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# Modernism in Children's Literature: *The case of Gertrude Stein's "The World is Round"*

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## Abstract

There is little discussion on the relationship between the terms: *Children's Literature* and *Modernism*. *Stream-of-consciousness* in children's literature appears to have not been historically recognized, nurtured, nor very much explored by authors and/or illustrators. Gertrude Stein's *The World is Round*, published in 1939, provided an entirely new exploration into the moods of childhood. Written in a unique prose style, the book chronicles the struggle of nine-year-old Rose in exploring the ideas of personal identity, *thereness* and *otherness* while being placed in a round world.

*Key words:* Modernism, Children's Literature, stream-of-consciousness, Gertrude Stein, otherness.

## Resumen

Existe una discusión limitada sobre la relación entre los términos: *Literatura Infantil* y *Modernismo*. *El flujo de la conciencia* (stream-of-consciousness) en la *literatura infantil* parece no haber sido históricamente reconocida, nutrida, ni muy explorada por autores y/o ilustradores. *El Mundo es Redondo* de Gertrude Stein, publicado en 1939, proporcionó una exploración completamente nueva de los estados de ánimo de la infancia. Escrito en un estilo de prosa único, el libro narra la lucha de Rose de nueve años al explorar las ideas de identidad personal, el estar allá afuera (*thereness*) y la otredad mientras se la coloca en un mundo redondo.

Palabras clave: *modernismo, Literatura Infantil, flujo de la conciencia, Gertrude Stein, otredad.*

Llegó Quien y tocó la puerta. Nadie le respondió: ¿Quién? Quien contestó: Quien. Nadie le repitió: ¿Quién? Quien volvió a decir Quien. Y es que cuando Cuando tiene por hermanos a Nadie y a Quien, sabemos que todo será tres veces más complicado. Esta es la sensacional e interesante historia de un día en la vida de Quien, Cuando y Nadie, los trillizos con nombres más peculiares en Ciudad Pamplinas.

Who arrived and knocked on the door. Nobody answered: Who? Who answered: Who. Nobody repeated: Who? Who said Who again. And it is that when When has Nobody and Who for his brothers, we know that everything will be three times more complicated. This is the sensational and interesting story of a day in the life of Who, When and Nobody, the triplets with the most peculiar names in Nonsense City.

**I created this short story when I was seven years old.** I remember being in the car with my dad, waiting for my sisters to come back from running some errands. Dad was a writer, so the natural thing for us to do to kill some time was...to write. Fast forward 32 years later, and I proposed to illustrate myself this short story of my own making as the final project for the Children's Book Illustration Diploma I enrolled in.

*– It's a very interesting proposal Sole, but stories like that are too difficult to sell. People don't get them, editors don't get them, and it will be very tough to try to get it accepted by a publishing house.*

Quite discouraging, right?

I am not by any means an expert on children's literature scholarly-wise, but I've been a consumer of it my entire life, and even more now during adulthood. Why is it that the industry of children's books seems to *remain* doubtful of texts which make the reader ponder and/or of those which mirror the way a kid thinks or constructs un(spoken) monologues and dialogues in their minds? I chose the word *remain* because this type of *stream-of-consciousness* in children's literature appears to have not been historically recognized, nurtured, nor very much explored by authors and/or illustrators.

One cannot talk of *stream-of-consciousness* in literature without referring to Modernism. One may smile at the thought of famously difficult, high-art English modernists such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce writing picture books for children—and indeed neither of them wrote children's stories purposely for illustration or publication—. “Nor have their stories, made into picture books,

attracted much attention now, [...] suggesting a lesson about children’s literature in general: the higher the aesthetic ideal, the lower seems the calling to write for children” (Hodgkins 354) (see Figure 1).

There is however an unintentional beautiful example in Joyce’s work *for adults* that in my opinion could be placed in as a modernist children’s piece of literature for it unequivocally reflects an infant’s *stream-of-consciousness*, i.e., the first chapters of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* originally published in 1916. One of the distinctive characteristics of Joyce’s storytelling in this novel is his attempt to represent each stage of a boy’s developing consciousness in the language through which the child himself perceives the world. Thus, the narrative itself demonstrates the artist’s exploration of language. As the novel progresses, Stephen—the main character—continually meditates on sights, sounds, smells, and especially the way words sound (Lewis). He ponders on grand issues such as God, the Universe, and the place he holds within and around them.

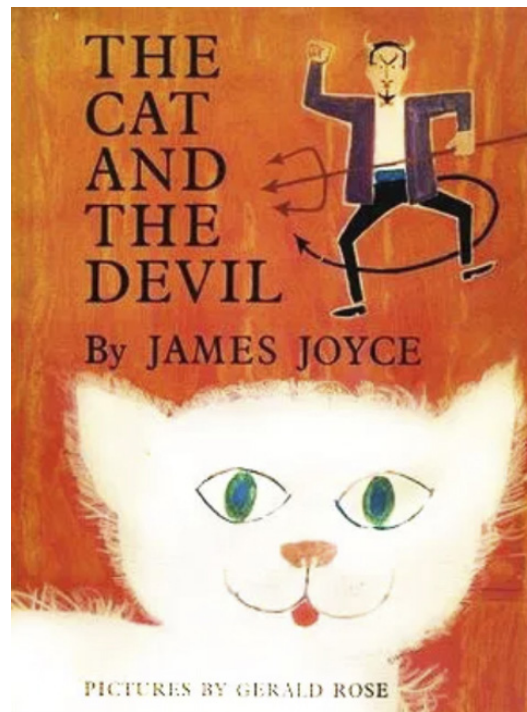
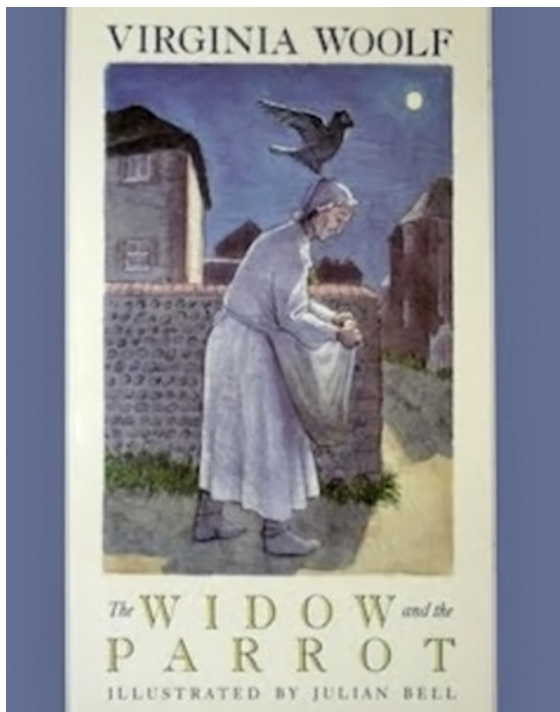


Figure 1. (Left) *The Widow and the Parrot* is a story by Virginia Woolf written for her nephew Quentin Bell, published in 1988 and illustrated by Woolf’s grandnephew, Julian Bell; picture taken from: [Abebooks.com](http://Abebooks.com), [www.abebooks.com/first-edition/WIDOW-PARROT-Woolf-Virginia-Bell-Julian/14843668710/bd#&gid=1&pid=1](http://www.abebooks.com/first-edition/WIDOW-PARROT-Woolf-Virginia-Bell-Julian/14843668710/bd#&gid=1&pid=1).

(Right) James Joyce wrote a charming fable for a family member, published posthumously in 1964 as *The Cat and the Devil* (Rego Barry) and illustrated by Richard Erdoes; picture taken from: [Themarginalian.org](http://Themarginalian.org), [www.themarginalian.org/2013/07/24/the-cat-and-the-devil-james-joyce-gerald-rose/](http://www.themarginalian.org/2013/07/24/the-cat-and-the-devil-james-joyce-gerald-rose/).

On the other hand, studies on modernist American picture books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have tended to focus on their aesthetic/art history aspects, ignoring modernism's political and business imbrications, and have positioned these books' development in the US as later than and derivative of European predecessors. But the US had, at the turn of the twentieth century, become the industrial powerhouse of the world, and picture books of this period, born not out of the crucible of war, revolution, and dislocation but from the triumph of industrial capitalism, are important precursors (Conrad 127).

Scott publishing company in New York and via Margaret Brown—the author of the now-classic children's story *Goodnight Moon* (ca. 1947)—put forth an interesting question to their fellow colleagues: *Couldn't certain carefully selected adult authors also write books for children?* The Scott editorial board pondered this suggestion and decided it was worth trying. Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and Gertrude Stein were written letters soliciting for stories. Hemingway and Steinbeck declined because of commitments to their own editors, but an enthusiastic Gertrude Stein wrote that not only would she accept Scott Books' offer, but that she had already nearly completed a book (Rust 130).

Ignoring how much of an influence on the “Mother of Modernism” Joyce's work<sup>1</sup> might have been (Metaxas), the modernist children's picture book by excellence was to be brought up into the spotlight: *The World is Round* by Gertrude Stein. Published in 1939, Stein provided an entirely new exploration into the moods of childhood. Written in her unique prose style, the book chronicles the struggle of nine-year-old Rose to contrast the sense of one-self stability, *thereness* and *otherness* while being placed in a round world—it is a whimsical tale that delights in wordplay and sound while exploring the ideas of personal identity and individuality (Stein, book jacket).

What is it that makes, in my opinion, *The World is Round* (1939) the *textbook-modernist* work, not only studied from within a Children's Literature perspective but from Literature as a whole? I'm convinced it is because it quirkily and effortlessly ticks all the boxes of what Modernist literature characteristics are known to be:

- **Individualism, crisis, and change.** There is a fascination with how the individual—our female hero Rose—adapts to a round and (un)changing world. For Rose, the notion of roundness around her is overwhelming: the

<sup>1</sup> Funny thing is that the feud that raged between James Joyce and Gertrude Stein in Paris between the years 1921 and 1939 is without doubt one of the most significant spats of any era. That these two powerful personalities coexisted in the same city at the same time is alone worthy a close scrutiny which escapes the purposes of this essay.

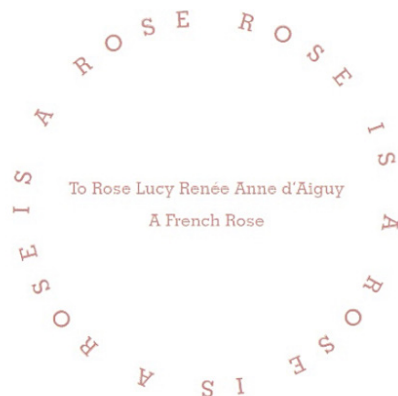
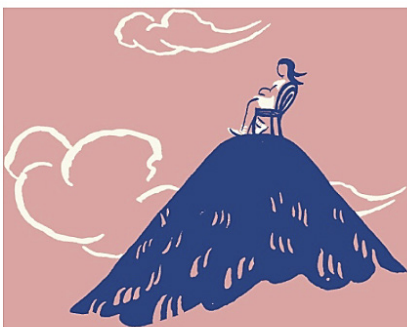
world, the lakes, the moon, the eye of an owl, the stars, the sun, her mouth when she sings, yellow peaches, a drum, the wheels of a bicycle, her eyes, her head, numbers, the Devil, the letter “o” in Rose, tree trunks, a ring...they are all round. It is not only after bravely and voluntarily wandering on a self-discovery journey that Rose comes into terms with roundness, conquers her fears, and considers the possibility of things not being what they really are or what she thought they should be. The individual triumphed over obstacles.

- **Experimentation with language.** Stein’s prose is broken free of traditional forms and techniques; there is no (coherent) punctuation. Profuse grammatical repetition is beautifully employed, mimicking children’s language in a similar way to what Joyce did in the early chapters of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) (*vide supra*). Fragmented and discontinuous narrative is also obvious throughout the text, a clear case of which is the *blue lion*, which wanders in and out of the chapters without an apparent logical chronology and for me, as a sort of nod or wink in the plot. It was Stein’s reputation for unintelligibility that caused an outcry of disbelief when the book appeared in the fall of 1939, the negative reviews minced no words. “‘Far, far better,’ wrote Dorothy Killgallen, ‘if you have a child, let him read Nick Carter, William Saroyan, the Wizard of Oz, Tommy Manville’s Diary, or the menu at Lindy’s—anything but such literary baby-talk.’ Another [...] expressed ‘Gertrude Stein is writing is writing is writing a new Gertrude Stein a new book is writing is writing Gertrude a new a new a new...’” (qtd. in Stein and Hurd 95). Nevertheless, most other reviewers were charmed by both the writing and the illustrations, and I do clearly coincide with this latter group.
- **Economy of image and text.** Hurd’s illustrations for *The World Is Round* (1939) stand out for their simplicity, flatness, and detail. The easiness of line in these drawings allows repetition to emerge distinctly. The effect is one of both movement and continuity, echoing Stein’s own use of linguistic repetition (Will 340). For me, the reading and seeing experience was enthralling. Ellen Lewis Buell’s description of the book **as an object** in her *New York Times Book Review* of November 12, 1939, is spot-on: “It is printed in blue ink, because that was Rose’s favorite color, on fiercely pink paper, as toothsome-looking as ten-cent store candy” (qtd. in Stein and Hurd 98). Personally, I was not satisfied with the free-downloadable PDF version (see Figure 2); I had to get my own hard-bound pink-colored paper copy which is simply gorgeous. Further, for me there are two distinguishable narrative

voices in *The World is Round* (1939): on the one side is Rose’s and on the other, the narrator’s; my impression being that the first is older than the second. Who is the youngest narrator? I’m not sure. It might be the case that it is an even younger Rose-self retelling the story.

- **Stream-of-consciousness.** The story is irrefutably told in a pattern resembling the thoughts of a young human, specifically that of a child. It focuses directly on experiences seen through an infant’s eyes and explores the realm of Rose’s senses and considerations, colors, sounds, likes, dislikes, and terrors. Rose’s emotions and concerns, such as being alone, being lost and being found, as well as her own identity and relevance in the world really become the main philosophical characters.
- **Dark and Light / Rose and Willie.** Stein defines identity in terms of the relation of self to others—for example, she refers to Rose’s reflection of self through her dog, Love: “I am I because my little dog knows me” (qtd. in Stein and Hurd 107)—.She introduces Rose’s cousin Willie, against whom Rose compares herself, since we are told that he is not like Rose. Whereas Rose questions whether she would continue to be herself were she to possess another name, Willie is confident that even if his name were Henry, he “...would be Willie always Willie all the same” (Cleveland 118). Rose may as well be seen as darkness and Willie as light. This theory is much confirmed at the end of the story, when it is actually Willie’s light (literally and metaphorically) which brings back Rose from getting lost in her own contemplations.

THERE



NIGHT



Figure 2. Clement Hurd’s illustrations for the US edition of *The World is Round* (1939) by Gertrude Stein; pictures taken from: [collections.library.yale.edu](https://collections.library.yale.edu). [collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/10544206](https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/10544206).

- **Symbolism.** Rose’s struggle to climb the mountain is everyone’s attempt to arrive at some place where one is finally *there* and may be in a *position* to respond the question about one’s own existence. There is a subtle menacing, ill-minded tone that brings uneasiness to *The World Is Round* (1939): the pinnacle of this being when Rose finds the repeating words “Devil, Devil, Devil” (47) behind the water-fall. One cannot feel but a shiver in the spine. It makes me think of Virginia Woolf who responds in her letters to her baby nephew Julian Bell thus: “A child is the very devil” (Dusinberre 193). The ending of *The World is Round* (1939) leaves just as much to the reader’s imagination as it leads to an open ending with multiple interpretations. Some might take it into the realm of feminism, some others into the opposite end arguing that despite having been a brave female hero who stood for her own beliefs and faced her fears throughout the story, Rose finally succumbs to the patriarchy and to heterosexual normativity while being rescued by and married to Willie (Will 342). I prefer to think of the ending as a mixture of both. I believe that Rose, by having reached the upmost stage of psychological fright brought upon her by herself only, is indeed *rescued*. But this rescue is not a Disney princess-like rescue; it’s a mental rescue of Rose from Rose.

## Conclusions

The best children’s books are those that transcend the limits of a single generation to keep on communicating to future generations and thus, *The World Is Round* (1939) has undoubtedly proved to be a permanent part of American Literature. I admire Gertrude Stein’s persistence in using experimental techniques and addressing dark subjects in her children’s books, which demonstrates academics and publishers should really begin to have faith both in young readers and in the value of modernist experimentation in children’s literature (Rovan 15).

For this essay, the reviewing of online databases revealed little discussion of the relationship between the terms: *Children’s Literature* and *Modernism*. “The fact is that children’s literature has not found yet its way into most conversations about Modernism as a literary movement or Modernism as a literary period” (Westman 283). *What if* children’s literature was to be included in courses about Modernism? *What if* some meaningful works of children’s literature were to be included **in the syllabus** about Modernism in English Literature degrees?



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