STEIN, WOOLF, AND JOYCE: MODERNIST AUTHORS ON CHILDREN'S BOOKSHELVES

STEIN, WOOLF E JOYCE: MODERNISTAS NAS PRATELEIRAS DAS CRIANÇAS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the works of Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf have been published, adapted, and reimagined, and how they circulate within children's literature. The study introduces and briefly discusses a corpus that includes original texts written for children, picturebooks, fictionalized biographies, and graphic novels. It argues that these texts defy rigid distinctions between adult and children's literature and promote crossover reading modes by offering layered narratives that resonate differently with children and adults. Younger readers encourage imaginative engagement and play; adult readers, particularly educators, scholars, or enthusiasts, provide intertextual depth and cultural criticism. The findings affirm that the modernist legacy has extended beyond its canonical borders through creative repackagings that reframe reading as a dynamic, inclusive, and age-transcendent experience.

Keywords: children's literature, crossover, modernism, readership.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina como as obras de Gertrude Stein, James Joyce e Virginia Woolf foram publicadas, adaptadas, reimaginadas e circulam no âmbito da literatura infantil. O estudo apresenta e discute brevemente um corpus que inclui textos originais escritos para crianças, livros ilustrados, biografias ficcionalizadas e romances gráficos. Argumenta-se que esses textos não apenas desafiam distinções rígidas entre literatura infantil e adulta, mas também promovem modos de leitura crossover ao oferecerem narrativas em camadas que ressoam de maneira distinta com leitores de diferentes idades. Para o público infantil, incentivam o engajamento imaginativo e o jogo; para leitores adultos, especialmente educadores, estudiosos ou entusiastas, oferecem profundidade intertextual e crítica cultural. Os resultados confirmam que o legado modernista se expandiu para além de suas fronteiras canônicas por meio de reconfigurações criativas que redefinem a leitura como uma experiência dinâmica, inclusiva e que transcende fronteiras de idade.

Palavras-chave: literatura infantil, crossover, modernismo, leitura.

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Introduction

The intersection between modernist aesthetics and children's literature has often been perceived as paradoxical. On the one hand, Modernism, characterized by its linguistic experimentation and subversion of narrative conventions, is frequently aligned with elite adult readerships. On the other hand, children's literature has traditionally been viewed as linear, didactic, and pedagogically grounded. Yet, as contemporary scholarships increasingly acknowledge, this binary overlooks the generative possibilities that emerge when these two fields converge.

Thus, this article investigates how three central figures of Anglo-American modernism, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, engaged with children's literature, directly through original works or via adaptations and retellings. These authors brought modernist techniques into child-oriented narratives. Their works exemplify what Beckett (2021) terms crossover literature, a category that invites dual readings (adult and child) and resists rigid marketing labels.

Methodologically, the article presents and briefly discusses texts, drawing from primary works and recent scholarly contributions. The goal is to examine what justifies its broad range of children's texts. It asks: I) In what ways do modernist features manifest in children's texts by or associated with Stein, Joyce, and Woolf? II) How do these texts function as crossover literature, appealing to mixed-age audiences?

The article is structured as follows: first, it outlines the conceptual frameworks of modernism and crossover literature; then, it overviews Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce's presence in children's literature and culture. In the discussion, the article reflects on how these authors' engagements with childhood invite us to reconceptualize their work not only as children's literature but also as crossover texts.

1. A crossover perspective

Despite extensive research in children's literature and modernism, there remains a surprising lack of critical engagement connecting the two. Investigations into literary anthologies like *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* reveal two key reasons for this gap. First, as editors such as Jack Zipes and Lissa Paul have pointed out, children's

literature has historically been excluded from the literary canon, treated as distinct from what is traditionally considered "real literature." Second, the structure of such anthologies often reinforces this division by organizing content according to genre rather than historical chronology (Westman, 2007).

This genre-based framework has roots in the practical needs of librarians, teachers, and publishers, who have long categorized books according to their intended audiences' age and reading levels. Distinctions between picturebooks, chapter books, and so on have shaped publishing, pedagogy, and the scholarly treatment of children's texts. As a result, it becomes difficult to situate children's literature within specific historical frameworks, such as the modernist era between 1890 and 1950 (Westman, 2007).

Critics like Jacqueline Rose (1984) have characterized children's literature as a retreat from modernist experimentation. Yet, this view overlooks a significant body of work where modernist techniques and child-focused narratives intersect: Gertrude Stein authored a book specifically for children and left behind additional stories published posthumously; Virginia Woolf wrote imaginative stories for (and sometimes with) her nephews, some of which were later adapted into picturebooks; and James Joyce composed playful letters for his grandson that were also later published as picturebooks. For Stein and Woolf, children's literature offered a unique space for literary experimentation. Although many of these works initially circulated in private contexts, within their own families, they have since entered the broader canon of global children's literature.

This interpretive complexity makes their texts a fertile ground for what Sandra Beckett (2021) defines as crossover literature: works that transcend age boundaries and speak simultaneously to children and adults. Although this term gained prominence only in the late 1990s, the phenomenon it describes is centuries old. Beckett (2021, p. 50) explains that crossover literature "blurs distinctions between adults and children", creating a shared space where intergenerational reading becomes possible. While the Harry Potter series brought crossover literature into mainstream awareness, Beckett (2021) emphasizes that the practice is not limited to fantasy novels or contemporary bestsellers.

Picturebooks, poetry, graphic novels, and even adult literature appropriated by young readers contribute to the crossover tradition: canonical texts such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) or *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) were read by children well before the institutionalization of children's literature as a separate category. Today, crossover can occur more deliberately, with books intentionally written for mixed-age readerships. This shift reflects broader cultural trends toward media convergence and intergenerational consumption of literature and entertainment.

Understanding modernist children's literature through the lens of crossover allows us to reconsider its cultural status. Rather than occupying a marginal position within literary history, such works emerge as central to the modernist project. Reynolds (2021, p. 126) even suggests, based on Juliet Dusinberre (1987), that "modernism is a product of children's literature", since many prominent modernist writers were profoundly shaped by their early encounters with texts like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. This statement invites us to invert the conventional narrative. Instead of asking how modernism influenced children's literature, we might ask how literature for children contributed to the development of modernist aesthetics.

This reevaluation of children's literature as a modernist and crossover form enriches our understanding of literary history and suggests new critical pathways. As crossover literature, modernist children's texts serve as bridges between audiences, between disciplines, and between aesthetic traditions. They call for a critical approach that is as flexible and multidimensional as the texts. This conceptual flexibility is essential for understanding how literature circulates across age boundaries and appreciating how aesthetic innovation can occur in unexpected cultural spaces.

2. Blurring Boundaries

2.1 Gertrude Stein

Gertrude Stein, known as the "mother of modernism," is renowned for her radical literary style that challenged conventional narrative forms. What remains less known is her contribution to children's literature. Stein considered herself the literary counterpart of Albert Einstein, stating in *Everybody's Autobiography* that "Einstein was the creative philosophic mind of the century, and I have been the creative literary mind of the century"

(apud Rocha, 2022b, p. 110). Her writing style, marked by repetition, sonic rhythm, and grammatical experimentation, has often been considered inaccessible for adult audiences. Yet it found unexpected resonance among child readers, especially in works such as *The World is Round* (1939). Stein's foray into children's literature reveals a continuity between her avant-garde literary practice and the imaginative linguistic world of childhood, which she approached not as a passive target of education but as an active collaborator in meaning-making.

Stein's experimental language, often referred to as "Steinese," reflects her deep engagement with cubist aesthetics and the psychological theories of William James, with whom she studied at Radcliffe. Sherwood Anderson (1994, p. 92) described her method as "laying word against word, relating sound to sound, feeling for the taste, the smell, the rhythm of the individual word". Stein invited readers to inhabit a linguistic landscape where meaning emerges through rhythm and repetition. Her modernist method is not about simplification but activating new reading forms. According to Barbara Will (2007, p. 340), Stein's literary sensibility is closer to children's linguistic experience than perhaps any other modernist writer, as she "straddled the boundary between sense and nonsense".

The World is Round, published in 1939, was the only one of Stein's children's books released during her lifetime. Written originally as *The Autobiography of Rose*, it was published after Margaret Wise Brown challenged writers like Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Stein to write for children. Only Stein agreed and already had a nearly completed manuscript, revealing an existing interest in child audiences. The book is dedicated to a real child, Rose Lucy Renée Anne d'Aiguy, and combines personal elements with fairy-tale motifs. The protagonist Rose, a nine-year-old girl, embarks on a journey of self-discovery, questioning language, knowledge, and identity. The opening lines are emblematic of Stein's style: "Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around" (1967, p. 7-8). These repeated structures are not mere stylistic flourishes; they are what Stein herself called "insistences", expressive rhythms that generate new meanings through variation and iteration (Rocha, 2022b).

To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays, pushes this linguistic play even further. Although written in 1940, it was published only posthumously in 1957. Stein subverts the genre in this alphabet book by prioritizing rhythm, sound, and linguistic curiosity over

conventional instruction. Letters are personified, characters change names, and semantic boundaries dissolve. For example, one segment reads: "G is George Jelly Gus and Gertrude," while another declares: "K is for Kiki, Katy, Cake and Kisses" (s.p.). These sequences blend poetic cadence with whimsical logic. According to Jacquelyn Ardam (2011), Stein's alphabet is not a rote learning tool but a demonstration of how language can be explored, stretched, and reinvented. Her approach positions the reader not as a passive recipient but as an active participant in constructing textual meaning.

The linguistic fluidity continues in *First Reader* (1941), which was also published posthumously. Structured as a series of twenty lessons, the book defies conventional educational norms. Its opening story follows a dog determined to learn to read, but the narrative quickly dissolves into seemingly unrelated observations. In it, meaning is constantly deferred through rhythmic variation. In one passage, Stein (1941, p. 11) plays with homophones and the visual appearance of words: "And read just think of read if red is read, and read is read… how can they know, oh no how can they know". This manipulation of phonetic and semantic registers exemplifies how Stein repurposes traditional literacy materials into experimental poetic forms. Thus, Stein's goal is to provoke readers into recognizing language as a system that resists finality and rewards interpretive engagement.

Stein's fourth children's text, *Three Plays* (1943), brings her modernist theater into dialogue with child audiences. The short plays "In a Garden," "Three Sisters Who Are Not Sisters," and "Look and Long" are not bound by narrative continuity or traditional stage directions. Instead, they are rhythmic scripts that emphasize verbal play over performative logic. As Dirce Waltrick do Amarante (2014) notes, Stein's drama often defies theatrical representation altogether due to the absence of clear character cues or scene divisions. Still, these works resonate with children's theater traditions, which historically emphasize improvisation, embodiment, and collective storytelling. Stein's plays invite young readers and performers to inhabit a performative space where language becomes the main character.

Gertrude Stein's children's literature channels her techniques toward the linguistic instincts of children, who are still learning the rules of language and are therefore more inclined to play with them. Stein's work is not about simplification but transformation:

she reconfigures traditional genres such as the alphabet book, the primer, and the fairy tale, foregrounding rhythm, repetition, and ambiguity. Her "wild pen", as she once wrote, invites us to think about what literature is and what it could be.

Stein's legacy continues to influence contemporary authors and illustrators. Jonah Winter and Calef Brown's picturebook *Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude* (2009) reimagine her life by focusing on her partnership with Alice Toklas and her role in shaping modernist art and literature. The book employs rhythmic language and illustrations that echo the aesthetics of Picasso and Matisse, creating a dialogue between Stein's avant-garde techniques and the accessible world of children's storytelling.

Another example of Gertrude Stein in children's literature is the picturebook *A Little Called Pauline*, originally a poem from Gertrude Stein's 1914 collection *Tender Buttons*. It was illustrated by Bianca Stone and published by Penny Candy Books in 2020. According to the publisher's website, it is intended for children aged 7-11.

2.2 Virginia Woolf

The presence of Virginia Woolf in children's literature and their culture has gained increasing critical attention through her intergenerational collaborations, posthumous picturebooks, fictionalized biographies, and visually experimental graphic novels (Rocha, 2022a). Among the earliest manifestations of this presence is her participation in *The Charleston Bulletin*, a family newspaper initiated in 1923 by her nephews Julian and Quentin Bell. Eight *Supplements* produced between 1923 and 1927, co-authored by Woolf and Quentin, were later compiled and edited by Claudia Olk (2013), offering a rare glimpse into Woolf's experimental practice within an intimate and domestic framework. Far from merely playful artifacts, these typographically erratic and visually dynamic manuscripts disrupt conventional hierarchies of literary production and foreground the child's voice as artistic and interpretive.

Woolf's narrative and aesthetic experimentation also extended into picturebooks published after her death. *Nurse Lugton's Curtain* and *The Widow and the Parrot*, composed for her young relatives in the 1920s, were posthumously published in illustrated editions. The former imagines a dreamlike world emerging from the unconscious of an elderly seamstress, where embroidered animals come to life while she

sleeps. Initially discovered within the manuscript of *Mrs. Dalloway* and published by Leonard Woolf in 1966 as *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble*, the story was later republished in 1991 with color illustrations by Julie Vivas. Similarly, *The Widow and the Parrot*, a tale combining spectral narrative and animal companionship, recounts a widow's unlikely inheritance with the assistance of a parrot. The story's local grounding in Rodmell and Monk's House and its early appearance in *The Charleston Bulletin* anchor it within Woolf's domestic and geographical realities.

The reconfiguration of biography and creativity appears in contemporary picturebooks that reimagine Woolf as the protagonist. Kyo Maclear and Isabelle Arsenault's *Virginia Wolf* (2012) employs visual and poetic modes to articulate a non-linear, affectively charged narrative loosely based on Woolf's emotional life. The story centers on Virginia's mental illness, metaphorized as "wolfishness", and the curative power of her sister Vanessa's imaginative intervention. Arsenault's illustrations, rendered in gouache, pencil, and watercolor, track emotional shifts through visual composition, echoing Woolf's arguments in "The New Biography" about capturing inner truths rather than external facts. Likewise, *Una stanza tutta per me* (2017) by Serena Ballista and Chiara Carrer reinterprets *A Room of One's Own* for early readers through metaphor and visual symbolism. By aligning Woolf's spider metaphor with children's experiences of storytelling and spatial autonomy, the book offers a feminist pedagogy rooted in creative empowerment.

The crossover appeal is evident in *Flush: A Biography* (1933), Woolf's most commercially successful book, which occupies a unique position between canonical neglect and widespread acclaim. Written after the experimental *The Waves* (1931), *Flush* marked a return to a more conventional storytelling and became a bestseller in the UK and US, enabling Woolf to purchase a car for her sister Vanessa. The proliferation of illustrated editions reinforces the book's crossover status, which has extended the book's reach to young adult audiences.

Flush illustrated reissues, such as the 2018 Prosymne Press edition with artwork by Katyuli Lloyd and the 2019 Spanish edition illustrated by Iratxe López de Munáin, engage readers through expressive visuals emphasizing mood and movement rather than realism. The visual strategies employed reflect Woolf's modernist aesthetics and invite

intergenerational appeal. More recently, Gala Pont Paradís's 2025 edition for Editorial Alma continues this trend, adding a watercolor palette to the book's interpretative possibilities.

2.3 James Joyce

Two picturebooks, *The Cat and the Devil* (1990) and *The Cats of Copenhagen* (2012), initially written as letters to his grandson Stephen in 1936, exemplify this lesser-known dimension of James Joyce. In the former, the author constructs a narrative in which the Devil speaks a fictional language dubbed "bellsybabble," a playful fusion of "Beelzebub," "babble," and "Babel." This neologistic invention parallels the linguistic hybridity seen in his works.

The story's illustrations, such as those by Brazilian artist Lelis (2012), amplify its crossover appeal. The artwork adds a metatextual layer that bridges the textual and visual realms by representing the devil as a caricature of Joyce, complete with round glasses and eccentric posture. The humor embedded in language and illustration invites shared reading experiences across generations, expanding the interpretive horizon beyond childhood. Joyce's self-referential humor resonates with the broader modernist tendency to question authorship and narrative authority.

Discovered in 2012 and published upon Joyce's entry into the public domain, *The Cats of Copenhagen* differs significantly in structure and tone. It lacks a conventional plot and functions as a travelogue marked by absurd observations and satirical commentary on civic life. The narrative opens with a paradoxical statement: "There are no cats in Copenhagen," setting the stage for a series of surreal descriptions. While deceptively simple, the work reflects Joyce's lifelong engagement with disruption and resistance to narrative closure.

Joyce's linguistic inventiveness is also evident in adaptations that reinterpret his challenging works through apparently accessible forms. Donaldo Schuler's *Finnício Riovém* (2004), a Brazilian adaptation of *Finnegans Wake*, exemplifies this process. Written for a younger audience, Schuler's version captures the spirit of Joyce's notoriously difficult text through wordplay and multilingual puns. Illustrated by Cristiane Löff, the book combines text and image to simulate the dreamlike fluidity of Joyce's

original. Recognized with the Prêmio Açorianos de Literatura and selected for Brazil's National School Library Program, *Finnício Riovém* testifies to the potential of modernist aesthetics when reframed as children's literary experience.

Further illustrating the adaptability of Joyce's modernist fables are the illustrated editions of *The Ondt and the Gracehoper* (2014) and *The Mookse and the Gripes* (2018). Originally embedded within *Finnegans Wake* as modernist retellings of Aesop's fables, these stories gain renewed accessibility through the work of Irish illustrator Thomas McNally. These editions are enriched with essays by scholars such as Danis Rose and Fritz Senn, which provide entry points for navigating the text's intricate linguistic terrain. Visual adaptations like these contribute to the crossover effect by repackaging literary complexity in visual frameworks that provoke curiosity rather than exclusion.

The graphic novel *Dublinés* (2011), authored by Spanish illustrator Alfonso Zapico, offers another form of reimagining Joyce's legacy. Based on Richard Ellmann's biography, the novel narrates Joyce's tumultuous life, featuring encounters with figures like Marcel Proust. The title references *Dubliners*, emphasizing the role of place in Joyce's imagination, and the visual storytelling provides an entry point into his personal and creative struggles. While primarily targeting adult readers, sequential art and episodic narrative appeal to a broader demographic, including young adults or less specialized readers. Awarded the Premio Nacional de Cómic in 2012, *Dublinés* demonstrates how visual biography can function as crossover literature, transforming the complex figure of Joyce into a character accessible through both historical fact and visual fiction.

3. The crossover dynamic

Modernist authors' engagement with children's literature through their original texts, adaptations, or biographies challenges persistent assumptions about modernism's inaccessibility and the simplicity of texts written for children. As the analysis in section two reveals, figures such as Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf extended their experiments into texts that address younger audiences. The stream-of-consciousness characteristic of these works can be considered a vital crossover feature, especially in the case of Stein, once it is

> […] also very characteristic of children's early narratives that mirror their unmediated speech, so may feature excessive repetition, make playful or mistaken use of grammar; all at great, unpunctuated speed. The text has an urgency about it, like a dream you wake up from and want to remember. I like the advice on how to read Stein in a press release: "Don't bother about the commas which aren't there, read the words. Don't worry about the sense, read the words faster. If you have any trouble, read faster and faster until you don't" (Rocha; Ferreira, 2020, p. 209).

This makes Gertrude Stein's children's literature a fusion between avant-garde experimentation and childlike play. In *The World is Round* (1939), *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* (1957), *First Reader* (1941), and *Three Plays* (1943), Stein cultivates a literary style rooted in rhythm, recursion, and grammatical instability. As Kimberley Reynolds (2021) notes, modernist writers were drawn to childhood's intuitive and playful qualities. Stein's linguistic innovation, where she plays with the visual and phonetic dimensions of words, highlighting the instability of language, mirrors how children naturally experiment with language, making her modernist methods particularly resonant in the context of early literacy. Her works have a fairy-tale quality,

> often given where critics find work unclassifiable, such as the case with Gertrude Stein's work generally, where for example The New York Times called *Ida* "either a short novel, a long poem or a modern fairy tale". Stein's style is characteristically rather like folk or fairy tale in that there's an immediacy of condensed, abstract ideas, of the kinds of uncertainties, questions, repetitions and rhythms found in oral forms: "[…] and just then was it a pen was it a cage was it a hut but anyway there was no but she saw it was a dwarf, and it was not a woman it was a man and if it knew how, and it did, away it ran" (Rocha; Ferreira, 2020, p. 209)

Virginia Woolf's contributions to children's literature emerge not only in her direct writings for children, such as *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* and *The Widow and the Parrot,* but also in how her adult works like *Flush* (1933) and *Orlando* (1928) have been reinterpreted through illustrations, biographies, and picturebooks. As Sandra Beckett (2021) notes, publishers increasingly tailor editions for dual markets, releasing books with different covers for adult and child audiences or simultaneously including titles in both catalogues. The same can be exemplified in the illustrated editions of Joyce's *The*

Ondt and the Gracehoper (2014) and *The Mookse and the Gripes* (2018), drawn from *Finnegans Wake* and accompanied by Thomas McNally's illustrations.

Joyce's forays into children's literature offer another perspective on the convergence of modernism and crossover. His two picturebooks, *The Cat and the Devil* (1990) and *The Cats of Copenhagen* (2012), originated as letters to his grandson Stephen and embody many of the experimental hallmarks of his adult fiction. Like Stein, Joyce uses repetition, sound, and wordplay not as barriers but invitations into a playful textual universe. The book's visual dimension, enhanced by illustrations portraying the Devil with Joyce's features, furthers its crossover appeal, appealing to adult readers' recognition and children's visual curiosity.

According to Beckett (2021, p. 50), one of the hallmarks of crossover literature is its "blurring of distinctions between sense and nonsense", a description that resonates strongly with Joyce's playful subversions. This strategy reflects what Reynolds (2021, p. 125) identifies as a central modernist concern: "the nature of language and the challenge of representing subjectivity and perception". In Joyce's case, these challenges are distilled into compact, playful forms that allow children and adults to engage with the exact text on different cognitive and emotional levels.

These editorial strategies signal a broader reevaluation of Stein, Woolf, and Joyce in contemporary publishing, repositioning their legacy at the intersection of canonical literature and crossover narrative, where age boundaries are no longer prescriptive but creatively porous.

Conclusion

This article examined how the presence of Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf in children's literature challenges long-standing assumptions about the inaccessibility of modernism and the supposed simplicity of texts for young readers. By tracing the origins of these works, many of which began as private communications with children and were transformed into picturebooks, the study has shown that these texts invite a wide range of interpretive communities across age, genre, and cultural context.

For child readers, these works often function as entry points into literary play. The books foreground rhythm, repetition, humor, and visual narrative strategies that stimulate

imagination and foster affective engagement. Yet for adults, these texts open richer intertextual and ideological fields. Literary scholars, for instance, may read them as extensions of modernist aesthetics. The same narrative or illustration may evoke wonder in a child and ironic subtext in an adult, underscoring the multiplicity of meaning embedded in crossover literature.

The presence of modernist authors on children's bookshelves, with texts about them or written by them, signals a transformation in how we understand readership, authorship, and literary value. Rather than marginal curiosities, these works function as vital cultural artifacts that foster intergenerational dialogue, encourage formal innovation, and expand the cognitive and affective possibilities of reading. In embracing hybrid forms and audiences, they invite us to see literature as a fluid, collaborative, and inclusive practice.

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