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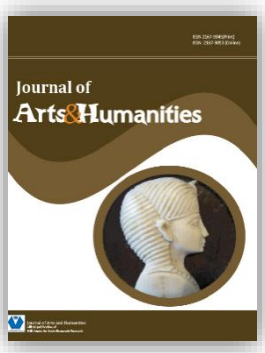

The Ethics of Desire in Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha": A Lacanian Reading

Narim Kim[1]

ABSTRACT

The heroine of Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha," the centrepiece story of her novella *Three Lives* (2006), is an unconventional character whose "wandering" entails involving herself in sexual relationships with both men and women. Hence, many readings of Melanctha's story tend to regard her as unethical, while instead complimenting her lover Jefferson and his classically Aristotelian values, as the morally superior. The objective of this article is to overturn this conclusion, for such an assumption consolidates the hackneyed privileging of mind over body, man over woman, and white over black. Such thinking will be countered by reinstating Melanctha's sexual desire as ethical, as this will unsettle the traditional meaning of what is "ethical." To do so, I read "Melanctha" through a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. Through such a reading, Jefferson will first be revealed to be immersed in a false belief of the wholeness of language and the logical mind, or what Lacan calls the Symbolic. Doubting this fantasy, Melanctha instead follows her desire, which continuously leads her towards the "beyond" of the Symbolic. At this beyond is a realm that essentially entails the "death" of the subject. Thus, by showing through her wandering that desire is in "truth" oriented towards death, I reinstate Melanctha as Lacan's ethical subject.

Keywords: Desire, Ethics, Gertrude Stein, Lacan, Melanctha.
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1.0 Introduction: Is Melanctha's "wandering" unethical?

Among the three stories of Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (2006), "Melanctha" stands out as significantly longer and more complex than the other two stories, "The Gentle Lena" and "The Good Anna." "Melanctha" is complex due both to its form and content: In the work Stein subverts conventional uses of literary language by altering syntax, detaching words from conventional meaning, and excessively repeating words and phrases. At the same time, "Melanctha" is also notable for its eponymous

[1] Yonsei University, Republic of Korea, Email: narim537@hanmail.net.

unconventional heroine, a bisexual mulatta who freely "wanders" through temporary lovers, always wanting (sexual) "excitements" and loving "too hard and much too often" (Stein, 2006, p. 56). This particular trait has sparked controversy over whether Stein may be interpreted as racist, as the most sexually active woman of *Three Lives* is also the "darkest" of the three.

Critics who claim that the story is indeed racist include Milton A. Cohen (1984), who, to prove that Stein favors white over black, actually draws a detailed graph of the racial hierarchy in the work. Another example is Sonia Saldívar-Hull (1989), who specifically points out that Stein associates "blacker" skin with "bad," "simple-minded," and "childlike vocabulary," while on the other hand relates "white" with "good," "intelligent," and "sophisticated" (p. 191). According to Saldívar-Hull (1989), the effect of the story's repetitive style is to "drill in" these racist characterizations. Indeed, Saldívar-Hull (1989) even suggests that to her Stein seems to be able to sympathize with Melanctha only because the mulatta has some white blood in her (p. 191).

Although Saldívar-Hull (1989) may be correct in claiming that racist logic has often degraded non-Caucasians as promiscuous, her reading is nevertheless limited in the sense that she chooses to simply regard unrestrained sexuality as "bad," i.e. unethical. True, Melanctha does "wander." However, is this wandering simply "bad," and is Stein in turn simply racist for creating a "bad" colored heroine? This paper questions this conclusion, and sets as its objective to overturn the assumption that Saldívar-Hull (1989) bases her reading on, in a way that is analogous to how Jacques Lacan overturns the classical scholar Aristotle's notions of what is "good" and "bad."

In his *Ethics* seminar (1992), Lacan first and foremost sets out to criticize traditional ethics as represented by Aristotle as having been short-sighted in dealing with the human subject. Building upon Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious subject, Lacan overturns "the whole trajectory of the philosophical conception of the ethical subject as being first of all a knowing subject and the subject of such knowledge" (Freeland, 2013, p. 19). Aristotle's notion of the self is the knowing, rational subject, a person who is capable of making "good" decisions through a syllogistic process of the lucid mind. In this light, being "bad" in Aristotle's view is to make illogical choices, although *knowing* that the choice is not "good." On the other hand, Lacan's subject does *not* know itself. This is because the unconscious, which is made up of desires that consciousness cannot grasp, exists. However, Lacan claims that the unconscious also follows a syllogistic line of reasoning, not unlike how Aristotle's states that the conscious mind operates. By claiming so, Lacan counters Aristotle's rejection of desire as illogical and therefore "bad."

Melanctha's desire is unfathomable to her; it is repeated throughout her story that she simply does not know what it is that she wants. One thing is clear, however: Melanctha is not content within her world and is continuously oriented towards the "beyond" of it, although she has no idea of exactly what lies in the beyond. According to Lacan, what lies beyond the subject's world, which he terms the "Symbolic," is something indescribable and thus beyond the level of words, or "signifiers." As "good" and "bad" are signifiers, what Melanctha searches for thus is not "good," and nor is it "bad," which in turn means that Melanctha's wandering also cannot be simply concluded as "good," nor can it be described as "bad." Rather, her wandering is beyond the two moral categories, and is rather what Lacan calls "ethical," in that it leads us to the "truth" of human desire.

Before focusing on Melanctha's ethical wandering, I will first show the differences between Melanctha and Jefferson. I will first deal with Jefferson's point of view, which sees Melanctha as illogical and unethical. From here I will go on to show how Jefferson, contrary to how he views himself, is actually immersed in a fantasy. Specifically, this is what Lacan describes as the fantasy of the non-existent sexual relationship. To explain this fantasy, I will first delineate, albeit briefly, basic ideas of Lacanian theory. To discuss Melanctha, I will give special focus on Lacan's theory on desire and what desire has to do with ethics.

2.0 Melanctha versus Jefferson

Melanctha's "wandering" being her defining trait, numerous readings have suggested that Stein found her inspiration for creating a heroine like Melanctha in the teachings of her mentor William James (1982), who claimed that there are "childish" people whose minds "wander," meaning that they are unable to "selectively" perceive stimuli while remaining "inattentive to all but those objects that bear upon our individual needs" (Ruddick, 1991, pp. 16-18).[2] When this Jamesian logic is applied, the "wandering" Melanctha is considered to be underdeveloped, while her lover Jefferson Campbell, as the more focused of the two, is in turn interpreted as more sophisticated than his female counterpart. Stressing this difference between them as irreconcilable, Bridgman (1971) reads "Melanctha" as a tragic rendition of the classic "opposites attract" theory of love, claiming that Jefferson represents "calm," "conventionality," "peace" and "control," while Melanctha's traits may be summed up as "passion," "liberation," "turmoil," and "looseness" (Bridgman, 1971, p. 53). As Bridgman sees it, it is because of this asymmetry between them that Jefferson in the end leaves Melanctha, although initially he was attracted to her because she was different from him.

The problem Jefferson has with Melanctha is that he cannot accept Melanctha's different way of living because it registers as what he defines as "bad" conduct. Born into a patriarchal, religious family—Jefferson's father is religious, and his mother "reverences" his father while "worshipping" Jefferson as well (Stein, 2006, p. 70)—by the time he meets Melanctha, Jefferson has walked a course in life entirely different from the woman who has wandered for most her life. While Melanctha is never described as having any kind of profession, from early on in life Jefferson aims to become, by studying hard and going to college, the doctor he is when he meets Melanctha (Stein, 2006, p. 70). Having achieved his goal of self-betterment, he also strives to better his African American community.

This goal being what he thinks is "moral," Jefferson tells Melanctha: "I want to see the colored people like what is good and what I want them to have, and that's to live regular and work hard and understand things" (Stein, 2006, p. 74). Naturally, he disapproves of Melanctha's way of living, as her "wandering" oversteps the boundaries of what he considers as "regular." However, Melanctha also gives Jefferson a piece of her mind.

> It don't seem to me Dr. Campbell, that what you *say* and what you *do* seem to have much to do with each other. And about your being so good Dr. Campbell," went on Melanctha, . . . "It seems to me, Dr. Campbell you want to have a good time just like all us others, and then you just keep on saying that it's right to be good and you ought not to have excitements, and yet you really don't want to do it . . . No, Dr. Campbell, it certainly does seem to me *you don't know* very well yourself, what you mean, when you are talking. (Stein, 2006, p. 74)

Here Melanctha reverses Jefferson's view, telling Jefferson that he *does* want to have excitements, although he may *say* that he does not. She thereby points out that language is not as transparent as Jefferson thinks; speaking subjects may say something while meaning another. This may be because the person intends to hide his/her intent, or also because, like Melanctha implies applies to Jefferson, the person speaking *does not know* his/her true intent, because it is unconscious.

Melanctha's pointing out to Jefferson the possibility of himself not actually knowing himself in fact threatens Jefferson's self-confidence to a substantial extent. Jefferson's conflict is so evident that Madelyn Detloff (2009) even suggests that for Jefferson, Melanctha's influence is literally "toxic" (p. 65). According to Detloff, Jefferson only manages to survive because he escapes Melanctha's influence. Such a reading is not uncommon, however: Indeed, Mark Niemeyer (1994) also claims that Jefferson escapes the "hysteric" Melanctha, which is why he manages to escape from lapsing into hysteria himself (p. 83). Moreover, Niemeyer (1994) adds that Jefferson gains a "fuller understanding of himself" through this escape (p. 83).

[2] For a look into what Stein would have learned from James's seminars, refer to William James (1982) own *Psychology: The Briefer Course.*

However, complimenting Jefferson for changing, as does Niemeyer, leads to reading "Melanctha" less as Melanctha's story and more as something like Jefferson's *bildungsroman*. In such readings, Melanctha passively and unchangingly stands as something like a gateway through which Jefferson with his logic must pass to emerge as a better version of himself. When the story is read from a Lacanian perspective, however, Melanctha will be the one resisting Jefferson, because Jefferson will be revealed to be immersed in a fantasy, which is to Melanctha, illogical.

3.0 Jefferson's fantasy of the sexual relationship

The crux of Lacanian theory is that the speaking subject is born from lack. Lacan speculated that before the subject is subjected to language, there exists the human of the Real, the realm not (yet) subject to the Symbolic's signifying function, which differentiates things by assigning them with distinct signifiers. Thus, to exist in the Symbolic, the human must be represented by a signifier, and this equals to being assigned a "place" in the Symbolic (Fink, 1990, p. 87). However, signifiers are never sufficient to express the whole of the human's being; there is always something that is lacking within the Symbolic. For convenience's sake although this lacking something cannot be assigned a signifier, Lacan chose to refer to the remnant left behind by the human as it enters the Symbolic as a subject as *objet a* (1998, p. 103).

To shield himself from acknowledging that lack is constitutional for all subjects, including himself, Jefferson immerses himself in the fantasy of the sexual relationship, believing that it is possible to become "one" with Melanctha. How he describes his relationship with Melanctha to her is revealing.

> I see perhaps what really loving is like, like *really having everything together,* [emphasis added] new things, little pieces all different, like I always before been thinking was bad to be having, all go *together* [emphasis added] like, to make one good big feeling. (Stein, 2006, p. 99)

Jefferson's repeated emphasis of a sense of everything coming together here implies that he believes there is a fusion between him and his lover. That is to say, Jefferson believes that Melanctha will complete him. In Lacanian terms, this means that Jefferson loves Melanctha as the object that he lacks: *objet a*.

Enjoying Melanctha as *objet a*, Jefferson cannot wholly enjoy her; he can only enjoy what he "imagines her to be, wants her to be, fools [himself] into believing she is or has" (Fink, 1995, p. 111). Wanting to know incorporate Melanctha as *objet a* into his universe, Jefferson attempts to understand "really more for certain *all* about [emphasis added]" Melanctha (Stein, 2006, p. 80). How he attempts to do so is to attempt to understand and define Melanctha through words. Heavily reliant on language, Jefferson tells Melanctha: "I *just* [emphasis added] want to go on talking with you" (Stein, 2006, p. 83), which makes evident that he intends to start and maintain his relationship with Melanctha through talk, through language, and thus within his symbolic world. However, like Lacan says, language is ever insufficient in representing the whole of being. Thus this attempt is doomed to fail.

However, Jefferson is unrelenting, and so he situates Melanctha in the analyst's position while seating himself in the psychoanalytic couch, from where he demands of Melanctha to explain herself to him. Jefferson is tormented because he cannot understand why "he wanted very badly Melanctha should be there beside him, and he wanted very badly, too, always to throw her from him" (Stein, 2006, p. 93). This paradox is comes to be too much for him, and so he in the end chooses to conveniently conclude that the mystery of Melanctha was an "illusion" (Stein, 2006, p. 119). That is, for the sake of reassuring himself, Jefferson dismisses Melanctha as "made just like all us others" (Stein, 2006, p. 119), which allows him to return to his self-assured self and go back to his "regular" way of living, picking back up his work for the colored people. In other words, Jefferson does not ever truly give up his belief in the Symbolic.

As such, Jefferson ultimately gives up his search to understand. Melanctha, however, does not give up her search, which is why she is Lacan's ethical subject. The following section will therefore go on to discuss how Melanctha can be reinstated as ethical.

4.0 Desire's object: The "evil" thing

It is evident that when her father interrogates her about the "power" John compliments her about, Melanctha truly does not know what he demands to know. However, the narrator gives a hint as to what this something Melanctha does not know could be:

> Melanctha Herbert had always been old in all her ways and she knew very early how to use her power as a woman, and yet Melanctha with all her inborn intense wisdom was really very ignorant of *evil*. Melanctha had not yet come to understand what they meant, the things she so often heard around her, and which were just beginning to stir strongly in her. (Stein, 2006, p. 59)

It is after her confrontation with her father about this "evil" she is ignorant about that Melanctha starts to "wander." What this suggests is that what Melanctha wants to understand through her wanderings is precisely this "evil." The narrator portrays her first wanderings:

> In these next years Melanctha learned many ways that lead to wisdom . . . These years of learning led very straight to trouble for Melanctha, though in these years Melanctha never did or meant anything that was really wrong . . . when the darkness covered everything all over, she would begin to learn to know this man or that. She would advance, they would respond, and then she would withdraw a little, dimly, and always she did not know what it was that really held her. Sometimes she would almost go over, and then the strength in her of not really knowing, would stop the average man in his endeavor. It was a strange experience of ignorance and power and desire. Melanctha did not know what it was that she so badly wanted. She was afraid, and yet she did not understand that here she really was a coward. (Stein, 2006, p. 60)

The passage above describes Melanctha as a "coward" who desires knowledge of the "evil" but withdraws every time because she is afraid to truly understand—she only "*almost* [goes] over." Emphasizing how Melanctha repeatedly withdraws, the early pages of her story repeat that Melanctha is a coward (Stein, 2006, p. 60, 61, 63) and show her to wander from man to man, only involving herself in brief and superficial relationships.

From the viewpoint of Aristotelian ethics, such wandering would be deemed unethical, i.e. "bad," as it is not directed towards achieving "good" self-betterment. However, for Melanctha, her wandering is not bad—indeed, "Melanctha never did or meant anything that was really wrong" (Stein, 2006, p. 60). Unrestrainedly wandering, Melanctha does not care for being neither good nor bad. Rather, what Melanctha is drawn towards is something that lies beyond such moral categorizing—something that rather fits the label "evil."

It is with this desire for something beyond that Melanctha deeply immerses herself in a homosexual relationship with Jane Harden, who is seven years older than Melanctha. Like Melanctha, Jane also has a reputation for "wandering." By the time she meets Melanctha, Jane has been thrown out of college for "bad conduct" (Stein, 2006, p. 65), which indicates that she is not interested in conforming to the Symbolic's law. Melanctha is drawn to Jane's transgressiveness and so chooses to become Jane's lover. What is interesting, however, is that what Melanctha experiences in her relationship with Jane entails *suffering*:

> [Jane] loved Melanctha hard and made Melanctha feel it very deeply . . . [Melanctha] learned a little in these days to know joy, and she was taught too how very keenly she could suffer . . . It was a very tumultuous, very mingled year, this time for Melanctha . . . Sometimes the lesson came almost too strong for Melanctha, but somehow she always managed to endure it and so slowly, but always with increasing strength and feeling, Melanctha began to really understand. (Stein, 2006, p. 60-67)

With Jane, Melanctha paradoxically feels both joy and suffering, and it is through experiencing this

paradoxical, inexplicable feeling that she thinks that she is beginning to "really understand" (Stein, 2006, p. 67).

What Melanctha feels in her relationship with Jane is enjoyment through a lesbian sexual experience, a deviant mode of enjoyment that the Symbolic's law does not allow. According to Lacan, the Symbolic bars subjects from enjoying the "infinite" pleasure that exists in the beyond of the Symbolic—jouissance—and instead orders subjects to enjoy only the pleasure language defines as pleasure, with parts of the body that language designates as appropriate (Fink, 1995, p. 24). This is why Melanctha feels both pleasure and pain while with Jane; her experience is not allowed for the subject to enjoy. At the same time, it is because Melanctha realizes this paradoxical sensation that she thinks she is beginning to understand: She has caught a glimpse of the beyond of the Symbolic.

Having caught this glimpse, Melanctha does not choose to stay with Jane, which would have put an end to her wandering. This is because, for one, Jane's wandering turns out to consist mainly of drinking, which has "no real attraction for" Melanctha (Stein, 2006, p. 67). Also, towards the end of their relationship Jane becomes dependent on Melanctha (Stein, 2006, p. 67), which has no use for Melanctha, as what she wants Jane to be is her teacher. Thus Melanctha chooses to leave Jane and recommences her solitary wandering, in search of "something *realler*" (Stein, 2006, p. 68).

However, that this real thing is beyond the Symbolic essentially means that this thing cannot be found within the Symbolic: The thing Melanctha seeks is what the Symbolic lacks; it is a *lacking* thing. To find this thing, the subject must transgress the limits of the Symbolic, which equates to giving up one's symbolic identity. Thus, finding the real thing would entail the "death" of the subject, which is why Lacan defines this thing as a radical "evil." It is with regard to this formidable nature of the real thing that it is possible to conceive of the Symbolic as a "'net' seemingly cast over the totality of the real"; it bars the subject from the "evil" that lies beyond (Freeland, 2013, p. 76).

Initially, Melanctha agrees to this set up. Very early on in her story, Melanctha's desire is described as a "desire for a right position" (Stein, 2006, p. 54), which is basically a desire for a place within the Symbolic. However, Melanctha cannot dismiss the feeling that the Symbolic is insufficient. Indeed, she makes explicit her distrust of language by announcing to Jefferson:

> "I certainly never do talk very much when I like anybody really, Jeff. You see, Jeff, it ain't much use to talk about what a woman is really feeling in her. You see all that, Jeff, better, by and by, when you get to really feeling. You won't be so ready then always with your talking. You see, Jeff, if it don't come true what I am saying." (Stein, 2006, p. 84-85)

Melanctha's speech here rather sets her up as the woman mysterious, whose secret cannot be put into words. Accordingly, Jefferson interprets Melanctha's dismissal of talk as a refusal to give up knowledge of something that he does not know, which is why he goes on to beg for more and more from her, to *tell* him what she knows. What Melanctha stresses, however, is the fundamental incompatibility between the real thing and language.

As opposed to Jefferson, Melanctha does not rely on language in her search for knowledge. Rather, her search is initiated by a realization of language's incapability to express the real thing and sustained by a yearning for that evil thing that which escapes language, which indicates that Melanctha is attracted to transgressing the distance the Symbolic sets between its subjects and the Real.

5.0 Melanctha's ethics of desire

However, Melanctha is never shown to *completely* transgress this distance. Rather, her life after Jefferson leaves her is depicted as one that seems to continuously seek stability within the Symbolic. For one, Melanctha chooses to stay with her friend Rose Johnson, a woman who, completely unlike Melanctha, "never found any way to get excited" (Stein, 2006, p. 129). Rose also "never had any kind of trouble to perplex her" (Stein, 2006, p. 131) because, of a "selfish, decent kind of nature," Rose "always

knew very well what it was she wanted, and she knew very well what was the right way to do to get everything she wanted" (Stein, 2006, p. 131). As this character feels "solid, simple, certain" to Melanctha, she clings to Rose for stability (Stein, 2006, p. 131). As much as Melanctha seeks stability, however, her desire continuously pulls her away from it. Hence, her desire to settle down notwithstanding, Melanctha leaves Rose, feeling that "she must begin again to look and see if she could find what it was she had always wanted" (Stein, 2006, p. 134).

Picking up her active search again, Melanctha involves herself with the wayward Jem Richards, a gambler and a playboy. Jem is also knowledgeable about horses, animals whose wildness Melanctha loves.[3] Thus, as a successful gambler who knows horses, Jem is associated in Melanctha's mind with "successful power" (Stein, 2006, p. 135). This vibrant man towards who Melanctha feels a strong attraction is an enigma for Melanctha. That is, unlike Jane, Jefferson, and Rose, Jem keeps Melanctha wondering. This is especially so later in their relationship, when Jem begins to lose interest in Melanctha because his concern becomes entirely focused on winning bets. Unable to understand Jem's aloofness, Melanctha repeatedly questions herself what Jem wants, i.e. what he desires:

> Melanctha did not know what it was Jem Richards wanted . . . What was it Jem Richards really wanted? . . . Melanctha never could make out really what it was Jem Richards wanted . . . sometimes she was all sick inside her with her doubting. What was it Jem really wanted to do with her? (Stein, 2006, p. 139)

Melanctha's wondering is repeated over many paragraphs, but no conclusion is ever reached. Jem "never [makes] things any better for Melanctha" (Stein, 2006, p. 141) by clarifying his thoughts, and so Melanctha speculates on her own.

Although this lone speculation is painful for Melanctha, this is precisely what distinguishes her from the other main characters of *Three Lives*. Most obviously, that Melanctha questions is contrasted against Lena and Anna, both of whom never question. Also, whereas Jefferson does not take on the weight of understanding desire on himself, in the sense that he demands of Melanctha to conveniently provide him with an answer, Melanctha actively questions, although she may suffer for it. Moreover, whereas Jefferson concludes in the end that he has reached a stage of enlightenment, Melanctha never concludes that she "knows."

Such a conclusion is impossible, because the real thing cannot be incorporated into the symbolic subject's universe. Our very existence is constituted by this lack, although it is "almost impossible to believe there is . . . a void . . . at the center of life" (Ragland, 1995, p. 110). Ellie Ragland (1995) explained that the effect this constitutional lack has on out existence is that it "produces enigmatas at the best, unbearable suffering at the worst, and anxiety, ecstasy (mania), depression, anger, or despair in between" (p. 110). In other words, the fundamental lack at the center of being accounts for "why 'big' life questions are never answered once and for all" (Ragland, 1995, p. 110). There being no answer, the subject must thus forever question. It seems to be that, for Lacan, this very act of questioning is what he meant by "ethical." He stated:

> [Ethics] begins at the moment when the subject poses the question of that good he had unconsciously sought in the social structures. And it is at that moment, too, that he is led to discover the deep relationship as a result of which that which presents itself as a law is closely tied to the very structure of desire . . . he discovers that which articulates his conduct as that the object of his desire is always maintained at a certain distance. But this distance is not complete; it is a distance that is called proximity, which is not identical to the subject, which is literally close to it. (Lacan, 1992, p. 76)

By questioning what the law sets as "good," the ethical subject discovers that the good is a symbolic

[3] It is mentioned early on in the story that Melanctha loves horses; she meets John the coachman because she visits the stable he works at.

construct and that it veils something that the Symbolic maintains at "a certain distance." Continuing one's questioning is thus an attempt to close this distance, which is what Melanctha pursues through her wandering.

As this something that the Symbolic maintains at "a certain distance" is in fact "nothing," i.e. the lacking real thing, ultimately Melanctha cannot find it. Indeed, she is never shown to find anything and instead abruptly dies at the end of her story. It is only in the final three paragraphs that her illness and death are discussed, which leaves the readers perplexed as to why she dies:

> Melanctha never killed herself, she only got a bad fever and went into the hospital where they took good care of her and cured her . . . When Melanctha was well again, she took a place and began to work and to live regular. Then Melanctha got very sick again, she began to cough and sweat and be so weak she could not stand to do her work . . . Melanctha went back to the hospital, and there the Doctor told her she had the consumption, and before long she would surely die. They sent her where she would be taken care of, a home for poor consumptives, and there Melanctha stayed until she died. (Stein, 2006, p. 147)

As unforeseen and unexplained as this conclusion is, however, the passage does subtly indicate why Melanctha "got very sick again": It is after "she took a place and began to work and to live regular" that Melanctha's illness becomes fatal. From here it is possible to surmise, although this runs the risk of sealing what the text intentionally leaves open to interpretation, that Melanctha's fever, cough, and sweating are symptoms that result from her attempting to take up a place in the Symbolic and conform to its laws of what is "regular." That is, Melanctha dies when she stops her wandering.

The ethics of psychoanalysis is to reveal that our unconscious desire is headed towards the real thing that in truth does not exist. Stein has unveiled this structure, by depicting a life that is lived only as a circling around this unobtainable thing. Like Lacan pointed out, life is not a linear, cumulative process that leads to an ultimate answer. Rather, it is a circuitous movement that has lack at its center. Due to this fundamental lack, "big" life questions cannot ever be answered once and for all (Ragland, 1995, p. 110). However, this is not to say that there is no value in questioning, or that we should stop questioning, which would amount to passively acquiescing to the Symbolic, as does Lena and Anna. What must be rejected is rather the attempt to seek an answer in the fictitious form of an ultimate Truth, as this would put a stop to the questioning process. Thus, what Stein has shown by Melanctha's story is that life *is* a question, which indeed seems to have been on Stein's mind throughout her life, as her final words on her deathbed were first "What is the answer?," followed by silence, and then "In that case, what is the question?" (Brinnin, 1987, p. 404)

6.0 Conclusion

The question that Melanctha asks and in a sense sustains her life is about the something beyond the Symbolic, the something that cannot be fathomed through signifiers. As such, it is impossible to pinpoint what this is through the words of this thesis. However, I will nevertheless present a tentative surmise of what Melanctha is unconsciously drawn to.

As hitherto discussed, Melanctha is oriented towards something beyond "good" and "bad"—something "evil." To note is that always persisting in Melanctha's mind when she wanders towards this "evil" is the question "how she could go on living when she was so blue" (Stein, 2006, p. 54). Specifically, "sometimes the thought of how all her world was made filled the complex, desiring Melanctha with despair" (Stein, 2006, p. 54), which makes her wonder why she does not kill herself, "although she thought this was the best thing for herself to do" (Stein, 2006, p. 54). That she thinks she should kill herself but does not do so is repeated sporadically throughout the text, along with the phrase "Melanctha Herbert was always seeking rest and quiet, and always she could only find new ways to be in trouble" (Stein, 2006, p. 56). Here, "rest and quiet" can be read as a form of death, which means that, taken together, the repetition of both such phrases suggest that always underlying Melanctha's prowess is an attraction towards death.

Also worth noting at this point is that, not only does Melanctha herself ponder about death (to be more exact, about suicide), her story is also infested with actual deaths of other characters, so much so that Janice L. Doane (1986) claimed that there is in fact a "condensed juxtaposition of life and death" in the story (p. 74). That is, death and sickness mark their presence in the midst of Melanctha's sexual wandering, although they bear no crucial relation to the progress of the plot. Examples are: the death of Rose's baby, with which the story opens; the death of Melanctha's mother, who is dying when Melanctha proposes "friendship" to Jefferson; and the sickness of the dying man who Jefferson tends to near the end of his relationship with Melanctha. Perhaps the most important instance is, however, Rose's revelation of how, as a young child, Melanctha overhears her mother say to her father that she was sad that "Melanctha had not been the one the Lord had took from them stead of the little brother who was dead in the house there from fever" (Stein, 2006, p. 133). Interestingly, this episode bears similarity to an episode from Stein's own life: According to Richard Bridgman, as Stein's parents had decided on a limit of the children they would have, it was only after two of their children died that they decided to have two more—Stein's older brother Leo, and then Stein herself. Bridgman (1971) said that the knowledge of her birth as something that only occurred because of death never stopped to trouble Stein (p. 7), which perhaps explains why she went on to create a heroine for whom death is always a felt presence.

As death is the ultimate unsignifiable, in the sense that no one who has directly experienced death can speak about it, it is possible to interpret the ineffable real thing Melanctha searches for as death itself. Although one may question death, one may not receive an answer. Instead, one may only continue to "wander" through life, circling around death. Ironically, Melanctha's effort to close this distance between herself and death is what sustains her life; it seems to be that she dies when she stops her transgressive wandering towards death.

However, this is only one speculation. The nature of the real thing is never made clear in the text, and Melanctha, as a heroine who does not know, invites readers to "wander" along with her, perpetually speculating about desire, death, and existence. Hence, just as Lacan emphasized, over and over again in his typically enigmatic fashion, that language is insufficient to fully express "truth," Stein also emphasized this insufficiency through presenting an intensely repetitive, difficult text that only circles around, while never entirely revealing, the "truth" of what Melanctha's desire, as is the desire of all subjects, is oriented towards.

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