpretive strategies work together with what Fish calls theoretical assumptions. What I mean by “theoretical assumptions” are the interpretive habits and expectations described by Fish that literary theorists inevitably use when engaging in the act of interpretation. Critics use interpretive strategies that line up with their theoretical assumptions and terministic screens. For example, critics using a feminist terministic screen who assume that grammar is imperative to the meaning of texts will use interpretive strategies, such as structuralism, that look for patterns of meaning within grammar that they can relate back to feminism. Through an exploration of feminist and gender studies lenses in connection with Fish’s theories on the predetermined nature of interpretation, we can explore how critics interpret feminism and gender studies in connection with *Tender Buttons* (both the goals of such criticism and its terminology), what underlying assumptions critics reveal about gender and sexuality through their analysis, and how the discourse on feminism and gender studies in connection with *Tender Buttons* shifts depending on interpretive strategies and interpretive screens.

### III.2.a: Intentionalism and Biography Focus

Stein's identity (her psychology, her biography, her intentions, etc.) is noticeably present within Wight's, Goodspeed-Chadwick's, and Ruddick's scholarship. Intentionalism, a strategy that is associated with the Bowers-Tanselle school of thought, perceives authors' intentions for their works as critical to forming "correct" interpretations. Intentionalist strategies involve researching the biographies of authors, examining documents relating to authors' works, and using statements from the authors themselves about what they intended for their writing. Although intentionalism often involves biography, the two strategies (intentionalism and biographical focus) are not interchangeable. Critics sometimes rely on biography to reinforce their claims about what influenced an author without connecting it to specific intentions. Intentionalism is used frequently in Stein scholarship that uses feminist and gender studies, Cubist, and language lenses. The majority of critics seem to agree that Stein was trying to do something by writing *Tender Buttons*. Critics of the various lenses come to different conclusions about what that something might be (to subvert patriarchy, to call attention to the manipulation of language, etc.) but they all posit that Stein had specific goals for her text. Biographical dependence is most common in *Tender Buttons* scholarship that uses feminist and gender studies lenses, but it is also used in Cubist interpretations. As much of feminism and gender studies focuses on gender and sexuality, in addition to the fact that Stein was very likely a queer woman, most scholarship that stems from these lenses draw upon Stein's life (her relationships, her psychology, etc.) to reinforce assertions about how she represents gender and sexuality in her writing.

To varying degrees, Wight's, Ruddick's, and Goodspeed-Chadwick's scholarship suggests that in order to ascertain meaning in *Tender Buttons*, one must understand Stein both as a person and a writer. For Wight, this involves analyzing specific instances in Stein's life and her psychology in connection with *Tender Buttons*. For example, Wight interprets "Colored Hats" to be a reference to Stein and Toklas' trip to Avila, Spain.

Wight notes that Stein and Toklas loved

this part of Spain, which was known for the peculiar colored hats often worn in that region. The hats, worn by women, varied by color depending on the

woman's marital status (virginal, married, widowhood). According to Wight,

"With this in mind, one reads Stein's "Colored Hats" with new understanding, finding in the poem meaningful references to women's married-state

conditions like pregnancy ('broad stomachs') and childbirth ('the least thing is

lightning') and to their virginity-associated conditions like menstruation ('custard hole')" (36).

Here, the basis of Wight's interpretation relies entirely on biographical and contextual

information. Wight's interpretation also draws upon the meanings that she associates with words,

but this is secondary to her reliance on Stein's biography.

The dangers of appealing to the author to this degree include imposing limitations on a text's possible meanings and drawing significant meaning from an unstable or unreliable context.

Wight's interpretation of *Tender Buttons* is certainly plausible, but also quite narrow. Wight

states that, "if one allows that multiple, ambiguous identifications are true, but that behind them

all is invariably the figure of Alice Toklas, everything falls into place, and one can relax and

attend to Stein's experiments in these portraits ["Susie Asado," "Preciocilla," and "A Sweet Tail (Gypsies)"] and in *Tender Buttons*" (38). Though Wight does not posit that her interpretation is

#### COLORED HATS.

Colored hats are necessary to show that curls are worn by an addition of blank spaces, this makes the difference between single lines and broad stomachs, the least thing is lightening, the least thing means a little flower and a big delay a big delay that makes more nurses than little women really little women. So clean is a light that nearly all of it shows pearls and little ways. A large hat is tall and me and all custard whole. (Stein 258)

the *only* plausible one, she suggests that Alice Toklas is essentially the key to unlocking meaning within *Tender Buttons*, thus vastly limiting interpretive possibilities. In addition, Wight's focus on biography ultimately makes for an unstable foundation of her analysis. The crux of her analysis relies on Stein's relationship with Toklas. While there is much evidence to support that there was a romantic relationship between Toklas and Stein, Wight's analysis makes rather extreme claims about Toklas's presence in Stein's works. In fact, much of her analysis amounts to conjecture about Stein's personal experiences with Toklas, and how those experiences influenced Stein's writing. Thus, Wight's focus on biography yields an unreliable context for her interpretation.

Goodspeed-Chadwick herself investigates the role of biography in Stein scholarship, and asserts that it is relevant and necessary to interpreting *Tender Buttons*. She suggests that using Stein's life as an interpretive lens allows readers to find a way into her texts that seem to resist not only interpretation but basic reading strategies (10). In addition, she references Stein's relationship with Alice Toklas as a major influence on her writings on sexuality, and asserts that lesbian identity and relationships are coded obscurely in *Tender Buttons*, likely because Stein was writing "at a time when naming and repeating non heteronormative onomastic details or scenarios could not register successfully or effectively" (11). Goodspeed-Chadwick thus relies on connections between the conditions of Stein's life and her use of language to ground her

assertion that Stein created additional space for naming and identity (10). Goodspeed-Chadwick also draws upon what she perceives to be Stein's intentions for *Tender Buttons*, as demonstrated by her analysis of "A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass." She suggests that Stein uses language in "A Carafe" to "tell us" how she shifts the discourse on female identity and sexuality. For example, Goodspeed-Chadwick suggests that the line "a spectacle and nothing strange" tells us that Stein's prose poetry will defamiliarize, renew, and refashion the ordinary, while the line, "a hurt color" (a bruised, opaque color through which we cannot see) warns us that her aesthetic may not be easy to read or decipher (17). Unlike Wight, Goodspeed-Chadwick does not draw upon specific biographical instances to reinforce her interpretation. Rather, she recognizes that Stein's life experiences in general influenced her work, but primarily draws upon postmodern and feminist theories in her interpretations. Thus, Goodspeed-Chadwick's scholarship does not utilize biography and intention as strongly as Wight's. In other words, despite her assertions that we cannot ignore Stein when interpreting *Tender Buttons*, the foundation of her analysis does not rest on Stein's life. Goodspeed-Chadwick's analysis demonstrates, in my eyes, a more productive use of feminist and gender studies lenses, as it does not center on, and consequently limit, interpretation by focusing narrowly on the author.

A CARAFE, THAT IS  
A BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a  
cousin, a spectacle and  
nothing strange a single  
hurt color and an  
arrangement in a system  
to pointing. All this and  
not ordinary, not  
unordered in not  
resembling. The  
difference is spreading.  
(Stein 245)

Ruddick's uses of intentionalist tactics take a different focus than Wight's or Goodspeed-Chadwick's. She examines Gnosticism in connection with the Bible and Stein's own spirituality. Though Stein did not self-identify as a gnostic, Ruddick believes her feminist thought was influenced by the emerging feminist ideas of a "women's bible." In addition, Ruddick picks up on some biblical allusions in *Tender Buttons*. Ruddick explains that Gnosticism was a historical

movement (which originated in the first and second century CE, but resurged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century) associated with a repudiation of matter, but it is also a movement which has much to do with Stein's intellectual turns in *Tender Buttons* (229). Ruddick describes Stein as a "gnostic reader, who unlocks within the master text of Western culture [the Bible] a buried, alternative truth. At the same time, she is a gnostic writer, who half hides her own subversive thinking, yet in such a way that readers who devote themselves to her text can learn to follow her" (9). According to Ruddick, Stein thinks of the Bible as distorting but secretly containing the truth; readers who are party to the secret know how to read it subversively to get back its spiritual meaning (230). Ruddick suggests that Stein's reading of the Bible, "rereads a received message, seeing that it conceals but contains a saving wisdom. The phallus contains a mother, if we know how to get her back from the symbol" (230). Ruddick diagnoses feminist Gnosticism in *Tender Buttons*, and connects it to the gnostic lens through which Stein reads the Bible. Ruddick asserts that, "Just as Stein spies secrets buried in the patriarchal texts, she buries her own anti-patriarchal secrets in a text just pliant enough to invite us to try to retrieve her meanings. And since each reader of this polysemous text will recover different meanings, each interpretation amounts to a creative and individual act, a revision" (230). Ruddick's assertions suggest that she relies on the assumption that Stein had certain goals, or intentions, for *Tender Buttons*. These goals were not so much about a specific meaning that she wanted readers to uncover in the text but rather involved readers engaging with the text in such a way that they are able to create and revise meaning. Ruddick's scholarship involves both a biographical focus and intentionalism to some degree. She addresses what influenced Stein's own spirituality as well as the hidden messages that Stein intended readers to find in her work. Her use of intentionalism suggests that Stein was doing something purposefully

with *Tender Buttons*. Specifically, she contends that Stein buried messages about patriarchy and androcentrism in her work. She does not, however, go as far as Wight. While Wight's analysis relies almost entirely on biography, Ruddick addresses aspects of Stein's life (such as her knowledge and interest in a "women's bible") in addition to acknowledging the multiplicity of meaning in *Tender Buttons*.

Ruddick's use of Gnosticism and her statements about *Tender Buttons* reveal some contradictions (which she acknowledges) between her poststructuralist leanings (i.e. her emphasis on polysemous meaning) and the structuralist inclinations of Gnosticism. However, Ruddick contends that a text can be polysemous and still have themes or patterns of meaning, and although Stein opens up what is sometimes called *jouissance*, or the play of the signifier, the fact that a person's language is polysemous does not mean that the person cannot at the same time be thinking "about" various things, in ways that can be traced and interpreted (8). In other words, Ruddick suggests that Stein, though she created *Tender Buttons* with the intention of having readers come away with various meanings, still embedded the text with her own insights on spirituality and feminism. This contradiction reflects the conflict that exists between postmodern criticism and feminist criticism, which I explore more in the chapter's conclusion.

### **III.2.b: Structuralism**

Wight, in addition to her dependence on biography, uses structuralist tactics that focus on the physical structure of the pieces in *Tender Buttons*, as well as elements of grammar and word choice in order to uncover messages about women as aesthetic objects, lesbian desire, and femininity. Structuralism relates texts to larger structures, which can include genres, narrative structures, motifs, or patterns. Structuralist criticism generally operates under the assumption that texts have hidden meaning that can be uncovered through looking for themes and patterns.

Structuralist criticism of *Tender Buttons* appears in various forms based on which interpretive lens it is being used with. Cubist lenses often use structuralism to describe *Tender Buttons* as a Cubist text. Language lenses often use structuralist tactics that focus on patterns concerning grammar and style. Feminist and gender studies lenses focus on the physical structuring of the pieces of *Tender Buttons*, as well as patterns relating to grammar and word choice. An example of this is Wight's break-down of the piece, "A Petticoat." First, Wight compares the structure of the piece to a Japanese haiku, noting that, like haiku, "A Petticoat" uses the juxtaposition of ideas and the connotations of words to create the message, rather than cause and effect logic (34-35). While the piece at first appears to be a description of a petticoat, upon further examination the reader questions the presence of the "ink spot" that soils the purity of the white garment. Wight suggests that the ink spot could imply a woman's soiled virtue, or indicate that the profession of writing damages a woman's femininity. Whatever the inkspot means, Wight contends that, "The poem insists that some disgrace is involved in petticoats, or at least in one of these items. There is clearly what one almost always has in Stein: a riddle, a mystery--even an implied narrative" (35). Structuralist criticism relies on the existence of codes and patterns within the language of a text. Through Wight's analysis of "A Petticoat," we can see her making connections between symbols and what those symbols signify. For example, Wight frequently mentioned the color white in her analysis, and links this color to the notion of purity. Wight's structuralist interpretive strategies lead her to come to conclusions about the "riddles and mysteries" that lie beneath the surface of the poems. For Wight, these riddles and mysteries are always connected to not only Stein's notions and experiences of gender and sexuality, but specifically to Stein's relationship with

A PETTICOAT.

A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm. (Stein 256)

Alice Toklas. These conclusions, while plausible, ultimately limit the possibilities of interpretation for *Tender Buttons*.

Thinking about interpretive strategies of structuralism through Fish's work allows us to see how Stein critics understand her work. Structuralism relates texts to larger structures, which can include genres, narrative structures, motifs, or patterns. Critics that use structuralist tactics generally operate under the assumption that texts have hidden meaning that can be uncovered through looking for themes and patterns. Structuralist criticism of *Tender Buttons* appears in various forms based on which interpretive lens it is being used with. Cubist lenses often use structuralism to describe *Tender Buttons* as a Cubist text. Language lenses often use structuralist tactics that focus on patterns concerning grammar and style. Feminist and gender studies lenses focus on the physical structuring of the pieces of *Tender Buttons*, as well as patterns relating to grammar and word choice. It is useful to consider that structuralism appears as an interpretative strategy in scholarship of all lenses. This phenomenon begs the question of why and how structuralism is used so frequently in *Tender Buttons* scholarship. The answer is multilayered, as critics ascertain different meanings from structuralism depending on their interpretive lens, terministic screens, and theoretical assumptions. However, one commonality that structuralist criticism shares across the board is critics' tendency to connect structure and intent. In other words, critics either analyze the structure of *Tender Buttons* to make assertions about Stein's intended meaning, or suggest that Stein deliberately manipulates structure in order to "force" readers to see what she wants them to see. Considering critics' tendency to assign authority to Stein in light of Fish's theories is especially useful, as it reveals how constructed interpretation truly is. Fish asserts that intention and understanding are two ends of a conventional act, each of which necessarily stipulates the other (476). In addition, he points out that words like

"encourage" and "disallow" imply agents, and it is only "natural" to assign agency first to an author's intentions and then to the forms that assumedly embody them (477). However, rather than an author's intentions or the forms that they use in a text forming interpretation, interpretation creates intention and its formal realization by creating the conditions in which it becomes possible to pick them out (477). Wight's use of a feminist and gender studies lens pushes her to pick up on forms and patterns relating the physical structuring and grammar of *Tender Buttons* in order to make explicit connections with Stein's sexuality and personal relationships. Wight looks for patterns and symbols within *Tender Buttons* that relate to gender issues and sexuality, and consequently finds them, thus predetermining the outcome of her interpretation.

### **III.2.c: Postmodernism**

Postmodernism rejects the notion of capital-T truth, and asserts that unified truth does not exist. Postmodern criticism often challenges frameworks and systems that attempt to articulate meaning or truth, and points out the multiplicity of meaning in texts. Additionally, postmodern critics are often concerned with how dominating power structures create and maintain structures to enforce hierarchy. In literary criticism, postmodern strategies generally reject the ultimate authority of the author, and instead investigate the author's and the reader's role in meaning-making. Postmodern elements exist, in varying degrees, in *Tender Buttons* scholarship that uses language lenses, Cubist lenses, and feminist and gender studies lenses. Language lenses use postmodern strategies to argue against the notion of a single, correct meaning to *Tender Buttons*. Language lenses also point to how *Tender Buttons* subverts perceptual habits that have been embedded in readers by dominating power structures. Cubist lenses lean more towards structuralist criticism, but more recent Cubist scholarship (Kley 2004) acknowledges the role that

the reader plays in meaning-making. As I will explore in this section, feminist and gender studies scholars offer an interesting utilization of postmodern strategies. While feminist and gender studies scholarship often does emphasize Stein, it also rejects the notion of singular meaning, and is very much concerned with how power structures, such as patriarchy, marginalize women through language.

Goodspeed-Chadwick uses postmodern strategies in her interpretations, specifically the theories of French feminist writer, philosopher, literary critic and rhetorician, H  l  ne Cixous. She connects pieces in *Tender Buttons* to Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa." According to Goodspeed-Chadwick, Stein's "Milk" demonstrates the theme of language as a tool used for the empowerment of female identity by thwarting patriarchal ways of structuring, reading, and understanding texts (18). Goodspeed-Chadwick contends that "Milk" anticipates Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" wherein Cixous argues that women's writing or "  criture f  minine" can never be pinned down. Similarly, "Milk," "takes into consideration the experience of reading and advocates an open-ended interpretative writing style that links writing with female bodies (Stein's own and that of a mother cow)" (18). Goodspeed-Chadwick contends that the title "Milk" anticipates Cixous' notion of "white ink," which encompasses motherhood, sisterhood, multiplicity, sexual desire, love, the semiotic, and the female body (18-19). Through the notion of "white ink," Cixous urges women to write in their own language about their lives. Stein, Goodspeed-Chadwick contends, urges the same thing in "Milk." She analyzes several phrases in the poem: "Utter" suggests the 'udder' of a cow, milk, and female bodies, and 'needles' point to writing instruments, such as a pen, or directional tools, such as a compass. Both the pen and the compass are synecdoches, for writing and for (metaphorical) navigation, and both are tied directly to

MILK.

Climb up in sight climb in the whole utter needles and a guess a whole guess is hanging. Hanging hanging. (Stein 277)

female bodies and female writing” (19). Cixous has shaped much of postmodernist feminist theory. Goodspeed-Chadwick draws upon Cixous’ postmodern theories about language and meaning, specifically that meaning is not fixed but is something that is navigated. Her analysis of “Milk” is influenced by Cixous’ feminist ideas that women need to write in their own language to articulate their experiences. Goodspeed-Chadwick sees in “Milk” a feminist message that women cannot articulate their experiences through patriarchal writing styles. Thus, in order to empower themselves, women must subvert patriarchal writing. Goodspeed-Chadwick’s use of Cixous in connection with her assertions about “Milk” suggest that *Tender Buttons* exemplifies the sort of subversive writing that frees itself from patriarchal oppression.

Ruddick is influenced by postmodern theories relating to the multiplicity of meaning in order to interpret *Tender Buttons*. She posits that Stein reflects on her experimentation with language with the piece, “A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass.” The piece, according to Ruddick, is both an exercise in and a reflection on semantic decentering, fading in and out of discursive meaning.

Ruddick suggests that “A Carafe” is less of an anticipation of the poststructuralist idea of indeterminacy than it is reflective of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theories on language and meaning.

Wittgenstein, a philosopher concerned with logic and philosophies of mathematics, the mind, and language, argues that meaning, even if not in a one-to-one relationship to the sign, is not entirely unanchored. Wittgenstein asserts that words can have multiple meanings, but these bear a “family likeness” to each other. Moreover, he asserts that one should break the traditional habit of looking for a single core in which the meanings of words are located, and instead examine how words are used in overlapping ways. Stein, Ruddick contends, demonstrates

A CARAFE, THAT IS A  
BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a  
spectacle and nothing strange  
a single hurt color and an  
arrangement in a system to  
pointing. All this and not  
ordinary, not unordered in not  
resembling. The difference is  
spreading. (Stein 245)

these “resembling” meanings in “A Carafe.” For example, the word, “glass” could mean optical instrument or drinking vessel; yet because both meanings follow from the physical properties of glass, a connection exists (197). Wittgenstein’s influence on Ruddick is made clear by her conclusion that, “The very quality of language as familial--as a matter of likeness or loose kinship--causes uncentering...[the line] ‘The difference is spreading’ is not a post-structuralist *différance* so much as a kind of wobble in meaning that subtly (yet not indefinitely) diffuses itself” (197). Although Wittgenstein is not a postmodernist, postmodern theorists often draw upon his work. Postmodern theory rejects the notion of secret, singular meaning, and seeks to break interpretive habits of looking for such meaning in language. Similarly, Wittgenstein rejects the notion of defining words based on specific conditions. Ruddick’s postmodern interpretation of *Tender Buttons* is influenced by philosophies that pre-date but inform postmodernism. Thus, Ruddick’s use of postmodern strategies is difficult to categorize, as she is drawing upon Wittgenstein’s theories that influence and are influenced by a broad range of concepts. For example, Ruddick’s postmodern criticism draws upon Wittgenstein’s idea of familial ties between words, a somewhat structuralist idea. Postmodernism and structuralism are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as postmodernism builds off of structuralism. Unlike other critics I have explored in my thesis, Ruddick’s scholarship embraces, rather than rejects, this influence.

### **III.3: Conclusion**

Thus far, I have examined the terministic screens and the interpretive strategies utilized by feminist and gender studies critics to make sense of *Tender Buttons*. The terministic screens of gender studies and feminism (psychoanalytic and theological) are utilized in combination with interpretive strategies involving structuralism, intentionalism, biography dependence, and postmodernism. Wight’s scholarship, which uses a gender studies screen, heavily relies on

biographical and contextual evidence to reinforce assertions about Stein's gender and sexuality. Gender studies lenses typically utilize such interpretive strategies, as gender studies focuses on the repressed experiences of individuals in order to uncover hidden meaning. The feminist scholarship that I have examined branches out in several directions. Ruddick uses a combination of theological and psychoanalytic feminist screens with postmodern interpretive strategies that involve reviewing the multiple meanings of words. The combination of these screens and strategies lead Ruddick to assertions about how the ambiguity of *Tender Buttons* challenges the mode of signification associated with the father because ambiguous and difficult texts defy the notion of monologic meaning. Goodspeed-Chadwick primarily uses Cixous' postmodern theories about language and meaning in connection with a feminist screen. She specifically draws upon Cixous' assertion that meaning is not fixed but is something that is navigated. In addition, Goodspeed-Chadwick draws upon Cixous' feminist ideas that women need to write in their own language to articulate their experiences. Goodspeed-Chadwick's use of feminist terminologies from theorists such as Cixous is typical of feminist screens. One of the main contentions of feminist theory is that women have always been oppressed by patriarchal language; women cannot write themselves out of patriarchy using such language. In order to overcome oppression, women must reject the "language of the father" in favor of a new women's language. As I have explored, a wide array of terminologies and interpretive tactics have been used to unpack the text, leading to different conclusions that range from how Stein projected her own sexuality in the text to how she reshaped the discourse surrounding femininity and the domestic sphere. Some of this scholarship relies heavily on biography, while others rely more on psychoanalysis and postmodernism to reinforce their assertions. In the following section, I explore a

contradiction that arises in the feminist and gender studies scholarship (particularly Goodspeed-Chadwick's and Ruddick's): the question of the relevance of the author in feminist criticism.

As feminist movements have evolved over the decades, so has feminist scholarship. Critics' use of feminist and gender studies theories are particularly interesting in that they demonstrate how scholars analyze concepts of patriarchy, gender, sexuality, femininity, etc. differently to ascertain meaning from her work. What feminist and gender studies scholarship also brings into question is the role of the author in feminist literary criticism, and why there may be something to be said for including some emphasis on the author in feminist interpretations, even when the dominating interpretive strategies for the last few decades have been and continue to be postmodern. It is interesting to note that despite the fact that Wight's, Ruddick's, and Goodspeed-Chadwick's scholarship are produced between 1986 and 2014, and the different ways that they utilize feminist theories, one aspect of their feminist literary criticism remains consistent: the heavy reliance on biography and intention. One would expect that as scholarship progressed, the postmodern tactic of focusing on the reader rather than the author would become more prevalent. However, Stein remains solidly present in the scholarship about her work, even in recent scholarship. Considering Stein's presence within Wight's, Ruddick's, and Goodspeed-Chadwick's scholarship reveals an interesting perspective on the disagreement in feminist interpretive communities: What is the role of the author in feminist literary criticism? Should female authors be subjected to the same treatment as male authors in postmodern literary criticism? Some argue for preserving author-function not only in terms of reception theory, but also in terms of a politics of author recognition.<sup>10</sup> Although postmodern feminist critics defy the ultimate authority of the author, and emphasize the subjectivity of texts, the author has never

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<sup>10</sup> See Cheryl Walker's "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author" (1990) for further explanation

quite disappeared from their criticism. However, a few feminist critics have attempted to use Barthes' extreme postmodern theories, completely eliminating the author from consideration when interpreting texts written by women.<sup>11</sup> This approach to feminist criticism is often criticized, as erasing women as the author of their works in favor of indeterminacy is an act of oppression. We cannot ignore the identity or the experience of female authors; to do so would be to minimize their struggle to become recognized as a legitimate part of literary tradition. It would be a major oversight for any literary thinker, even a strict postmodernist, to read Gertrude Stein (or any other female author) without considering her life at all. To do so would be to dismiss the great struggles that women writers went through in order to break into literary tradition. Literary criticism has gone through a critical shift, one that in many ways retains postmodern tactics concerning interpretation, but acknowledges that original postmodern theories apply to certain populations more than others. However, there has never been a total reconciliation between the contradictions that exist between postmodernism and feminist literary criticism. Contradictions between postmodern literary criticism and feminist literary criticism will mostly likely always exist, and Stein is an illuminating example of these contradictions, particularly when using feminist and gender studies lenses.

There is a noteworthy outlier in the scholarship that I have examined about *Tender Buttons*. Almost all of the scholarship that I have studied in these chapters are from women-- with the exception of Edward Michael Kaufmann (1989). Interestingly, the vast majority of the women critics mentioned or acknowledged Stein's sexuality and/or resistance against patriarchy, no matter the lens, screens, or strategies they used. Kaufmann, however, focuses only on the

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<sup>11</sup> Cheryl Walker criticizes feminist critic Toril Moi's dismissal of biographical information about female authors as irrelevant to feminist literary criticism. See "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author" (1990) for further explanation

subversion of language and how culture is used to distort language by those in power to distort reality. This is thought-provoking, as Kaufmann does not shy away from appealing to Stein to interpret *Tender Buttons*. In fact, he strongly asserts throughout his scholarship that Stein had specific intentions for *Tender Buttons* to, "...subvert the non-sense that language, after its centuries of encasement in print, has become. Language, Stein shows, is no longer an instrument of perception but has become an instrument of culture that obscures perception" (Kaufmann 448). He briefly mentions that "Glazed Glitter" has sexual overtones, but there is no further mentioning of sexuality, gender, or patriarchy. While other critics who appeal to Stein at least acknowledge Stein's feminist inclinations about sexuality or patriarchy, Kaufmann's scholarship suggests that while he values intention as important to interpretation, he does not consider biography to be as relevant. His analysis points to the very limitation mentioned above of using extreme postmodernism in connection with works by female authors. DeKoven and Murphy focus on the language of *Tender Buttons* just as much as Kaufmann, yet they provide a more comprehensive analysis because they acknowledge an aspect of Stein's life that could have impacted her writing. In view of this, I argue that their analyses are ultimately stronger. The challenge lies in finding an adequate balance of biographical factors in connection with postmodern strategies. Ultimately, the relationship between the reader and the author, particularly authors such as Stein, must be reexamined. What this reexamination would entail is another project in itself; however, in short, postmodernism must be redefined so that women writers are not trivialized by literary analysis strategies tailored to men's writing. Stein is a unique author, and to ignore her life completely would belittle her marginalization as a woman, a queer person, and an experimental writer at a time when all of these categorizations worked against authors.

## Chapter IV: Language

### IV.1: Introduction

Many avenues have been explored in order to make sense of *Tender Buttons*. Thus far, I have explored the lenses and sub-lenses of Cubism, feminism and gender studies, and the theoretical presuppositions and terministic screens utilized in critics' interpretive strategies. This chapter will focus on what is perhaps *Tender Buttons*' most defining feature: language. The language of *Tender Buttons* is considered to a certain degree in all approaches to the text, yet critics often use it as a supporting tool for their larger claims about Cubist intentions, feminist leanings, etc. The scholarship that I examine here uses the language of the text as the foundation of assertions about how Stein uses, or subverts the uses, of language. I explore how critics understand *Tender Buttons*' use of certain elements of language such as grammar and sentence structure in order to make sense of its disregard for conventional, orderly articulation of meaning. Understanding how and to what end critics focus on language not only reveals the presuppositions and terminologies that critics use to arrive at meaning, but also illuminates how texts such as *Tender Buttons* can be used to understand how language is manipulated by power structures, how meaning is ascertained from language, and how language altars perceptions of reality. Marianne DeKoven (1981) explores how Stein's writing differs from Cubist art in how effectively it subverts patriarchal and logocentric thought and writing. Edward Michael Kaufmann (1989) also focuses on the subversiveness of Stein's language use, asserting that Stein's true purpose for *Tender Buttons* was to subvert the non-sense that language has become since its encasement in print. Marguerite S. Murphy (1992) concentrates on the subversive way that Stein articulates meaning to readers in order to talk about feminine prose and subjects with a feminist angle. All of these scholars emphasize the subversiveness of *Tender Buttons* through its language, yet approach their claims from different angles. In addition to looking at how critics

use language lenses to make sense of *Tender Buttons*, I also examine how critics interpret Stein's use of a language lens. Overall, *Tender Buttons* scholarship that utilizes language lenses attempts to demonstrate that, unlike other Modernist writers, Stein does not convey meaning in a traditional sense, but forces readers to examine how language constructs what we know about meaning. Examining language lenses in connection with Stein is particularly interesting, as Stein is a marginalized figure in the Modernist literary era. The use of language from her contemporaries, such as Eliot, Pound, and Joyce, is much more in the spotlight of past and present literary scholarship. Thus, exploring how Stein uses language lenses situates her as a valuable experimenter of language of Modernist period.

#### **IV.2: What are “Language Lenses?”**

What I mean by “language lenses” is the terminology, concepts, and interpretive strategies used by critics that primarily focus on certain aspects of texts' language. These lenses rely on theoretical premises about how we understand the meanings of words, how language is used by power structures to oppress marginalized groups, and what “meaning” is in the first place. Language lenses in particular relate to Burke's<sup>12</sup> theories of terministic screens. While “language lenses” is a broad term that I use to describe the terms, concepts, and interpretive strategies used to interpret *Tender Buttons*, I use the concept of terministic screens to highlight terminology of specific linguistic theories and theorists. In other words, if language lenses are what critics use to focus on linguistic aspects of *Tender Buttons*, terministic screens are demonstrated through the terms and theories through which critics make sense of what they see in the language of the text. In addition, “language lenses” work through what Fish calls

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<sup>12</sup> Throughout this chapter, there is repeated information from the previous chapter about Burke's and Fish's theories. This repeated information is geared towards readers only turning to one chapter, rather than reading the entire thesis.

“interpretive strategies.” While language lenses provide a focus to scholarship, and terministic screens provide a filter through which critics select the terms and theories of this focus, interpretive strategies are what critics use to understand the terms and theories in connection with the text. Language lenses, terministic screens, and interpretive strategies work together to influence the outcome of interpretation. As I will explore in this chapter, interpretation is largely predetermined in that lenses, terministic screens, and interpretive strategies encourage critics to find what they are looking for.

As in the previous chapters, I will be applying Fish’s literary theories on interpretation in combination with Burke’s rhetorical theories on perception and reality to Stein scholarship. These theories are useful to consider in connection to language lenses because they encourage exploration of how critics such as DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy understand the unconventional use of language in *Tender Buttons* through their theoretical assumptions about textual features and through the terministic screens of interpretive trends. “Theoretical assumptions” are the interpretive habits and expectations described by Fish that literary theorists inevitably use when engaging in the act of interpretation. “Terministic screens,” a term developed by Burke, are filters that are composed of terms through which people perceive and understand the world; they shape what we perceive to be observations of reality. As Burke notes, terministic screens shape our perspective of reality through reflective, selective, and deflective habits. They are reflective of our reality in that they select (or direct our attention to) certain details and deflect our attention away from others. Ultimately, through examining the scholarship about *Tender Buttons* surrounding language and meaning in connection with these theories, we can explore how people ascertain meaning from language, how culture is used to assign meaning and values to words, and how certain forms of prose can subvert the habits that

culture has impressed upon language. As I explore later in the chapter, examining language-centered scholarship also points to the value of *Tender Buttons* as a means for understanding theories and perceptions of language. While we analyze various aspects of language to understand *Tender Buttons*, we can also use *Tender Buttons* to understand language.

The language-lens scholarship that I explore uses language that reveals terministic screens of feminism and postmodernism, and engages interpretive strategies involving deconstruction, structuralism, and intentionalism. Critics utilizing language lenses draw upon the terminologies and linguistic theories of philosophers and literary thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Noam Chomsky. The concept of “language lenses” relates interestingly to Burke’s “terministic screens.” Burke’s screens focus on how the terminology of different disciplines is utilized in order to interpret our realities. The language lenses that I describe explore the various terminologies that critics use to form interpretations of texts. An understanding of these critics’ theories and the terminology that they use is necessary to explore their relevance in DeKoven’s, Kaufmann’s, and Murphy’s scholarship.

DeKoven’s analysis draws upon the terms “lexical meaning,” “signs,” and “signification” to support her argument that words are a more subversive medium than painting. Because words have lexical meaning, or meanings that can be considered in isolation from the sentence containing it and regardless of grammatical context, they can subvert patriarchal and logocentric hierarchies in ways that painted shapes cannot. Much of DeKoven’s and Murphy’s *Tender Buttons* scholarship seeks to show how the text overthrows the conventions of patriarchal writing, the male-dominated writing which explicitly and implicitly oppresses and reduces females to marginalized roles, in order to reposition discourse about feminine subjects. DeKoven and Murphy also draw upon the Derrida’s condemnations of logocentric writing, which regards

words and language as a fundamental expression of an external reality. Logocentric writing represses what Derrida calls, “pluridimensionality,” which Stein’s experimental writing embodies. DeKoven uses these theories of Derrida to assert that Stein’s *Tender Buttons* challenges logocentric hegemony and allows readers to realize a possible cultural order beyond it.

DeKoven also draws upon Kristeva’s theories on symbolic and pre-symbolic language. Kristeva’s theories reinforce DeKoven’s assertions that Stein rejects conventional writing forms in favor of a style that enables readers to break free of their status as a subject. She draws upon Barthes’ theories on “readerly” and “writerly” texts but agrees more with Kristeva’s feminist take on *jouissance*. She is influenced by Kristeva’s theories about the *jouissance* of women’s language that is repressed by patriarchy and uses these theories to assert that *Tender Buttons* is a text embodies the language of the “female other” in order to reject patriarchal writing forms.

As with the two previously studied lenses, language lenses go in different directions and focus on different aspects based on what terministic screens and interpretive strategies critics use. Some, like DeKoven regard the language of *Tender Buttons* as a tool to subvert patriarchal and logocentric culture, and analyze the text through structuralist interpretive strategies, with a focus on grammar. Other critics, like Kaufmann, use a form of the language lens to assert that the language of *Tender Buttons* is Stein’s way of showing readers what language has become since it appeared in print, using intentionalist and structuralist strategies. Finally, a language lens is used by Murphy to show how *Tender Buttons*, through its writing style and subject matter, exemplifies the inherently subversive genre of prose poetry. This angle of the language lens argues that prose poetry undermines prosaic conventions in order to validate itself as authentically “other,” yet it must also, to some degree, suggest a traditional prose genre in order

to subvert it successfully. Thus, prose poetry continually brings traditional and new concepts together into conflict. This direction emphasizes grammar, structure, and to some extent intentionalism. The various angles of language lenses demonstrate that language, and therefore meaning that we gain from language, is subject to manipulation by dominating power structures. It is impossible to have language free of any manipulation; however, as DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy show, it is possible to have an awareness of manipulation. The critics form interpretations of *Tender Buttons* that articulate how the text is not only an interesting text to examine for its content, but also a lens through which to view how language and meaning are manipulated.

### **IV.3: Scholarship**

Scholarship covering the language of *Tender Buttons* is extensive and complex. As such, the scholarship section of this chapter is meant to provide an overview of scholars' points of view, as well as the terminologies and theories that they utilize in their interpretation. Each scholar represents an interesting facet of a language lens. DeKoven's scholarship is often drawn upon by other scholars focusing on the language of *Tender Buttons*, as it is an interesting blend of feminism and post-structuralism. Kaufmann's scholarship is interesting to explore for its postmodern leanings, as well as its distinct lack of any feminist theory (which I explore at the end of Chapter III). Murphy's scholarship is valuable to examine in that it explores how a particular genre (prose poetry) can be used to subvert traditional discourse on women. DeKoven's, Kaufmann's, and Murphy's scholarship arrive at various conclusions about the language of *Tender Buttons*, yet there are overlaps in the screens and interpretive strategies that they use. Exploring where their scholarship overlaps and diverges from one another lends

additional perspective to the question of how and why critics focus on the language of *Tender Buttons*.

DeKoven's analysis of *Tender Buttons* challenges the tendency among Stein scholars to regard the text as "literary cubism," in addition to making assertions about how the incoherence of *Tender Buttons* subverts patriarchal and logocentric culture. DeKoven argues that writing is a more subversive medium than painting because meaning in language can work outside of patriarchal and logocentric spheres in ways that painting cannot. DeKoven examines the way that language is used in *Tender Buttons*, drawing upon Chomsky's "degrees of grammaticality" to analyze how Stein uses and subverts the uses of grammar in order to convey meaning in a way that strays from conventional logocentric methods. In addition, DeKoven analyzes the structure of the text through Derrida's theories on pluridimensionality and criticism of logocentrism to assert that *Tender Buttons* (and texts like it) points toward a cultural order beyond logocentrism because it rejects the coherent, referential meaning that readers expect. She goes further to emphasize the feminist aspects of *Tender Buttons* through Kristeva's feminist theories on symbolic and pre-symbolic language to explore how meaning is conveyed in patriarchal and logocentric writing, and how the language of *Tender Buttons* subverts these forms of writing in order to talk about feminine subjects (or what are perceived to be feminine subjects) in a manner that validates and values them. Through her distinctions between Cubist art and language, DeKoven demonstrates her tendency to focus on how readers gather meaning from texts through elements of grammar, lexical meaning, and signs and signification. As I will explore in the following sections, these concerns reinforce DeKoven's argument that words are ultimately a more subversive tool than painting.

Kaufmann's scholarship responds to the many critics that form connections between Cubism and *Tender Buttons*, but does not share DeKoven's feminist approach or conclusions. He argues that although Cubist art influenced Stein's writing, the real focus of *Tender Buttons* is the subversion of non-sense that language has become. Kaufmann argues that the supposedly clear connections between Cubism and *Tender Buttons* are largely superficial, and asserts that Stein "wants not to create non-sense, but to subvert the non-sense that language, after its centuries of encasement in print, has become. Language, Stein shows, is no longer an instrument of perception but has become an instrument of culture that obscures perception" (448). What Kaufmann means by his description of language being "encased in print" is the moment in the eighteenth century when the printing press made the printed word widely available. Kaufmann's analysis suggests that it was Stein's belief that language "lost something" through its mass production. The habits of language and perception were no longer recognizable to readers, and words had lost their unique value. According to Kaufmann, Stein realized that in language, the medium was often used as a mediator, erased by the message it carries, while the language itself remains unseen. Kaufmann goes on to explain that, through *Tender Buttons*, Stein examines the conceptual and physical processes of language in order to make language visible and to make apparent the role it has in creating reality. Kaufmann asserts that, like Roland Barthes, Stein knew that culture creates a language that writes and means automatically (448). If one pairs any two words together, they are automatically intelligible. Kaufmann argues that the concept of a language that always means was preposterous to Stein. If it is true that language always means, writers do not choose words, the words choose them. Stein, "does not want intelligibility; she wants signification. Rather than ignoring the intractability of language as an artistic material, as some of her critics charge, Stein makes the intractability of language -its habits- the focus of

*Tender Buttons*” (Kaufmann 448). According to Kaufmann, Stein’s aim was to create a completely visible language, and restore language to how it was before the eighteenth century and the advent of modern print. According to Kaufmann, Stein shows that language is no longer an instrument of perception but has become an instrument of culture that obscures perception (448). Kaufmann explains Stein’s perception that words, by the nineteenth century, had lost much of their variety, and her desire to recapture the value of individual words and their meanings. Through *Tender Buttons*, she forces us to reexamine the way we read by creating a “visible writing” that we cannot look through. Kaufmann’s analysis of *Tender Buttons* focuses on how readers ascertain meaning from language through analyzing the grammar and structure of the text through a postmodern interpretive lens. His scholarship shows that he rejects the notion of a language that claims to mean automatically. As I will explore in the following sections, Kaufmann uses postmodern critical strategies to demonstrate how *Tender Buttons* subverts the “meaningless sense” of printed language to force readers to break habits of gathering meaning that are perpetuated by culture’s use of print.

Murphy, like Kaufmann, explores the ways that language informs culture and vice versa, but her angle focuses on feminism and the domestic sphere. In other words, how has language been used to write about women and how does *Tender Buttons* subvert these tendencies? Murphy explores the subversive potential of the genre of prose poetry in her book, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*. The chapter “Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*: Beyond Description: A New Domestic Language” asserts that *Tender Buttons* demonstrates the subversive potential of the genre of the prose poem. She identifies four areas in which Stein’s prose poems are subversive: the prose genre (description), prose syntax, ordinary meaning in discourse (semantics), and decorum of women’s prose (139). Murphy suggests that

Stein's prose poems do not always make sense, but defamiliarize readers with the English that they are familiar with--playing with meaning. She agrees with DeKoven's argument that interpretation for meaning transgresses the intent and polysemous nature of Stein's language, but asserts that to renounce all readings of *Tender Buttons* is to render Stein silent after one has simply overheard her textual "jouissance" (139). Her exploration of Stein's subversiveness leads to suggestions about how Stein uses language to challenge conventional discourse about domestic labor. Murphy concludes by suggesting that, "Discourse in *Tender Buttons* is dynamic, a gleeful dismantling of authoritative voices and forms of prose, resulting in the experience of language as an event, without the support of a recognizable form or the solace of a mythic key that will direct us to the telos of it all" (166-167). Murphy's scholarship reveals several of her theoretical presuppositions about meaning and language. For example, her assertion about how the unconventional style of Stein's "descriptions" make room for a new form of women's discourse suggests that she rejects conventional, logocentric language as limiting and patriarchal. Furthermore, her disagreement with DeKoven about the value of interpreting texts like *Tender Buttons* suggests a theoretical presupposition that meaning does reside within texts. As I will explore more in depth in the sections that follow, Murphy's scholarship is produced through the terministic screen of feminism, and she uses structuralist assumptions (that meaning lies within texts) in combination with postmodern interpretive tactics that unpack the grammar and structure of *Tender Buttons*.

DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy utilize a language lens in different ways, yet there are notable commonalities. For instance, all three critics are concerned with how certain power structures, such as patriarchy, manipulate how language is used in culture to impart certain realities to readers. In the cases of DeKoven and Murphy, the focus is on how language has been

used in patriarchal and logocentric ways to describe feminine topics, and how *Tender Buttons* subverts these tendencies. Kaufmann's scholarship takes a different approach, and focuses on how *Tender Buttons* subverts the perceptual habits of readers caused by how language is presented in print. In addition, all three critics are concerned with how readers discover meaning in texts and from language in general, and how *Tender Buttons* disrupts this process. In the sections that follow, I will examine the terministic screens through which each critic forms their interpretation, as well as the interpretive strategies they utilize to arrive at their conclusions.

#### **IV.4: Feminist Terministic Screen**

DeKoven's and Murphy's scholarship uses language that reveals a terministic screen of feminism. Both DeKoven and Murphy emphasize Stein's feminist leanings in relation to the subversive aspects of *Tender Buttons*, yet they do so in different ways than the feminist and gender studies scholarship I examined in Chapter Three. Whereas Chapter Three's scholarship relied quite heavily on biography, intention, and psychoanalysis to make assertions about feminism, anti-patriarchal concepts, and lesbianism, DeKoven's and Murphy's scholarship, rather than focusing on Stein's personal life, emphasizes lexical meaning, grammar, and structure of language in order to support their claims. Their analysis relies on an examination of how readers understand language, how readers are involved in the meaning-making process, and how logocentric and patriarchal writing are rejected in *Tender Buttons* to reposition feminine discourse.

DeKoven's analysis of *Tender Buttons* reveals a terministic screen of feminist theories on language. Feminist terministic screens often explore how females identify themselves, and how society structures and reinforces what constitutes "female identity." In addition, feminist screens challenge traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Finally, feminist screens challenge the

roles that have been forced upon women in patriarchal structures. DeKoven connects the feminist aim to subvert the patriarchal norms of language to *Tender Buttons*' subversion of conventional modes of language. DeKoven uses terminology, such as "language of the mother" and "mother's body," that is used by feminist critics to assert the liberating power that language can have once it is freed from the logocentric style that patriarchal writing uses. DeKoven suggests that Stein consciously disrupts logocentric and patriarchal style to the end of creating a text that conveys meaning through a "presymbolic" language of the mother. DeKoven mainly relies on Julia Kristeva's theories to reinforce her assertions about the feminist meanings in *Tender Buttons*. Kristeva is a philosopher, literary critic, psychoanalyst, and feminist, whose theories are vastly influential to how feminism is studied today. Kristeva asserts that it is not enough to dissect the structure of language in order to find its hidden meaning. Her post-structuralist approach asserts that language should also be viewed in light of history and of individual psychic and sexual experiences. Studying language through feminist terministic screens enables marginalized populations to trace the source of their oppression to the language they use. Kristeva represents a unique feminist terministic screen in that she revolutionized the way that critics recognize how language is used to oppress marginalized populations. This terministic screen involves terms that were popularized in Kristeva's writings, such as "pluridimensional jouissance" and "presymbolic language." "Jouissance" disregards literary codes and allows readers to break out of their subject positions (92). Kristeva's "pluridimensional jouissance" is located in experimental texts and draws upon Kristeva's assertion that "The jouissance of the 'polymorphic, orgasmic body, laughing and desiring' is defined and repressed as the female 'other' by patriarchal culture. The rebellion of that repressed other, which releases jouissance, takes place in experimental writing" (92). According to DeKoven,

Kristeva locates this pluridimensional jouissance in the radical or experimental text, but unlike Barthes she does so by connecting it to the early experience of the "mother's body." The jouissance of the "polymorphic, orgasmic body, laughing and desiring" is defined and repressed as the female "other" by patriarchal culture. The rebellion of that repressed other, which releases jouissance, takes place in experimental writing. (92)

DeKoven is influenced by Kristeva's theories about pluridimensional jouissance of women's language that is repressed by patriarchy and uses these theories to assert that *Tender Buttons* is a text embodies the language of the "female other" in order to reject patriarchal writing forms. DeKoven also draws upon Kristeva's theories on symbolic and pre-symbolic language. DeKoven explains that while paternal, symbolic language is sensible, orderly, clear, and dominated by anterior meaning, the presymbolic language of the mother, which experimental writing liberates, absorbs and employs, making nonsense abound within sense (92). Symbolic language is language as we commonly understand it. We are accustomed, as Kristeva has shown, either to forget or to ignore the pre-symbolic state of language we all experience before we become competent and familiarized with symbolic language. According to DeKoven, "Presymbolic language, like experimental writing and in opposition to symbolic language, is characterized by the ascendancy of the signifier: the play of intonation, rhythm, repetition, sound association" (89). *Tender Buttons*, DeKoven contends, exemplifies this sort of presymbolic language; it is a mode through which the subversion of the conventions of language as we know them is accomplished. DeKoven suggests that Stein recognized the forgotten language that Kristeva describes as presymbolic, and consciously forms *Tender Buttons* using this kind of language in order to reject the symbolic language that readers have become accustomed to. In

other words, DeKoven's scholarship suggests that Stein's use of presymbolic language forces readers to recognize or relearn a kind of language that has been forgotten in favor of the symbolic language used by patriarchal and logocentric writing.

The feminist terministic screen that DeKoven uses (which heavily relies on Kristeva's theories) influences her feminist take on *Tender Buttons*. The terminology of her feminist screen enables her to pick up on what she perceives to be presymbolic language in *Tender Buttons*, which subsequently leads her to make assertions about how patriarchal and logocentric writing are rejected in favor of forgotten presymbolic language. What is interesting about DeKoven's feminist screen is that it leads DeKoven to similar conclusions that Kaufmann reaches with his postmodern screen. While DeKoven asserts that *Tender Buttons* allows readers to reject the habits of symbolic language and remember a forgotten "presymbolic language," Kaufmann suggests that the text allows readers to disrupt the perceptual habits that printed language has embedded in readers. Although they use different screens to arrive at their conclusions, both scholars are concerned with how *Tender Buttons* disrupts parts of the reading experience that readers have been accustomed to.

Murphy also views *Tender Buttons* through the terministic screen of feminism. She asserts that, "Stein's "counter-discourse" to the prose of cookbooks, to the prose of guides to housekeeping, fashion, and etiquette, does not renounce or trivialize that world, but uses its authority to value, explain, and stabilize her own domestic sphere" (164). Murphy contends that Stein's style subverts conventional discourse by suggesting more essential, yet censurable meanings for domestic labor (164). According to Murphy, Stein's subversion remakes "description" of an enclosed feminine world into a polysemous discourse of great complexity and makes interesting the realm of interiors, the woman's world, by fastening on its objects and by

weaving its discourse and its intimacies into her elaborate semantic game (165). Murphy's analysis of *Tender Buttons* demonstrates a feminist terministic screen. Feminist discourse addresses marginalized groups and topics in order to break into discourses they were previously barred from, and situate them as valuable and relevant. Murphy's scholarship suggests that Stein is situating "the women's world" in a discourse that subverts conventional feminist prose and talk. Her scholarship follows feminist practices of demonstrating the struggle for women and women's subjects (such as the domestic world described by Murphy) to be examined in a deep, thought-provoking manner. Her use of a feminist terministic screen leads her to notice how Stein rejects patriarchal forms of language (particularly description) and meaning in favor of a language that plays with meaning in a way that gives women's topics a real presence.

#### **IV.5: Postmodern Terministic Screen**

Kaufmann forms his interpretation through the terministic screen of postmodern thought relating to language. At the center of his analysis of *Tender Buttons* is the assertion that Stein was intentionally using language in the text to subvert the manipulative manner in which power structures use culture and words to create the illusion of something that is natural and unproblematic. He uses Barthes's postmodern theories to support his claim that Stein's aim for *Tender Buttons* was to subvert the non-sense that language has become after its centuries of being used in print. Kaufmann's analysis relies on the postmodern idea that language is an instrument of culture that obscures perception. His interpretation also explores print as a distinct medium that changed the way people gather meaning from language. Kaufmann suggests that Stein's aim was to make visible the conventions of print and of the book, and asserts that, "The habits of moveable type and of an object capable of infinite replication, habits which twentieth-century readers can no longer 'see,' are a partial explanation for the paralysis that Stein finds in

language. The problem, like all problems of habit, lies in our ready acquiescence to these conventions” (457). Certainly, culture affects the way that people gather meaning through speech as well, but Stein’s major concern (according to Kaufmann) was how printed language had taken on a “meaningless sense,” that claimed to convey inherent, truthful reality. Kaufmann turns to the piece “Glazed Glitter” to clarify his point. According to Kaufmann, the “Japanese” Stein mentions in the prose piece is jpanning, lacquer. He asserts that, “That is her glazed glitter, another kind of blind glass (glaze derives from the same root as glass). The glaze is the glazed look of a dazed eye. It is not clear, but reflects, hiding any differences beneath” (454). Kaufmann analyzes this piece through the terminology and assumptions of postmodern theory, asserting that culture is a means of covering difference. One of the central tenets of postmodernism is the rejection of reason, which argues that reason, and the attempt to objectify truth, are masks for cultural power. Thus, scholarship that uses the terministic screen of postmodernism will be skeptical of any form of language that claims to articulate undistorted, inherent meaning. Kaufmann demonstrates this skepticism when he examines the “jpanning” of language that Stein describes in “Glazed Glitter.” Any cracks, or differences, are covered by the glitter of smooth jpanning. Kaufmann notes that the smoothness of the surface gives it the appearance of being natural and that, “the apparent clarity is the sinister clarity of habit. Habit washes away any traces of its beginning (“washing is old”), offering itself as the only natural course” (454-455). As Kaufmann focuses on how Stein subverts the so-called naturalness of language and culture, he relates every subversive aspect of

#### GLAZED GLITTER.

Nickel, what is nickel, it is originally rid of a cover.

The change in that is that red weakens an hour. The change has come. There is no search. But there is, there is that hope and that interpretation and sometime, surely any is unwelcome, sometime there is breath and there will be a sinecure and charming very charming is that clean and cleansing. Certainly glittering is handsome and convincing.

There is no gratitude in mercy and in medicine. There can be breakages in Japanese. That is no programme. That is no color chosen. It was chosen yesterday, that showed spitting and perhaps washing and polishing. It certainly showed no obligation and perhaps if borrowing is not natural there is some use in giving. (Stein 245)

*Tender Buttons* back to how Stein creates a visible writing -- one that we cannot look through. He specifically references postmodern theorist Roland Barthes' concern with the "natural" order of language and reality. Kaufmann specifically agrees with Barthes' stance that, "it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality...to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs,' and not 'me'" (Barthes 1323). Language does not mean automatically; meaning is understood through the significance that culture places on words. Kaufmann's analysis of *Tender Buttons* draws upon postmodern views about the inherent instability of words and the idea that culture creates a language that means automatically.

It is interesting to consider how the terministic screens of feminism and postmodernism differ and overlap, and what each screen reflects, selects, and deflects in their attempt to make sense of *Tender Buttons*. Critics like DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy selectively use terministic screens by focusing on, or selecting, what aspect of texts is most fitting with their interpretive strategies. They use these screens to deflect by ignoring aspects of texts that do not match up with their theoretical presuppositions. The feminist and postmodern screens offer unique insights on how *Tender Buttons* can be interpreted, and how readers ascertain meaning from difficult texts. DeKoven's, Kaufmann's, and Murphy's scholarship leans towards a self-referential postmodern lens. Kaufmann's scholarship embodies a postmodern rejection of a language that claims to be undistorted, while DeKoven's and Murphy's scholarship calls attention to the socially-conditioned perceptions of femininity and "feminine subjects" by situating them as products of logocentric and patriarchal discourses. In addition, the critics use reader-response theories when they recognize the reader as an active participant in meaning-making through interpretation. DeKoven's and Murphy's use of the feminist terministic screen is reflective of feminist ideas and goals. Specifically, their scholarship selects aspects of *Tender*

*Buttons* that emphasize its veering away from patriarchal and logocentric writing. Feminist lenses have many strengths—for one, they give *Tender Buttons* a feminist “voice” that it wouldn’t have otherwise had, and for another, they center Stein as a valuable feminist of the Modernist movement. That being said, reading *Tender Buttons* through a feminist lens demonstrates some of the contradictions (which I address more fully in the previous chapter) that arise when feminism and postmodernism are brought together in scholarship. For example, while DeKoven asserts that *Tender Buttons* is a text that resists interpretation, Murphy speculates that there are in fact meanings within the text that can be looked for and found, and that to reject any attempt at interpretation would be to dismiss Stein’s vision for the text.

Kaufmann uses a postmodern terministic screen to understand the language of *Tender Buttons*. Postmodernism rejects the notion of capital-T truth, and asserts that unified truth does not exist. Postmodern screens often challenge frameworks and systems that attempt to articulate meaning or truth, and points out the multiplicity of meaning in texts. Additionally, postmodern screens address how dominating power structures create and maintain structures to enforce hierarchy. Postmodern elements exist, in varying degrees, in *Tender Buttons* scholarship that uses language lenses, Cubist lenses, and feminist and gender studies lenses. Language lenses use postmodern strategies to argue against the notion of a single, correct meaning to *Tender Buttons*. Language lenses also point to how *Tender Buttons* subverts perceptual habits that have been embedded in readers by dominating power structures. Kaufmann’s scholarship embodies a postmodern rejection of a language that claims to be undistorted. He asserts that Stein’s “visible language” forces readers to look beyond the “sense” of ordinary language to arrive at meaning. Kaufmann suggests that Stein’s work warns us of the perceptual habits that have been perpetuated since language’s mass reproduction in print. Language, especially printed language,

is used in culture to create the illusion that words can provide an undistorted, truthful perception of the world. According to Kaufmann, Stein shows us that “the blanks between words are actually filled with ‘no sense [the non-meaning of the 'sensible' nonsense that language has become] that is to say, music, memory, musical memory’ -- the agents of custom that reassemble the habitual meanings in language” (460). Kaufmann’s postmodern screen influences him to select upon the aspects of language in *Tender Buttons* that disrupt the meaningless sense that readers are accustomed to. As I will explore more in-depth further in the chapter, Kaufmann’s use of a postmodern screen utilizes terminology and theories from Barthes, which inform his interpretive strategies.

#### **IV.6: Interpretive Strategies**

I have just explored how various terministic screens are utilized in *Tender Buttons* scholarship; I now turn to examining the interpretive strategies that critics rely on to form their interpretations. Examining DeKoven’s, Kaufmann’s, and Murphy’s scholarship in connection with Fish’s and Burke’s theories reveals several interpretive strategies and assumptions that were used in the formation of their interpretations. These interpretive strategies include tendencies of structuralism and post-structuralism, which focus on structure and grammar. The interpretive strategies used by DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy all attempt to get at the “meaning” of *Tender Buttons*. The term “meaning” in connection with texts is impossible to concretely define, as all critics gather meaning differently based on the terministic screens of their disciplines and the interpretive strategies that they were taught to use. Understanding how critics are looking at language in texts reveals what they consider “meaning” to be and what aspects of a text they think they need to focus on in order to arrive at it. With an understanding of how these critics use a language lens, we can better understand how critics use different elements of language (such as

grammar and structure) in order to ascertain meaning from texts. In other words, how are critics analyzing, reorganizing, and examining language to find meaning, or uncover what they perceive to be “hidden” meaning? Understanding this enables us to realize how criticism based on language has changed over the decades, and allows us to posit where language-centered scholarship is going in the future. The following sections center on the interpretive strategies and theoretical presuppositions that DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy use to form their interpretation. First, I address how the critics use the structure of *Tender Buttons*, (the broader physical structuring of the text (how the chapters are divided, how the words appear on the page, etc.) as well as the structuring of sentences) to show how Stein plays with perception in order to force readers to perceive meaning in a new way. What follows is a discussion of how the critics understand Stein’s use of grammar (how parts of the sentence are used and the organizational sense that they make) to show how it subverts typical logocentric and patriarchal writing as well as how it defies the “meaningless sense” that culture has imposed upon language.

#### **IV.6.a: Structure**

DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy use structuralist interpretive tactics to make sense of *Tender Buttons*. Structuralism relates texts to larger structures, which can include genres, narrative structures, motifs, or patterns. Structuralism criticism generally operates under the assumption that texts have hidden meaning that can be uncovered through looking for themes and patterns. Structuralist criticism of *Tender Buttons* appears in various forms based on which interpretive lens it is being used with. Cubist lenses often use structuralism to describe *Tender Buttons* as a Cubist text. Language lenses often use structuralist tactics that focus on patterns concerning grammar and style. Feminist and gender studies lenses focus on the physical structuring of the pieces of *Tender Buttons*, as well as patterns relating to grammar and word

choice. In the following sections, I explore how DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy focus on the structure of *Tender Buttons* to demonstrate how the text's physical appearance affects the reader and how unconventional structure affects meaning.

DeKoven uses the structure of the prose poems of *Tender Buttons* to make assertions about meaning and to differentiate between Cubist art and the text. She analyzes a portion of the prose poem, "Lunch," and asserts that the poem is readable, though it has nothing to do with its ostensible subject. Though we cannot say that "Lunch" is "about" anything at all, we cannot deny that it has multiple, unresolved lexical meanings (86). Cubist art that has no representational shapes, however, has no "readable" meaning whatsoever: it has only the emotional, "aesthetic" suggestiveness of its formal configurations (85-86). DeKoven points out that, "A first reading of *Tender Buttons* seldom suggests any immediate connection between the actual writing and its ostensible subject, while it is clear at first glance that cubist compositions are structured around the fragmentation of their representational elements" (86). Whereas Cubist scholarship draws direct connections between the structure of Cubist art and the structure and meaning behind *Tender Buttons*, DeKoven's interpretive strategy takes the opposite approach. While Cubist scholars notice the similarities between Cubism and *Tender Buttons*' style, DeKoven notices the differences. For example, she notes that Cubist paintings fragment and multiply their subject, and the rest is abstract, but "Stein's writing is never abstract, and its multiplied, fragmented signification generally ignores its nominal subject" (87). DeKoven's interpretation is largely based on structural features that she notices about *Tender Buttons*.

LUNCH

Luck in loose plaster  
makes holy gauge and  
nearly that, nearly more  
states, more states come  
in town light kite, blight  
not white. (Stein 278)

Kaufmann turns to “A Carafe” to emphasize his points about structure. To Kaufmann, understanding the structure of the text is imperative to comprehend how and why Stein strayed

from conventional writing style. Kaufmann’s analysis demonstrates his belief that Stein deliberately structured *Tender Buttons* in a way that makes the manipulative effects of print clear to the reader. To Kaufmann, “A Carafe” demonstrates what Stein thinks about what language has become and illustrates her methods of subverting its dying condition. The heavy, dark typeface of the titles isolates the words and makes it clear that she is focusing on language and its physical embodiment in type (450).

According to Kaufmann, “The blurred distinction between title and piece, which eventually becomes apparent (occurring even in the chime of ‘blind’ in the title with

‘kind’ in the piece), initiates an immediate confusion between the typographical ‘outside’ [the title] and the ‘inside’ [the description] of the piece, a confusion that ‘Carafe’ develops” (451).

Here, Kaufmann focuses on the physical structuring of the piece, emphasizing how its appearance affects the reader and imparts Stein’s message about what language has become in print. Kaufmann’s interpretive strategy to focus on structure leads him to conclusions about how Stein uses structure in a way that recognizes the limitations and manipulation of language, and tries to subvert those limitations in order to create a “visible language.” Kaufmann’s emphasis on structure is interesting to consider because it reveals his theoretical presupposition that meaning is tied to structure. Because Stein altered the structure of the text in a way that readers were perceiving words in a way that they never had before, she was also altering how they gathered meaning from the text.

Kaufmann’s views on structure also reveal postmodern interpretive assumptions of the impossibility of stable realities. The influence of Barthes on Kaufmann’s theoretical assumptions

A CARAFE, THAT  
IS A BLIND  
GLASS

A kind in glass and a  
cousin, a spectacle  
and nothing strange  
a single hurt color  
and an arrangement  
in a system to  
pointing. All this  
and not ordinary, not  
unordered in not  
resembling. The  
difference is  
spreading. (Stein  
245)

is clear. Kaufmann references Barthes in his assertions about Stein, agreeing with his stance that, “it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality...to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs,’ and not ‘me’” (Barthes 1323). Thus, Kaufmann’s interpretation weaves together structuralist and postmodern theories to make assertions about meaning and structure in *Tender Buttons*. Kaufmann points out that the text is structured like a dictionary, but one that she has ordered not according to the rules of the alphabet. Each piece of the text, “carries us a bit further in her narrative of naming, of discovering the processes of naming and the way in which language defines a reality, although she will have it define only her reality not its reality (Kaufmann 459). Kaufmann describes how Stein defies the way that print has been used to name and define reality, and seeks to show the reader that language is now a system that culture uses to impress its ideas and values on the reader. Kaufmann’s examination of structure weaves together a postmodern rejection of singular, truthful realities with assertions about how culture has manipulated the medium of print in order to impose particular meanings on language.

Murphy, like DeKoven and Kaufmann, explores the structure of *Tender Buttons* in order to examine how Stein subverts conventional prose style. Her exploration differs from DeKoven’s and Kaufmann’s in that it focuses more on the entire structure of the text as opposed to unpacking individual pieces. Murphy suggests that *Tender Buttons* can be perceived as a complex, semantic, game and that “the titles of the prose poems, and the headings of the three sections, "Objects," "Food," "Rooms," set up this game with description, identifying them as descriptive pieces, as pictorial prose poetry” (142). Murphy points out that most entries in the first two sections, "Objects" and "Food," are brief. "Objects" contains fifty--eight entries while "Food," contains fifty--one. "Rooms," however, is divided into paragraphs, composing one long

prose poem, as if "Rooms" necessarily involves a more spacious exploration (142). Murphy agrees with Richard Bridgman's points that, "the book's tripartite structure is unusually suggestive. 'Objects'—what we perceive outside us. 'Food'—what we absorb. 'Rooms'—what enclose us" (Bridgeman qtd. in Murphy 142). Bridgeman's analysis reinforces Murphy's point that Stein was consciously subverting the genre of prose poetry. Similar to Kaufmann, Murphy picks up on the physical structuring of *Tender Buttons*--the titles of the pieces, their length, and how they are sectioned out and organized. Murphy asserts that Stein subverts conventional methods of description, and that the "unusually suggestive" structure of *Tender Buttons* actually leads readers to conclusions about what we perceive, what we absorb, and what encloses us. Murphy's focus on structure is interesting to examine when considering how critics ascertain meaning from texts. Interpretive strategies that focus on structure rely on the assumption that readers gain meaning from texts not just from word usage, themes, symbols, etc., but also from physical features of texts. In other words, reading for meaning does not simply involve a conscious effort to understand how a text uses themes, language, etc., but also the unconscious influence of a text's physical appearance.

DeKoven's, Kaufmann's, and Murphy's focus on structure points to an interesting pattern in how critics ascertain meaning from challenging texts. It is more typical for critics to rely on aspects of texts such as word choice, themes, etc. in the search for meaning, but critics such as DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy believe that unconventional texts like *Tender Buttons* require a more in-depth examination. In other words, challenging texts like *Tender Buttons* need to be looked at for things beyond what can be gathered from a surface reading, which compels critics to turn to certain aspects, such as physical appearance, that one might not focus on with a conventionally written text.

#### IV.6.b: Grammar

Another interpretive strategy that is noticeable within all three pieces of scholarship is the emphasis on and analysis of grammar. DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy explore the grammar of *Tender Buttons*, and how Stein's use, or disregard, of conventional grammatical mechanics contribute to the text's subversiveness. Grammar has been explored in the scholarship that I have examined in previous chapters, yet the emphasis on grammar in these pieces of scholarship serves a different purpose. DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy examine the grammar of *Tender Buttons* to the end of making larger points about how power structures manipulate how language is interpreted. Moreover, they analyze grammar to support connections between Stein's intentional use of language in connection with Cubism or feminism. Grammar is thought of as an orderly, logical method through which people make sense of language. By studying the grammar of *Tender Buttons*, DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy are shining a light on the fallacy of the notion of language as a stable vehicle through which readers obtain meaning.

DeKoven uses Chomsky's theory of "degrees of grammaticalness" to reinforce her views about the grammar of *Tender Buttons*. Chomsky regards language as a uniquely human, biologically-based cognitive ability. Chomsky's theory of universal grammar is highly influential in the field of linguistics. He argues that the human brain contains a limited set of constraints for organizing language, and implies that all languages have a set of rules known as "universal grammar." Native speakers of a language know which expressions are acceptable and which are unacceptable. Chomsky asserts that utterances that are strictly or conventionally grammatical are of the first degree, "semi-grammatical" utterances are of the second degree, and totally ungrammatical utterances are of the third degree (84). Chomsky's influence on DeKoven's analysis is demonstrated through her assertions about how readers are able to understand the

language of *Tender Buttons*, despite it not making sense in a conventional way. Readers know that the language of *Tender Buttons* is not conventional, but it is still acceptable because it is possible to ascertain meaning from it. According to DeKoven, Chomsky's "semi-grammatical" second degree is similar to Stein's experimental writing in *Tender Buttons*. She explains that "The second degree undermines or fragments coherent meaning and subordinates meaning altogether to the linguistic surface...these 'deviant utterances' retain significant connections among the meanings of their words. Without such articulations of meaning in a literary work, we would be unable to read it" (85). DeKoven picks up on phrases within *Tender Buttons* that match Chomsky's second degree of grammaticalness, which influences her to look for fragmented meaning in *Tender Buttons*. Her analysis points to her theoretical presupposition that grammar, when it is used conventionally, creates seemingly coherent and logical meaning. Thus, when she examines *Tender Buttons*, DeKoven sees in its incoherence a deliberate attempt to subvert conventional notions of meaning and logic. DeKoven emphasizes that by disrupting the ordinary use of grammar, Stein forces readers to consider language in a new way. Although she does not use grammar in a manner through which readers can easily assign meanings to the text as a whole, readers are still able to make connections with the words being used. DeKoven recognizes that the way grammar is used affects the way that readers perceive words and their meanings. DeKoven's analysis is demonstrative of an interesting aspect of *Tender Buttons* scholarship: critics can not only use language to understand *Tender Buttons*, but also use *Tender Buttons* to understand language. The fact that *Tender Buttons* does not use grammar conventionally is noticed by DeKoven, and leads her to not only make assertions about how grammar impacts the meaning of the individual pieces within *Tender Buttons*, but also how readers are affected by unconventional use of grammar. Thus, DeKoven's assertions about

grammar are particularly interesting because they point to how *Tender Buttons* can be analyzed not just for meaning of the poems within, but for implications of how people understand language to get at meaning.

Kaufmann asserts that the grammatical structure of “A Carafe” forces the reader to see its confusion by pointing to the similarities between the appositives. “A Carafe,” Kaufmann argues, is not a re-creation of a carafe, but an anatomy of language and culture revealed in the blindness of the glass (452). Kaufmann suggests that Stein realized that language no longer reveals reality as it claims, but instead covers it up. We don't use language, language uses us. For Stein, “language and its accomplice, print, were only another means of perpetuating the seamless totality, of covering difference” (Kaufmann 453). By examining everyday objects such as carafes, Stein hopes to subvert the habits of perception that claim to be natural, but are actually tied to language. Kaufmann realizes that the tendency to think of the relationship between grammar and logic as unproblematic is deeply flawed. Thus, his interpretive strategy of focusing on grammar leads him to assert that language cannot be pinned down to a single meaning because oftentimes, language simply cannot convey what we mean it to convey. His focus on grammar is again indicative of his scholarship's postmodern leanings in that it rejects the notion of singular meaning, as well as the “logic” of conventional writing.

Murphy notices certain aspects of the grammar and style of *Tender Buttons*, such as fragmentation and repetition, that do not follow patriarchal or logocentric writing patterns, which leads her to assertions about how the text subverts meaning. Her interpretive strategy leads Murphy to her arguments that *Tender Buttons* is not merely disrupting meaning, but using meaning. Murphy asserts that Stein's "descriptions" in *Tender Buttons* disrupt not only

<p>A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS</p>
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<p>A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. (Stein 245)</p>
---

conventional description, which works toward readability by explaining by means of a comprehensible relation system outside of the text, triggering reader recognition (144), but also conventional semantics and grammaticality. Murphy's analysis demonstrates the theoretical presupposition that words cannot be used without the suggestion of meaning. They carry their former uses with them—their former contexts and previous "owners" (149). Murphy draws on Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's perception that words are not our own, but always already affected by someone else's. Regarding grammaticality, Murphy agrees with DeKoven's assertion (which draw upon Chomsky's "degrees of grammaticalness") that *Tender Buttons* demonstrates the second degree of grammaticalness because it not only fragments coherent meaning, it subordinates meaning to the linguistic surface; in other words, the words in the descriptive pieces of *Tender Buttons* stand out simply as words before readers can register their lexical meanings. Murphy largely agrees with DeKoven here, and she goes further to assert that Stein deviates from conventional grammar but does not altogether negate it, giving readers the sense that the text's meaning is obscured by "intense linguistic play" (146). In other words, *Tender Buttons*' meaning may be fragmented, but it is not unintelligible. Readers must try harder to get at meaning, to understand this "linguistic play" but that doesn't mean that meaning isn't there. Here, Murphy demonstrates her belief that grammar can be used unconventionally to convey meaning. This meaning might not be the same meaning that readers would get out of conventionally used grammar, but it is meaning nonetheless. According to Murphy, pieces such as "A Long Dress" reject ordinary descriptive mechanisms that rely on conventional ways of

seeing (147). Murphy suggests that the piece is a set of questions without question marks, and points out that none of these questions have answers. Murphy suggests that Stein wants us to see the long dress as it actually appears and moves, and imitates the slow movement of folds through her insistent repetitions, such as "what is the current." Murphy takes note of how Stein exploits aspects of conventional women's prose, such as vocabulary, syntax, rhythms, etc. in order to create her own new "language" –one that subverts conventional forms of feminine discourse (149). The manner in which Murphy analyzes the grammar and style of *Tender Buttons* is interwoven with the feminist aspects of her interpretation. Murphy picks up on places in *Tender Buttons* where Stein rejects conventional grammar and style to the end of using a language, a women's language, to situate feminine topics in a way that patriarchal and monologic writing cannot. Murphy's focus on grammar and style is indicative of how many *Tender Buttons* scholars analyze the grammar and style of the text. She focuses on what she considers to be the subversive aspects of Stein's language use in order to make larger claims about *Tender Buttons*' effect on readers. In Murphy's view, as well as DeKoven's and Kaufmann's, Stein purposefully rejects conventional usage of grammar and style based on specific intentions she had for the text.

*Tender Buttons* scholarship uses interpretive strategies relating to grammar and style that focus on how Stein's use of these aspects does not align with how they are traditionally used. These strategies compare how grammar and style are typically used to convey meaning to how Stein uses them in *Tender Buttons*. Oftentimes, interpretive strategies that center on grammar

#### A LONG DRESS

What is the current  
that makes machinery,  
that makes it crackle,  
what is the current that  
presents a long line  
and a necessary waist.  
What is this current.  
What is the wind,  
what is it.  
Where is the serene  
length, it is there and a  
dark place is not a  
dark place, only a  
white and red are  
black, only a yellow  
and green are blue, a  
pink is scarlet, a bow  
is every color. A line  
distinguishes it. A line  
just distinguishes it.  
(Stein 252)

and style emphasize Stein's intentions. In other words, critics use the grammar and style of *Tender Buttons* to point to how and why Stein purposefully constructs the language of the text.

#### **IV.7: Conclusion:**

Out of the three lenses of *Tender Buttons* scholarship examined in this thesis, language lenses take the most postmodern approach. The scholarship examined here was produced between 1981 and 1992, when postmodern interpretive strategies were emerging as the common interpretive trend. With the postmodern shift in criticism came certain realizations about meaning and meaning-making. DeKoven's, Kaufmann's, and Murphy's scholarship leans towards a self-referential postmodern lens. Kaufmann's scholarship embodies a postmodern rejection of a language that claims to be undistorted, while DeKoven's and Murphy's scholarship calls attention to the socially-conditioned perceptions of femininity and "feminine subjects" by situating them as products of logocentric and patriarchal discourses. In addition, the critics use reader-response theories when they recognize the reader as an active participant in meaning-making through interpretation. While they all appeal to Stein in some way to form their interpretations, they also acknowledge that the reader completes a text's meaning through their preconceived notions and interpretive habits. The concepts of postmodernism and reader-response theory are interesting to consider in light of DeKoven's, Kaufmann's, and Murphy's examination of grammar, structure, and meaning. The three critics all acknowledge the contradictions that arise when one tries to assign meaning to *Tender Buttons*, demonstrating their postmodern rejection of the concept of singular, objective truth and the idea that texts have inherent meaning. Kaufmann does frequently tie his assertions to his perceptions of what Stein's intention for *Tender Buttons* was, yet he utilizes interpretive strategies that go much deeper than simply examining Stein's biography. Furthermore, though he does emphasize what Stein's

intentions were for *Tender Buttons* more so than DeKoven and Murphy, he does not imply that the meaning of *Tender Buttons* ends there. The critics emphasize an acknowledgement of their own interpretive methodologies, as well as the infinitely subjective nature of interpretation. Still, there are notable aspects of these pieces of scholarship that contradict the postmodern direction that these scholars are attempting to follow. For example, similar to the Cubist scholars, Murphy regards the prose poems of *Tender Buttons* to be “riddle-like” and as a “semantic game.” Variations of these descriptors have arisen in *Tender Buttons* scholarship of all lenses, which again points to a resistance in Stein scholarship to move beyond certain interpretive trends, such as structuralism and intentionalism.

Compared to the Cubist and feminism and gender Studies lenses, language lenses use interpretive strategies and makes assertions that largely follow current postmodern interpretive trends. Cubist scholarship and feminist and gender Studies scholarship follow interpretive trends, such as structuralism and psychoanalysis, that are not utilized as frequently in postmodern scholarship, while scholarship that focuses specifically on language follows a postmodern approach that has been the norm for the past few decades. It is interesting to note that all three pieces of scholarship reference the Cubist lens, both to acknowledge Cubism as an influencing factor on Stein and *Tender Buttons*, and to negate the claim that *Tender Buttons* can simply be regarded as literary Cubism. Overall, the critics using language lenses acknowledge the importance of the Cubist movement as an influencing factor of *Tender Buttons*, but ultimately argue that it does go far enough.

Language lenses have had an interesting effect on not only how we interpret *Tender Buttons*, but also on how we interpret Stein as a writer. Whereas the Cubist lens and the feminism and gender studies lens relies heavily on Stein, sometimes even putting her at the very

center of analysis, language lenses are more concerned with how people ascertain meaning from language in general, and what it is about *Tender Buttons* that makes people ascertain meaning differently. Stein is still very much present in scholarship that emphasizes language—many critics hypothesize about what her intentions were when structuring *Tender Buttons*—but most scholarship that uses this lens focuses on the subversive aspects of the text’s language. Studying scholarship that utilizes language lenses points to one of the most useful aspects of *Tender Buttons*: it encourages us to consider not only how language affects texts, but how texts affect language. *Tender Buttons* scholarship that uses language lenses is less concerned with how the language impacts meaning within *Tender Buttons* than how *Tender Buttons*, as a text, affects the way that readers perceive language and meaning. For example, Kaufmann is less concerned with assigning specific meanings to the pieces within *Tender Buttons* than demonstrating how *Tender Buttons* shines a light on how culture is manipulated by structures of power to assign “meaningless sense” to words and instill certain perceptual habits in readers. Murphy and DeKoven, while their scholarship is a bit more specific about what the pieces in *Tender Buttons* could mean, are also more focused on how *Tender Buttons* exposes patriarchal and logocentric writing, and aim to show how *Tender Buttons* subverts these kinds of writing in favor of a feminist language. Language lenses point to the uniqueness of *Tender Buttons* as a text that influences readers to break free of their role as the subject and embrace their role as the meaning-maker, as well as to recognize the manipulation of language by dominating power structures.

## Chapter V: Conclusion

### V.1: Introduction

The previous chapters have explored various lenses, terministic screens, theoretical presuppositions, and interpretive strategies of critics attempting to unpack Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. As I have explored, it is impossible to approach a text without preconceived notions or biases, or without using interpretive strategies. Having awareness of the subjectivity of interpretation is valuable in that we uncover why we interpret the way that we do, and we can engage in the act of interpretation conscious of our own limitations and biases. However, awareness can never add absolute objectivity to interpretation, as we can never completely detach ourselves from our biases to form a "neutral interpretation." Studying scholarship trends, especially atypical scholarship trends, reveals how readers take on challenging texts, and form interpretive communities that align with their preconceived notions. Throughout my study, I have uncovered not only the strengths and limitations of critics' methodologies, but also noticed some intriguing scholarship habits. After examining Stein scholarship from the last fifty years or so, I am surprised that I didn't find any solid patterns. That is to say, critics from various decades jump back and forth between intentionalism and anti-intentionalism, structuralist tactics and postmodern tactics. However, despite the lack of a definitive pattern, some spikes in trends emerge. For example, I notice an interpretive shift occurring in later Stein criticism (1990's - present). The shift involves a transition from psychoanalytic, intentionalist, and biography-based interpretive tactics to structuralist, postmodern, and reader-response strategies. For the most part, later *Tender Buttons* scholarship (post 1990) focuses at least in part on how critics construct meaning in *Tender Buttons*, rather than simply trying to find meaning within the text itself. This shift makes sense, as by the 1990's, certain interpretive habits such as biographical focus and

structuralism were considered outdated. What is interesting and atypical about this shift is that it did not occur within all of the interpretive communities connected to *Tender Buttons*. While scholarship that focuses on language is largely self-referential, the patterns with feminist and gender studies scholarship and Cubist scholarship are not as consistent. Language scholars are less compelled to appeal to Stein's intentions, biography, or psychology to the degree that Cubist and feminist and gender studies scholars do. Thus, it seems as though it is easier for critics to separate an author from the language that they use than from aspects of feminist and Cubist study.

## **V.2 Interpretive Communities**

Exploring the scholarship trends of *Tender Buttons* in connection with Fish and Burke brings to attention insights on what Fish calls "interpretive communities." According to Fish, "Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (483). Interpretive communities account for both the stability of interpretation among different readers and the divergences between different interpretations that can be debated. Readers that belong to the same community form similar interpretations, while readers from other communities employ different interpretive strategies and thus make different texts. There is no stability in texts, but there is stability in the makeup of interpretive communities and therefore in the different positions they make possible. The stability of interpretive communities is always temporary, as interpretive communities grow larger and decline, and individuals move from one to another. However, although interpretive communities are susceptible to change, Fish argues

that they are always there, providing just enough stability for the interpretive disagreements to go on. (484). Interpretive communities that use Cubist, feminism, gender studies, and language lenses all utilize terministic screens and interpretive strategies that condition the outcome of their interpretation. Although each lens is composed of facets that lead to different conclusions about meaning in *Tender Buttons*, they all fall under the umbrella of certain interpretive communities. For example, critics that use Cubist lenses, such as Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley, fall into the same interpretive community. Although they do not have matching assertions about what *Tender Buttons* means, they all use Cubism as a vehicle to arrive at their conclusions. Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley all use the terministic screen of Cubism, by applying their knowledge about the art movement as well as their assumptions about how people gather meaning from art and literature. In addition, they all use interpretive strategies that rely on structure. My study shows similar trends within other lenses. As I have noted above, *Tender Buttons* scholarship is unique in that critics jump back and forth between interpretive movements, rather than relying on tactics common in literary criticism at the time they were writing. My analysis of *Tender Buttons* scholarship suggests that Cubist and feminist and gender studies scholarship communities are the most unstable, using a wide range of interpretive strategies such as biographical dependence, psychoanalysis, structuralism, and postmodernism. Scholarship that focuses on language, however, is more consistent, and primarily uses poststructuralist tactics to discern meaning from the text. My investigation raises new questions and lays the foundation for additional study into the interpretive communities of *Tender Buttons* would produce further revelations about how and why scholarship trends have shifted over time. A more extensive study of a broader range of scholarship is necessary to delve deeper into the interpretive communities of *Tender Buttons*, and how some communities may be more consistent in their strategies than others.

### **V.3: *Tender Buttons* as a Theory of Interpretation**

My investigation of *Tender Buttons* scholarship points to an aspect of *Tender Buttons* that many critics miss: *Tender Buttons* itself should be understood as a theory of interpretation. Even critics that de-emphasize the question of meaning in order to examine how we ascertain meaning from the text often do not venture into how readers use *Tender Buttons* to interpret concepts such as Cubism, feminism and gender studies, and language. In other words, I suggest that critics should not only focus on what they can understand *Tender Buttons* through the concepts of Cubism, feminism and gender studies, and language, but also focus on how *Tender Buttons* informs our perceptions and understandings of these concepts.

The following sections address topics for future study of *Tender Buttons*, and why exploring these topics would be valuable to literary criticism. Specifically I explore what we can learn from *Tender Buttons* as a theory of interpretation. Cubist scholarship understands *Tender Buttons* through the art movement of Cubism, but simultaneously understands Cubist art and sensibility through *Tender Buttons*. Feminist and gender studies scholarship uses the aims of feminism and the focuses of gender studies in order to unpack *Tender Buttons*, while their understanding of feminism and gender studies is influenced by how they interpret the text. Finally, *Tender Buttons* scholarship that focuses on linguistics reveals not only how and to what effect Stein uses language in the text, but also how critics understand language and meaning from the text's unconventional style. My investigation covers underexplored ground in how critics use *Tender Buttons* to understand the mode through which they are interpreting it, and begs for further exploration of the circular nature of interpretation. That is, we are constantly engaged in multiple acts of interpretation, all of which inform one another.

#### **V.3.a: Cubism**

Cubist lenses focus on the structure of *Tender Buttons*, and view the text as a product of Cubist sensibility. Critics that use Cubist lenses focus on how they can apply what they know about Cubist art and the Cubist movement to *Tender Buttons* in order to uncover meaning underneath the surface of the text. However, another interesting topic that warrants further investigation is questioning not only how Cubism is used to interpret *Tender Buttons*, but how connecting *Tender Buttons* to Cubism informs critics' perceptions and understanding of the art movement. I contend that critics not only use the art movement to make assertions about meaning in *Tender Buttons*, but also unconsciously use *Tender Buttons* to understand the Cubist art that they compare it to. My project focuses not just on how critics analyze *Tender Buttons*, but also on what critics reveal through their interpretation but often don't pick up on. In other words, I turn a critical eye to how critics' interpretations inform their understanding of the concepts they use to unpack *Tender Buttons*. Perloff especially exemplifies this. Her scholarship makes connections between *Tender Buttons*, Surrealism, Dadaism, and Cubism in order to make sense of *Tender Buttons*' unconventional style, yet one can also examine Perloff's scholarship for how she understands and forms connections between Surrealism, Dadaism, and Cubism. Perloff contends that *Tender Buttons* was heavily influenced by the Dada movement and that it anticipates Surrealism. She compares Stein's "A Substance in a Cushion" to Marcel Duchamp's surrealist (according to Perloff) work *The Bride of 1912*. Perloff seems to regard Duchamp as both a Surrealist and a Cubist artist. She notes art critic Guillaume Apollinaire's labeling of Duchamp's work as "Orphic Cubism," which he defined as "the art of painting new structures out of elements which have not been borrowed from the visual sphere, but have been created entirely by the artist himself" (Apollinaire qtd. in Perloff 40). While Duchamp was influenced by both Surrealism and Cubism, it is impossible to pin him to a particular movement, as his style

was particularly unique. Duchamp was influenced by both movements, but his work is thought to have been intended as more of an ironic statement or mockery of painting. In fact, Duchamp notably differentiated his work from the Cubist movement, which he found to be too systematic, so it is interesting that Perloff brings together Surrealism and Cubism through her interpretation of *Tender Buttons*. Thus, Perloff's connections between the two movements and her categorization of Duchamp's work require more extensive examination, as they are potentially problematic. On a broader scale, examining Perloff's connections reveal how *Tender Buttons* is itself a theory of interpretation. The manner in which Perloff examines *Tender Buttons* through Cubism and Surrealism sheds light on how she interprets these art movements. Although Cubists and Surrealists were influenced by one another, the artists and artwork differed in style, form, and message. Perloff's interpretation of *Tender Buttons* suggests that she sees overlaps in the two movements. Her analysis points to *Tender Buttons*' potential as a theory of interpretation, as she uses *Tender Buttons* to interpret Cubism as much as she uses Cubism to understand *Tender Buttons*. Moreover, this insight begs a future study of how texts that are interpreted through art inform and affect the perception and understanding of art.

### **V.3.b: Feminism and Gender Studies**

Through examining *Tender Buttons* scholarship that uses feminist and gender studies lenses, one can observe not only how these schools of thought have impacted the interpretation of *Tender Buttons*, but also how critics are using *Tender Buttons* to interpret the goals and focuses of these lenses. For example, Wight's scholarship takes an extreme position on *Tender Buttons* that allows us to examine her understanding of gender studies, and how *Tender Buttons* influences her use of that lens. Her assertion that Stein was projecting herself as male in *Tender Buttons* despite being "clearly female physically" reveals and reinforces her understanding that

gender and sex are separate concepts. Wight defines Stein's sex by her physical body, and her gender by how Stein perceives herself and how she challenges the norms of femininity and sexuality. Gender studies today generally rejects biology as a stable foundation for determining sex, so Wight's understanding is demonstrative of a gender studies lens of previous decades. In addition, Wight's analysis of *Tender Buttons* influences her understanding of gender studies through Greek mythology. Early sexuality and gender studies were deeply involved in Greek studies, and Wight's understanding of the character Tiresias is clearly affected by her interpretation of *Tender Buttons*, and vice versa. Tiresias is presented in Greek mythology as a man who was transformed into a woman by Hera as punishment for harming a pair of mating snakes. Tiresias spends seven years as a woman, gets married, and has children. He is eventually able to transform back into a man through another encounter with mating snakes (depending on the version, Tiresias either kills the snakes or leaves them be). Wight interprets the gender studies aspect of Tiresias' story through *Tender Buttons*. She labels Tiresias to be "of ambiguous sex," just as she asserts that Stein is of ambiguous sex when writing *Tender Buttons*. Moreover, she asserts that Tiresias, the Sybil, knows "herself" to be erotically drawn to women, just as Stein was drawn to Alice Toklas. Wight's reading of *Tender Buttons* influenced her understanding of Tiresias in such a way that it almost alters the original story. Rather than emphasizing that Tiresias was a man forcibly transformed into a woman, Wight's writing focuses on Tiresias' female self. Her focus enables a convenient connection between Stein and Tiresias that would not have existed without *Tender Buttons*' influence. Wight's understanding of gender in the story of Tiresias exemplifies how *Tender Buttons* influences Wight's use and comprehension of gender studies. Her connections between Stein and Tiresias reflect the influence that interpreting texts can have on critics' understanding of certain branches of study.

Wight's scholarship in particular demonstrates that *Tender Buttons* should be considered a theory of interpretation. Her analysis reveals how far critics go to interpret a text's influence, as she selects aspects of Tiresias' story that fit with her gender studies analysis of *Tender Buttons*, and deflects aspects of the story that don't quite align.

### **V.3.c: Language**

Language lenses are often used in *Tender Buttons* scholarship to examine how Stein's unconventional writing style affects how readers ascertain meaning from the text. While these lenses have yielded interesting and valuable insights on how *Tender Buttons* plays with or subverts conventional meaning, an underexplored aspect of language lenses is how *Tender Buttons* affects the way that critics consider what meaning is and how it is discerned from language. Kaufmann's consideration of Stein's intentions for *Tender Buttons* is especially interesting to assess in these respects. Kaufmann is ultimately distrustful of any stable sense of meaning, as he posits that Stein's aim was to shine a light on how culture uses mass-produced printed language to embed perceptual habits in readers. His analysis of *Tender Buttons* consistently focuses on portions of the text that can be construed as a subversion of the manipulation of language by culture.<sup>13</sup> Kaufmann's postmodern analysis of *Tender Buttons* focuses on how readers ascertain meaning from language through analyzing the grammar and structure of the text. However, it is also clear that *Tender Buttons* influences Kaufmann's understanding of grammar and structure, as well as of how readers gain meaning from them. For example, Kaufmann unpacks the physical structural features of *Tender Buttons*, such as the boldness of the titles compared to the text of the poems, and asserts that the text's physical appearance affects the reader and imparts Stein's message about what language has become in

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth pointing out that Kaufmann gives culture agency in his scholarship, though the implication is that it is power structures that are influencing culture and language, and thus readers.

print. Kaufmann's focus on structure leads him to conclusions about how Stein uses structure in a way that recognizes the limitations and manipulation of language, and tries to subvert those limitations in order to create a "visible language." His emphasis on *Tender Buttons*' structure influences his understanding that meaning is tied to structure. He contends that because Stein altered the structure of the text in a way that readers were perceiving words in an unfamiliar way, she was also altering how they gathered meaning from the text. Kaufmann's understanding of the relationship between structure and meaning is one of many examples of how critic's perceptions of how certain elements of language and meaning are tied together. *Tender Buttons* does not use language in a way that readers are accustomed to; thus, in the act of interpretation, readers are influenced by the unconventional prose to look for meaning in places they might not have otherwise. Using *Tender Buttons* as a theory of interpretation would essentially "flip" scholarship that uses language lenses so that critics not only study how to make sense of unconventional language, but also how *Tender Buttons* influences what their perception of conventional language is.

#### **V.4: Conclusion**

My exploration of *Tender Buttons* scholarship has affected my own take on how *Tender Buttons* can and should be received. The majority of critics claim that *Tender Buttons* is a subversive text; the meaning that they find in the text overthrows certain power structures that impress ideas about meaning, logic, and interpretation onto readers. My position is somewhat different: While the text certainly challenges the dominant norms surrounding interpretation, meaning, gender and sexuality, etc., I suggest that what *Tender Buttons* does is inspire critical awareness in readers about these concepts, which is different from complete subversion. What I mean by critical awareness is certain recognitions about structure, language, feminism, and

patriarchy that may have been absent in readers before encountering *Tender Buttons*. The kind of awareness that *Tender Buttons* inspires varies depending on the reader and the terministic screens and interpretive strategies that they use. With Perloff, Dubnick, and Kley, *Tender Buttons* inspires awareness about how the structure (physical and grammatical) of a text informs readers' perceptions of meaning. For Wight, Ruddick, and Goodspeed-Chadwick, *Tender Buttons* raises an awareness of patriarchal and logocentric writing that has been used to oppress women. The language scholars DeKoven, Kaufmann, and Murphy recognize in *Tender Buttons* how certain elements of language, such as grammar and lexical meaning, manipulate perception and interpretation. Thus, *Tender Buttons* acts as a terministic screen that interacts with the terministic screens that critics use. For example, critics using the terministic screen of feminism to understand *Tender Buttons* simultaneously use *Tender Buttons* as a screen that influences their perceptions of patriarchy, gender, and sexuality. Critics' selection of terminology in *Tender Buttons* that aligns with the screen that they use reflects their own understanding of their particular screen.

All of the critics' scholarship that I have explored emphasize that *Tender Buttons* is a subversive text--that it overthrows certain patterns that readers have been conditioned to follow. It is my contention that while *Tender Buttons* does challenge notions such as conventional textual structure, patriarchal writing, and perceptual habits, it is more difficult to ascertain how subversive the text really is. The text is still largely marginalized by the power structures that critics claim it subverts. For example, feminist and gender studies screens assert that *Tender Buttons* subverts patriarchy and patriarchal writing, yet the text is still marginalized by a patriarchal system that values Stein's male contemporaries more than her. If *Tender Buttons* is the subversive text that critics make it out to be, Stein would be more readily recognized for how

she significantly shifted discourse on feminist concerns and influenced the Modernist movement. In addition, Kaufmann asserts that *Tender Buttons* subverts the habits that mass-produced language in print has embedded in language, yet critics still use logocentric perceptual habits to interpret *Tender Buttons*. In other words, while *Tender Buttons*' unique style does draw attention to the lack of linear "sense" that readers are accustomed to in texts, that does not stop readers from attempting to reorder the text in a way that fits more with their perceptual habits. This is the inevitable contradiction that I have brought up with interpreting challenging texts: to value their difficulty while simultaneously trying to make sense of them through the perceptual habits we have been accustomed to use. Readers cannot escape the language they were taught to use; and I do not think that *Tender Buttons* claims to be that escape. In many ways, *Tender Buttons* anticipates postmodernism with its self-referentiality, as the text uses language to destabilize language. *Tender Buttons* can only make us aware of its limitations and biases, not subvert the language itself.

To conclude, *Tender Buttons* will never be a text that has a generally agreed upon meaning. Its value lies in its ability to inspire debate and self-reflection, even over a century after its publication. There are still potential areas to study that will yield insights on why and how critics engage with challenging texts. *Tender Buttons* has not lost its relevance; it is in many ways a timeless text that critics spanning over a hundred years have made connections with. Thus, I suggest that future scholarship will shift from focusing on what meaning can be pulled from *Tender Buttons* to centering on how the text acts as a theory itself, affecting the perceptions and understandings of critics.

Appendix I.a: Map of *Tender Buttons* Scholarship

Scholarship Focus	Decade and author(s)	# of articles/books considered in this thesis (and author(s))	# of sources (not considered in this thesis)	# of Sources Total
Cubism	70's	1 Perloff		1
	80's	1 Dubnick	1 Walker	2
	90's			0
	00's	1 Kley	2 Hilder Siraganian	3
Feminism/Gender Studies				
	80's	1 Wight	1 Gubar	2
	90's	1 Ruddick	2 Murphy Mitrano	3
	00's			0
	2010's	1 Goodspeed- Chadwick		1
Language				
	70's		2 Hadas Schmitz	2
	80's	2 DeKoven Kaufmann		2
	90's	1 Murphy		1

	00's			0
	2010's		1 Kirsch	1
Other (Scholarship that addresses the study of Stein works)				
	80's	1 Neuman		1
	90's	1 Tyson		1
	00's	1 Poetzsch		1
	2010's		1	1

Appendix I.b: # of sources (that I consider in this thesis) from each lens that uses particular interpretive strategies (to varying degrees). All sources use more than one interpretive strategy

	Psychoanalytic Strategies	Structuralist Strategies	Intentionalist/Biographical strategies	Post-Structuralist Strategies	Reader Response Strategies
Cubism Lenses	0	3 Perloff Dubnick Kley	3 Perloff Dubnick Kley		1 Kley
Feminism and Gender Studies Lenses	1 Ruddick	1 Wight	3 Wight Ruddick Goodspeed- Chadwick	2 Ruddick Goodspeed- Chadwick	
Language Lenses	0	3 DeKoven Kaufmann Murphy	3 DeKoven Kaufmann Murphy	3 DeKoven Kaufmann Murphy	

## Appendix II.a: "A Substance in a Cushion"

## A SUBSTANCE IN A CUSHION

The change of color is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared. Sugar is not a vegetable.

Callous is something that hardening leaves behind what will be soft if there is a genuine interest in there being present as many girls as men. Does this change. It shows that dirt is clean when there is a volume.

A cushion has that cover. Supposing you do not like to change, supposing it is very clean that there is no change in appearance, supposing that there is regularity and a costume is that any the worse than an oyster and an exchange. Come to season that is there any extreme use in feather and cotton. Is there not much more joy in a table and more chairs and very likely roundness and a place to put them.

A circle of fine card board and a chance to see a tassel.

What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it. The question does not come before there is a quotation. In any kind of place there is a top to covering and it is a pleasure at any rate there is some venturing in refusing to believe nonsense. It shows what use there is in a whole piece if one uses it and it is extreme and very likely the little things could be dearer but in any case there is a bargain and if there is the best thing to do is to take it away and wear it and then be reckless be reckless and resolved on returning gratitude.

Light blue and the same red with purple makes a change. It shows that there is no mistake. Any pink shows that and very likely it is reasonable. Very likely there should not be a finer fancy present. Some increase means a calamity and this is the best preparation for three and more being together. A little calm is so ordinary and in any case there is sweetness and some of that.

A seal and matches and a swan and ivy and a suit.

A closet, a closet does not connect under the bed. The band if it is white and black, the band has a green string. A sight a whole sight and a little groan grinding makes a trimming such a sweet singing trimming and a red thing not a round thing but a white thing, a red thing and a white thing.

The disgrace is not in carelessness nor even in sewing it comes out out of the way.

What is the sash like. The sash is not like anything mustard it is not like a same thing that has stripes, it is not even more hurt than that, it has a little top. (Stein 247)

Appendix II.b: *The Bride of 1912*



## Appendix III.a: "Sugar"

## SUGAR.

A violent luck and a whole sample and even then quiet.

Water is squeezing, water is almost squeezing on lard. Water, water is a mountain and it is selected and it is so practical that there is no use in money. A mind under is exact and so it is necessary to have a mouth and eye glasses.

A question of sudden rises and more time than awfulness is so easy and shady. There is precisely that noise.

A peck a small piece not privately overseen, not at all not a slice, not at all crestfallen and open, not at all mounting and chaining and evenly surpassing, all the bidding comes to tea.

A separation is not tightly in worsted and sauce, it is so kept well and sectionally.

Put it in the stew, put it to shame. A little slight shadow and a solid fine furnace.

The teasing is tender and trying and thoughtful.

The line which sets sprinkling to be a remedy is beside the best cold.

A puzzle, a monster puzzle, a heavy choking, a neglected Tuesday.

Wet crossing and a likeness, any likeness, a likeness has blisters, it has that and teeth, it has the staggering blindly and a little green, any little green is ordinary.

One, two and one, two, nine, second and five and that.

A blaze, a search in between, a cow, only any wet place, only this tune.

Cut a gas jet uglier and then pierce pierce in between the next and negligence. Choose the rate to pay and pet pet very much. A collection of all around, a signal poison, a lack of languor and more hurts at ease.

A white bird, a colored mine, a mixed orange, a dog.

Cuddling comes in continuing a change.

A piece of separate outstanding rushing is so blind with open delicacy.

A canoe is orderly. A period is solemn. A cow is accepted.

A nice old chain is widening, it is absent, it is laid by. (Stein 275-276)

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