

Reading Your Own Obituary: American Modernist Attitudes towards Celebrity Culture

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Abstract

Much of the twentieth-century criticism of the modernist period focuses its attention on the supposed high/low literary culture divide. According to such arguments, the modernists' concern was to establish cultural capital, as economic capital was associated with hack writing and popular art. However, such criticism ignores the vast public attention paid to modernist writers and the very evidence that authors intentionally engaged with the public sphere. In this article, I will argue that American Modernists such as Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway worked to self-fashion their public images of fame, despite personal contradictory feelings regarding the mass market. Furthermore, I will argue that the development of author persona was facilitated by the need of authors and publishing houses alike, to achieve economic security alongside cultural value.

Key Words

American Modernism, Cultural Capital, Economic Capital, Stein, Hemingway, Fitzgerald

Introduction

In 1934, Gertrude Stein returned to the United States from Paris, France for the first time in thirty years to promote the publication of her memoir, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* [1933]. Her subsequent American tour is regarded as the moment that Stein transformed from an obscure modernist writer into a mainstream media sensation; however, the American reading public had long been aware of Stein and her work, although her name and stature as a literary figure were more familiar to the public than her actual writings. Stein's fame acts in contrast to the divide between high literary culture and popular culture generally assumed to have existed during the modernist period.

Critics such as John Carey and Fredric Jameson, amongst others, have emphasized the modernist writers' strong distaste for the public sphere and their aim to distance themselves from it with their esoteric literary styles, but evidence shows that there was not such a distinct separation between high and low culture. I plan to examine how the American publishing culture of the 1920s and 1930s was such that it produced celebrity literary authors. I will argue that not only did certain American modernist writers become celebrities, but that they, with the aid of their publishers, actively participated in fashioning their public personas. I will do so by looking at the careers of three of the most well-known and highly-regarded American modernists: Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. All three straddled the line between high modernism and self-promotion, combining their high artistic styles with their need for economic and public success.

Attitudes of Modernism

In an attempt to move away from the realism of Victorian novels, the modernists experimented with new forms of style and narrative which were often difficult for low and middlebrow readers to read and comprehend. John Carey goes as far as to claim that "the early twentieth century saw a determined effort, on the part of the European intelligentsia, to exclude the masses from culture" believing "the mass is, in art and literature, always wrong" [Carey. 2002: 16-18].

Less radically, modernist literature has historically been viewed as separate from the literary marketplace which Jameson describes as “the older [essentially high-modernist] frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture” [Jameson. 1991]. Pierre Bourdieu marks the difference between fields of cultural production with restricted culture being for the discerning few and unconcerned with capitalistic gain while wide-scale production being for the masses is obsessed with the bottom line [Bourdieu. 1996]. Modernist literature supposedly belonged to the former and did not cross into the territory of the latter.

However, a more recent surge of scholarship explores the connections between modernism and public culture and shows how frequently the two spheres interacted and how deeply they were connected. As Jonathan Goldman writes in *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity*, “readers were trained to think of [Modernist] authors as free from any influence of the popular marketplace, the sphere that would include celebrity [...] these two supposedly separate aspects of culture are, in truth, mutually constitutive, two sides of the same coin,” [Goldman. 2011: 2]. Indeed, modernist literature depended on its place within the public sphere with Timothy W. Galow claiming that “the high/low aesthetic divide can seem like little more than a tactical move perpetrated by authors trying to find a space in a thoroughly commoditized literary marketplace” [Galow. 2011: 28].

Modernist writers and publishers alike were forced to broker symbolic and economic capital. While writing avant-garde pieces of literature and publishing the innovative were certainly ways to establish a respectable presence in the literary scene, authors and publishers alike were aware that economic success was vital in order to sustain their careers. Many American publishers such as Alfred Knopf, Horace Liveright, and Bennett Cerf were also eager [and, at times, desperate] to simultaneously harness prestige and commercial success to ensure industrial longevity. The transatlantic modernists and American publishers worked to position themselves at the crossroads between hack writing and high art, and they thoroughly engaged with the public through a variety of means.

Magazines and the Masses

The growth of celebrity in the United States throughout the early part of the twentieth century is substantially due to an increase in the number of magazines and newspapers published and circulated due to the growth of distribution via railroads, as well as the opening of new sales channels, and an increase in advertisements in magazines leading to a slashing in prices making magazines more readily available and affordable to the public. Galow writes, “The [periodical production] industry provides a direct link between major trends in the emerging corporate business environment and shifting patterns of consumption” [Galow. 2011: 8].

The growth in the circulation of magazines and newspapers allowed the public greater access to reading than ever before. According to Carey, “Among European intellectuals hostility to newspapers was widespread” [Carey. 2002: 7]. Galow challenges Carey’s argument writing, “Rather than thinking of gossip columns and human-interest journalism as a parasitic offspring of ‘real’ news or ‘serious’ culture, these forms of reportage were a constitutive part of developing national media” [Galow. 2011: 3]. Furthermore, Galow points out how important the national media became “to the publishing industry in the early decades of the twentieth century” allowing authors such as Hemingway, Stein, and Fitzgerald all to become household names [Galow. 2011: 3]. In fact, all three authors actively engaged with periodicals and newspapers in the promotion of their works. For instance, not only did Fitzgerald agree to interviews in popular middlebrow magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*, and *Life*, but he constructed and transcribed his own interviews circulating them through his publishers to newspapers.

Furthermore, magazines and newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s show how aware the American reading public was of modernist writers and how interested the public was in their work despite perhaps not having read any of it. Loren Glass credits the great amount of press coverage to the gossipy nature of the American Modernist writers [Glass. 2004]. As Stein, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald were all expatriates who entered the public-eye and published some of their most famous works while living abroad in Paris, they developed a glamorous mystique about them which intrigued the American public. By physically

removing themselves from American culture, they were able to re-enter it through the literary marketplace as something other and exotic. Newspapers [e.g., Merle Schuster writing in the *New York Times*, “Paris, the Literary Capital of the United States” and cartoons in *Life*] contained stories of young, lazy, and drunk expatriates as jokes and lampooned high modernist style. In 1924, *The Saturday Evening Post*, the most widely circulated magazine in America at this time, published a parody of Stein’s work, “Investigations and Oil [After Gertrude Stein - with apologies].” This is ten years before Stein’s return to America, but the American reading public was certainly familiar enough with Stein’s style to understand such satires.

Of course, this does not mean that the American reading public was actively engaging with the works of Stein prior to 1934. Stein’s work was primarily published in smaller magazines such as *Broom*, *The Little Review*, *transatlantic review*, *Criterion*, and *transition* but some of her more accessible stories were published in the popular magazines *The Dial* and *Vanity Fair*. But, Stein was more read about than her work was read. Her work was seen as esoteric and difficult, but her general high modernist style was well-known enough to satirize and mock. Stein gained fame not so much for her work but for her presence in the Paris literary scene as the host of literary and artistic salons, and the public was curious to learn more about her as a person and the gossip surrounding her.

The American reading public was intrigued by the style and characteristics of the developing modernist movement as well. Karen Leick explains that “modernist artists and literary trends were certainly considered ‘news’ by periodicals and newspapers throughout the country; mainstream debates about modernism were familiar to all kinds of American readers” and argues that “the frequent discussions of avant-garde writing in mainstream publications [...] ensured that no elite readership could legitimately exist in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s” [Leick. 2012: 22]. The frequency of reviews and articles concerning the modernists’ styles and their attempts “to classify and explain the values of the experimental writing” shows how deeply embedded high art was in the lower spheres of American culture [Leick. 2012: 131]. As Glass writes, the 1920s and 1930s saw the ‘lost generation’ being “absorbed into American mainstream culture” [Glass. 2004: 5].

Stein and Hemingway's shift from obscure writers to mainstream icons were confirmed when they appeared on the covers of the middlebrow magazine *Time* in the 1930s and 1940s. They had moved away from as Glass puts it "their stated theories of self-effacement" to "their actual practice and literary-historical destiny of self-aggrandizement and even shameless self-promotion" [Glass. 2004: 5]. No longer were Stein and Hemingway submitting to T.S. Eliot's idea that poetry should be an "escape from personality," but rather they were embracing their public personas to sell their works [Eliot. 1920].

Writing Celebrity

Hemingway, Stein, and Fitzgerald all actively participated in cultivating their public personas. Although Stein and Fitzgerald downplayed their self-promotion, claiming that they engaged with the public and wrote short stories for middlebrow magazines due to the necessity to live and eat, evidence shows how dedicated they were to self-promotion in their attempts to control the images they presented to the public.

In 1934, a year after the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which sold more than 5,000 copies nine days in advance of official publication and went on to become a bestseller, Stein embarked on a lecture series tour of America. Her lectures repeatedly sold out, but Stein's *Lectures in America* [1935], a compilation of her lectures, sold poorly. It was clear that the public was not so interested in her ideas, but rather in seeing her. In *Everybody's Autobiography* [1937], Stein attempted to reconcile her feelings towards the contradictions in modernist literature between symbolic and economic capital, but she found it increasingly difficult to maintain a place in the market while keeping her distance from it.

Mythology surrounds the personal and professional lives of the modernist writers and perhaps Fitzgerald more so than any other for Fitzgerald actively worked to develop his own myths. His first novel, *This Side of Paradise* [1920], established Fitzgerald as the voice of the young post-WWI generation and confirmed his position with middlebrow readers and by the publication of *The Great Gatsby* [1925], Fitzgerald was regarded as the definitive voice of the "Jazz Age" and the authority on young American flappers and boozers. After spending his advance for *Tender is the Night* [1934] and committing his wife, Zelda, to a sanatorium,

Fitzgerald's career declined until he was forced to engage with the press so as to remind the public that he was still alive. Despite Fitzgerald's efforts to regain popularity and critical acclaim with "The Crack-Up" sketches published in *Esquire* [1936] and Hollywood screenwriting, he was unable to control the direction of his literary persona throughout the Depression era.

From early in his career, Fitzgerald worked to cultivate his public celebrity writing his own interviews, submitting blurbs for his books, suggesting covers and dust jackets, and making certain that the majority of articles and reviews concerning him either featured a picture of him in Brooks Brothers clothing or, at the very least, offered a description of his Ivy League looks and style. At the height of his career, Galow argues that Fitzgerald successfully navigated the divide between high and low culture by being "able to participate in America's crass consumer culture and live a life of public revelry while still maintaining enough detachment to write insightfully about it" [Galow. 2011: 127].

Not all critics were pleased with Fitzgerald's ability to marry low and high culture for middlebrow readers, a feat which Hemingway successfully managed as well. William Phillips, co-editor of *Partisan Review*, criticized the trend emerging in America after the First World War for "serious writing with popular touch" epitomized by Fitzgerald and Hemingway who "impatient for recognition, money, love, popularity [...] helped bring serious fiction into the middle range of audience appeal" [Phillips. 1983: 10]. Perhaps even more so than Fitzgerald, Hemingway made modernist literature accessible to the common reader. His signature sparse style made his works safe and welcoming to masculine men [Glass. 2004].

Hemingway first achieved recognition amongst the literary set in Paris with his innovative style in the early 1920s, but by the end of the decade he was a commercial success due to his semi-autobiographical novels *The Sun Also Rises* [1926] and *A Farewell to Arms* [1929]. Similar to Stein, Hemingway partially owed his commercial success to the public's interest in gossip surrounding the transatlantic modernists. Hemingway's editor, Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's [who was also influential in Fitzgerald's career], helped him to navigate the treacherous waters between high art and celebrity by, as Glass writes "operat[ing] on the

cusps between literary elite and cultural mainstream, and [Perkins] understood that the prestige of the former could leverage popularity in the latter” [Glass. 2004: 145]. However, as Hemingway’s fame grew and he transformed from aspiring bohemian to “Papa,” he experienced canonization in his own lifetime. By 1927, Hemingway had grown weary of his celebrity status writing to Perkins, “No living person should read as much stuff about themselves as they get through those cursed clippings” and compared the reading of his achievements in the papers to dying and being able to read one’s own obituary [Hemingway. 1927: 247]. Yet, despite semi-reluctance in his early career to engage with the public spotlight, he appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Life* several times and continued to submit short stories to middlebrow periodicals throughout his career.

With the publication of *Death in the Afternoon* [1932], Hemingway emerged as a full “personality” with Leonard J. Leff observing “he could supply the audience only with himself as Ernest Hemingway the professional writer, Ernest Hemingway the hack” [Leff. 1997: 199]. His subsequent work continued to reinforce his hyper-masculine image with Edmund Wilson of *Atlantic Monthly* deeming Hemingway the public persona of a writer as “certainly his worst invented character yet” [Wilson. 1982, 304]. What he was successfully able to manage in his early career with the help of Perkins led to, as John Raeburn puts it, a “disparity between his literary reputation and his public reputation” [Raeburn. 1984: 13].

Conclusion

From a literary standpoint, as their careers progressed and celebrity-statuses increased, there was a decline in the quality in each of these writer’s works. While engaging with the public and marketplace does not inherently worsen a writer’s craft, for Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Stein, their celebrity-statuses eclipsed their writing in the public-eye and turned their well-recognized personas into stereotypes. Yet, regardless of their personal and professional shortcomings, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Stein prove that while they absorbed the modernist styles and ideals of their European counterparts, they were also willing to engage with the public and have their works assimilated into middlebrow reading culture.

What is striking about the modernist period is not a clear distinction between high and low art, but rather the public's willingness to engage with and learn more about Modernist writers. The romantic notion that the literary market of the 1920s and 1930s was strictly binary, hack writing published for profit and high literary art published for its merit, is reductive and ignores the truth of what was actually happening. Writers and publishers were always conscious of the market demands of literature as well as the need to publish credible work and these two seemingly contradictory goals were best executed by the American modernists.

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