

**Tales of Good-hearted Women: A Comparison of
Gustave Flaubert's "Un Coeur simple" and
Gertrude Stein's "The Good Anna"**

善心女人的故事：比較福婁拜的〈一顆單純的心〉和史坦恩的
〈好安娜〉

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Abstract

This paper compares two short stories of good-hearted spinster women. One is "Un Coeur simple" by French writer Gustave Flaubert, and the other is "The Good Anna" by American writer Gertrude Stein. "The Good Anna," one of the three stories in Stein's first book *Three Lives*, owes its origin partly to Flaubert's "Un Coeur Simple," which is also one of the three stories in a collection called *Trois Contes*. Both stories are about a female servant who sacrifices herself in working for her mistress and helping her friends. Although the subject is the same, the themes and the ways of presenting the kind women are very different. Flaubert's story celebrates the sacred soul of Félicité, who is portrayed as a saint-like figure. Stein's character Anna, on the other hand, suggests the author's protest against exploitation through Anna's seemingly authoritative but actually submissive attitude toward the social convention. Moreover, unlike the objective narrative voice in Flaubert's story, Stein deliberately blends the character's language into the total voice of the narration. Therefore, despite the literary debt, Stein rewrites the traditional plot about women's experience by adding the anti-patriarchal element and using innovative narrative language in the portrait of a sacrificial spinster and hence gives the story a new meaning.

Key words: Gertrude Stein, Gustave Flaubert, "The Good Anna," "Un Coeur simple," *Three Lives*, *Trois Contes*, Women's Studies.

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摘要

這篇論文主要是比較兩個好心老女人的故事，一個是法國作家福婁拜的〈一顆單純的心〉，另一個是美國作家史坦恩所寫的〈好安娜〉。〈好安娜〉是史坦恩第一本書《三個生命》中的第一個故事，這個故事的起源之一就是福婁拜的〈一顆單純的心〉，而福婁拜的故事也是一本選集《三個故事》中的一個，兩個故事都是有關一名女僕如何犧牲奉獻、幫助主人及朋友的過程。雖然題材一樣，主旨和表現方式卻大異其趣，福婁拜的故事把女僕菲莉西蝶描述成一位聖者，有著高潔的靈魂，而史坦恩筆下的安娜則狀似權威、實則對傳統馴服屈從，用以表達作者對女性被剝削的抗議。除此之外，福婁拜的故事採取客觀的敘述聲音，而史坦恩則巧妙的把人物的語言融合在敘述的聲音中，因此，史坦恩的故事來源雖然是福婁拜的小說，卻加上了反父權的要素，以及創新的敘事語言，改寫了女性犧牲自我的傳統情節，並賦與故事新的意義。

關鍵詞：史坦恩，福婁拜，〈好安娜〉，〈一顆單純的心〉，《三個生命》，《三個故事》，女性研究。

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Gertrude Stein's "The Good Anna," one of the three stories in her first book *Three Lives*, owes its origin partly to Gustave Flaubert's "Un Coeur simple," which is also one of the three stories in a collection entitled *Trois Contes*. However, the striking similarities or the literary debt between "The Good Anna" and "Un Coeur simple" do not make these two books categorized into the same group. The differences in their themes, namely Stein's investigation of a submissive womanhood and Flaubert's celebration of a sacred soul, create different impact by similar plots and similar characters. The differences also lie in the narrative technique. Flaubert's objective viewpoint and Stein's intimate tone also help the stories to convey different meanings. Stein's avant-garde novella, addressing the role and perception of women at the turn of the century, is basically a revolt against the narrative style of realism which is represented by Flaubert's art. She sought to emulate the aesthetic of the innovative painters like Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse. The focus on language, tone, and description in the collection catapulted her to the forefront of the influential American Modernist Movement, which inspired later novelists such as Ernest Hemingway and others. Thus as a female writer, Stein rewrites the traditional plot about the kind-hearted spinster and expresses a sense of immediacy and privacy in telling a woman's story.

Both "Un Coeur simple" and "The Good Anna" are about the life story of a spinster and servant woman who is uneducated, compassionate, morally good, and faithful to her mistress all her lifetime. When Flaubert wrote the story, he meant to move the reader by his innocent protagonist Félicité. The story is quite simple. Félicité is a country maid who spends her entire life in humble and dedicated domestic service. She loves successively a man who abandons her, the children of her mistress (one dies and the other becomes a good-for-nothing), a nephew who dies in a distant land, and an old man in the last stage of his illness, until she finally discovers superior happiness with a parrot which she has stuffed after he dies too. This stuffed bird, the sole consolation in her own lonely death, becomes for her a mystic fetish. Thus the story is a pathetic one about a "servante au grand coeur" (a servant with a noble heart), a woman poor in spirit but immensely rich in her capacity to serve and to love.

The story begins with a statement that "Pendant un demi-siècle, les bourgeoises de Pont-l'Evêque envièrent à Mme Aubain sa servante Félicité" (Flaubert 43) (During the half century, the bourgeoisie of Pont-l'Evêque envied Madame Aubain for her servant Félicité). As a matter of fact, Félicité is exploited by everyone around her. For one hundred francs a year, she does all the cooking, the washing, the ironing and the sewing, not to mention various duties in the stable and the barnyard. She is taken advantage of by a ruthless sister and her greedy family. Every time her nephew Victor comes to visit her, he is told to bring his clothes to be mended and bring something back such as a packet of brown sugar, some soap, a little brandy, or even money. However, Félicité always does

her work gladly. The exploitation and her victimized status never bother her. Her ignorance and saint-like naiveté prove to be incorruptible.

Moreover, Félicité's life is filled with short-lived relationships. She grows up as an orphan working in the fields. She has her love story, but her lover Theodore betrays her and abandons her by marrying a rich old woman. She is upset for a while and decides to leave the farm where she works. Then she begins to work in Mme Aubain's house. She loves Mme Aubain's children Paul and Virginie and forgets her grief of the lost love. However, Paul is soon sent to school in Caen and Virginie is sent as a boarder to the Ursuline Convent at Honfleur. Later Virginie dies from illness before moving back home. In her loneliness, Félicité asks permission to receive her nephew Victor's visits. Again this regular visit from Victor does not last long. Victor leaves by boat for Havana for a long-term employment. Félicité makes it her business to see the boat off, only to get lost on the way and miss it as it separates from the quai. She even yells Victor's name to some young sailors on the boat she does not even recognize. She never really sees him leave and never hears from him in Havana. She can only imagine his status by the connection of cigar with the place Havana. The only news she gets about him is his death. After all these miseries and loss, she finally gets her only consolation in life: the parrot Loulou. Though Loulou also dies shortly, it becomes for her the image of Holy spirit, and she is never bothered by any loss any more including the death of her mistress Mme Aubain and the deprivation of the household.

Thus it is ironical that her name is Félicité, since her life is a succession of bereavements. She lives a meaningless existence in a disconsolate world of which she herself is unable to make any critical assessment (Brombert 245). However, the name is proper too in the sense that she never feels suffered and deprived, and she never feels the need to complain. Her nature of simplicity makes her incapable of suffering and hatred. So she is really fortunate because she is always happy and satisfied by transcending her suffering through endless and unconditional love.

Since she does not have a family of her own, she is devoted to the family of her mistress. She even risks her life to save Mme Aubain against the attack of the bull, and she never prides herself in the least on what she has done. When Virginie dies, it is Félicité alone who keeps the vigil for two nights. She kisses the dead body several times, wraps her in a shroud, puts her in the coffin, and finally cuts off a big lock of the girl's hair, half of which she slips into her bosom resolving never to part with it (Flaubert 64). She takes care of not only the children but also Mme Aubain as a mother. However, when Victor is unheard and finally dead, no one cares about Félicité's feelings. In her grief, she still has her duties of washing and needlework to do. Her capacity of love even extends to the unknown sick old man and the parrot Loulou. The eternal sense of maternity and mercy turns her simple heart into a sacred soul.

The story is told in a predominant mood of softness and sadness. Flaubert avoided his free indirect discourse used in his previous novels like *Madame Bovary* which enables the reader to slip easily from the narrated text to the mind of his character. Instead, he employed a narrator who leads the reader to see things through Félicité's naive eyes without entering her psyche. As Leonard Marsh points out: "Flaubert wanted to underline the absence of normal conceptive powers in this character who was to be by her very nature so simple, the very antithesis of Emma, willing to accept life's routine, uncomplicated and uncontriving" (Marsh 185). She is afflicted with defective vision and sense of hearing, but she does not suffer from it because she is not aware of it. Contrast to this limited power of conception and limited sense of perception, her mysterious final vision of the spirit of the Holy Ghost, which is identified with the stuffed parrot Loulou, becomes miraculous, and hence her story becomes a tale of hagiography. Her touching, blissful innocence, and scared self-abnegation create the thematic irony that goodness should be embodied in total ignorance or simplicity.

Gertrude Stein's "The Good Anna" also starts from an ironical statement: "The tradesmen of Bridgepoint learned to dread the sound of 'Miss Mathilda,' for with that name the good Anna always conquered" (Stein 11). Anna is a German immigrant servant who accepts her conventional social role and its destiny and remains faithful to her mistress as Félicité does. Although she is described as a dominant figure who has authority over the affairs of the household, she never "conquers" her role as a servant woman. She seems to have a bad temper as she always scolds her under servants and even her mistress Miss Mathilda. But she always means well because what she is concerned with most is decency. She has high ideals for chastity and discipline. Her goal of life seems to be "good" as her title indicates. Therefore, in spite of her devotion to the family of her mistress or her enjoyment of the relationship with her friends, Anna is very aware of her position as a servant woman. She quits the job when she feels that she is treated like a maid instead of a servant by her old mistress. She has her dignity of a servant, but she never has any idea beyond that. Thus she is confined by what "good" means according to social convention, and she persists to be a devoted servant all her lifetime.

Like Félicité, Anna works hard and tries to save money for the household, and she hardly spends any money on herself. She is exhausted till death for managing the family of her mistress. It is the duty and devotion of her whole life. Moreover, she scolds and defends her mistress Miss Mathilda and cherishes her as a mother. She even treats the strayed dogs in the same way as a mother does. Although Anna is not so tamed and amiable like Félicité, her way of treating those who have troubles with her like the under servant Molly is still charitable. Molly has a bad temper and does the job poorly. Anna and Molly do not get along with each other. However, Anna keeps her for a long time out of kindness and even takes care of her after she quits the job. When Miss Mathilda is

abroad, Anna is reluctant to leave, so she changes the place into a boarding house. Nevertheless, she still works as a housekeeper to serve the boarders till she is exhausted to death. Actually, Anna is hardly ill-treated by anyone in the conventional sense and she has not made any mistake on her part either. As what Stein quotes Jules Laforgue in front of the book: “Donc je suis un malheureux et ce n'est ni ma faute ni celle de la vie,” (So I am a miserable person, and it is not my fault nor the fault of life.) Anna's tragedy is determined by her loyalty to the conventional code of female self-sacrifice and faithfulness to her social role as a servant.

Despite Anna's active power to love and to dominate, she is still submissive to her position as a working class woman and victimized by it. Both Félicité and Anna dumbly accept the fortunes of life without knowing being trapped in them. However, besides Flaubert's feeling of compassion and tenderness toward the servant woman, Stein sets the mood of resignation and tells the story with poignancy and sense of fatalism. Hence, Stein's intention is to investigate a submissive womanhood by presenting the typological description of the character instead of celebrating the character's beautiful soul. The different intentions make Flaubert's character a blessed figure in spite of her sufferings and Stein's character a pitiful figure in spite of her seemingly authorized position.

Besides the different themes mentioned above, the major difference between the two female servant stories is the technique in narration. Both stories are told by means of accretion of episodes. In these episodes, like Flaubert, Stein uses a lot of ironies. One way she creates ironies is by the sophistication of her narrative consciousness which is blended into the total voice of the book. According to Michael Hoffman, the narrator not only reflects the dialect of the characters but also expresses the inarticulate thoughts of the characters in the very language that they would use, were they able to express their thoughts for themselves (Hoffman 31). However, the intrusive narrator in Stein's story and the discrepancy between the tone and situation causes a sense of ironic detachment. The whole story is told in a light and jolly tone even when the narrator occasionally repeats sentences like: “You see that Anna led an arduous and troubled life” (Stein II, 13, etc.). The “wise-child” tone of the narrative voice ironically betrays the hidden compassion of the author through the seemingly objective narrator.

Another important technique is repetition. Stein takes great pleasure in words to the extent that she keeps repeating them with various inflect to convey a certain aura about the character portrayed. The use of repeated sentences and phrases helps to establish Anna as a primitively simple person who is fixed in a certain mode of life and who thinks and does everything within the context of inexorable circumstances. As Beverly Hume points out, the use of repetition creates the sense of prolonged and continuous present and demonstrates the banality and mediocrity of the characters' existence. Women are trapped in the “presents” and destructively polarized relationships throughout their lives (Item 13). They are confined in the routines of their existence without the prospect of a future and

the development of their potential.

Actually, Stein's narrative technique is inspired by Cézanne's painting "Portrait of Mme. Cézanne" which is installed in the studio room of Stein's apartment when she and her brother Leo expatriates in Paris. "The Good Anna" owes a debt to Cézanne's painting as much as to Flaubert's "Un Coeur simple": the latter initiates the plot of the story but the former inspires the form. From the painting, Stein develops a similar technique of incantatory repetition. In other words, Stein acquires Cézanne's techniques in painting a woman and applies them to her own writing in the portrait of her female protagonists. She evolves an original literary portraiture that subordinates the plot to the characterization in order to pose the character in the center and establish the relations and situations to generate the story. The portrait is hence like a cinematic continuous succession of the statement of what the person is. She likes to use simple, direct, and even monosyllabic words to portray the characters. According to Jonathan Levin, the way she wields language is like the way the modern painters she admired are presenting form through a simplified use of color and line (Introduction). The way she views her characters is like the way a painter looks at the models at the moment. Fiction as a time-based art is approached with verbal equivalence to a painting which presents the character in a certain situation at the moment. Therefore, the social convention about this character is dismantled and she is able to deconstruct the patriarchal norms of "goodness" and subvert the social type of a loyal servant and kind woman. The employment of the aesthetic experiments makes Stein's story a modernist work and hence establishes a new mode of narration challenging the conventions of imitation and the production of illusions of reality represented by the tradition of Flaubert's realism.

Both Flaubert's "Un Coeur simple" and Stein's "The Good Anna" are stories of faithful servant women. Both Félicité and Anna have simple personality. They are charitable, devoted, thrifty, and hard-working. Although Anna has a hot temper and always scolds, she has a same good heart and sense of maternity as Félicité does. Both characters are not aware of their determined miserable fate and unconsciously accept their social role as an inferior servant. However, Flaubert's intention to celebrate a beautiful and sacred soul is different from Stein's purpose through different characterization and ways of narration. Stein tells the story not only with compassion but also with poignancy and a sense of feminine resistance. As a result, the two authors present different styles with the employment of different narrative techniques. Stein's unique and innovative structure and language rewrites the traditional plot involving women. The innovation is the "anti-patriarchal" element which reflects the change of conventionally accepted patterns of woman's experience. Thus in terms of both content and form, Stein recreates a tale of spinster in the modernist manner.

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