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Abstract

Familiarity Breeds Beauty: Collective Aesthetics and the Mere Exposure Effect

“Of course it is beautiful but first all beauty in it is denied and then all the beauty of it is accepted... Automatically with the acceptance of the time sense comes the recognition of the beauty and once the beauty is accepted the beauty never fails any one.”

— Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation”

Literature, and the literary canon in particular, is a social construction that both reflects societal values and shapes them. As each generation makes changes to the canon of their time by adding new works, these alterations reverberate in the reading practices of the subsequent generation, shaping their aesthetic criteria and affecting their own modifications to the literary corpus. Social influences upon aesthetic assessment are discussed in Gertrude Stein’s seminal essay “Composition as Explanation,” which performs an overt analysis of temporal and social factors contributing to the perception of beauty in a work of art even as it reenacts these processes in the mind of the reader. A reader processing Stein’s dense text, composed of many repetitions and reiterations of highly convoluted grammatical structures, will find that they have acquired the ability to comprehend the text through the very process of reading it—and that appreciation is naturally correlated with comprehension. In this sense, Stein’s writing is closely linked to the cognitive Mere Exposure Effect (MEE), a psychological phenomenon related to implicit learning and conditioning, in which simple exposure to symbols and structures enhances their attractiveness on subsequent viewings.

I intend to demonstrate, through a combination of empirical data and literary analysis, that both psychological experimentation and literary experimentation have something to offer our understanding of aesthetic experience. Experimental evidence concerning the Mere Exposure Effect can help to explain why the rhetorical devices used in Stein’s “Composition as Explanation” effectively enact the process of a work’s movement from refusal to acceptance, even as a close reading of Stein’s text in conjunction with recent experimental work on the relationship between mere exposure and the artistic canon can help to explain why new forms take time to be welcomed into the preexisting canon, how cultural factors affect our experience of beauty, and how basic psychological processes involved in ordinary aspects of human cognition influence our aesthetic evaluation of art.