"[B]etween Stability and Change": Rereading in the American Literature Survey Course
Matthew Duffus, Gardner-Webb University

Abstract: This essay considers the important role rereading texts can play in literature survey courses, both through references to scholars Patricia Meyer Spacks and David Galef, and through the results of the author's questionnaire, administered to two sections of his fall 2016 American Literature survey courses. Based on the results of this survey, the author has learned that students find rereading texts they first encountered in high school profitable, both in terms of increased comprehension and as a measure of how they have grown as individuals and as readers.

I came by my experiment in rereading accidentally. Early in the spring of 2016, as I was deciding what books to order for my fall American Literature survey course, I asked my current students how many of them had read *The Great Gatsby*. Surprisingly, only a handful of the fifty students had read it. Not even Baz Luhrman's recent movie version had piqued their interest, so I decided to pique it for them, or at least for their fellow undergraduates, by requiring it for the fall semester's course. It turned out that my spring students were an aberration, as twenty of my fifty students in the fall had previously read the book. A number of them had also read *The Awakening*, which was on the syllabus as well, and in my scramble to encourage them to reread these books instead of simply supplementing their high school memories with the occasional glance at *SparkNotes*, I came across the Patricia Meyer Spacks quote I borrowed for my title: "The dynamic tension between stability and change lies at the heart of rereading. Every renewed exchange between book and reader contains elements of both, and both provide pleasure" (4). This same "dynamic tension" is evident in the students in my course, who had all read Chopin and Fitzgerald in high school and would now be reencountering them as college sophomores, juniors, or seniors. I was curious to see what effect those intervening years had had on my students and their reading experiences, so I created a post-course questionnaire designed to interrogate the experience of rereading, the results of which I will discuss later. First, I want to take a moment to think about what happens when we reread a work of literature, particularly in relationship to the young, often inexperienced readers I encounter in my literature survey courses.

In *On Rereading*, Spacks considers this act as a phenomenon for general readers, but many of her insights are doubly appropriate when considering traditionally college-aged
readers. For instance, Spacks writes that rereading does more than merely "consolidate identity," as nineteenth-century essayist William Hazlitt suggested; she argues that "it also helps to measure personal change" (4). I can't think of a group undergoing more "personal change" than college students, particularly the often-sheltered ones I encounter at my small, religiously-affiliated university. My hope, as the fall semester wore on, was that the students would note ways in which their improved understanding of *The Awakening* and *The Great Gatsby* served as a measure of such change, for, as Spacks later asserts, "[r]ereading brings us more sharply in contact with how we—like the books we reread—have both changed and remained the same. Books help to constitute our identity. They also, as we reread them, measure identity's changes with the passage of time" (9). Reading Spacks, it was easy to see the role rereading could play in my students' self-awareness, but I found, in discussing these concepts with students, that I needed a more concrete rationale as well.

David Galef’s "Observations on Rereading," from his edited collection, *Second Thoughts: A Focus on Rereading*, provided me with all the justification I required. Galef writes, "the degree of self-awareness necessary to criticism makes rereading almost imperative, requiring at the very least a circumspect first reading" (22). "Circumspect first reading[s]" do not come naturally to my typical literature-survey students, who are enrolled in the class not out of a love of, and affinity for, reading but because they are required to take a literature survey. The challenge is even more acute in American Literature II, as it attracts students who seek a reading experience close to their own, in nationality and time period. As Galef states, "rereading is rethinking" (30), which is exactly what many of my students are reluctant to do without prodding. While they do often become absorbed in novels and plays, they are less willing to interrogate their experience than I would like. Having them read a novel for the second time was a way to move beyond the basic "thumbs-up, thumbs-down" attitude many of them fell back on during first reads.

I found, though, that some of my colleagues were skeptical of this endeavor, wondering if it would not be more productive to introduce students to as many unfamiliar texts as possible. Seeing as this would be most students' final encounter with the types of writers discussed in a literature survey, I often faced well-meaning questions about why I hadn't chosen "X" instead of Chopin or "Y" instead of Fitzgerald. After all, they argued, canonical works such as these are often taught in high schools. Building on the work of Spacks and
Galef, I believe that students can benefit from the act of rereading familiar works, not merely from exposure to new ones. Most people enjoy mastering a skill—whether it be French cooking, golf, or playing the piano—so isn't it possible that students would enjoy, or at least appreciate, having the opportunity to revisit a work at a later, more mature period in their lives? This is particularly relevant in general-education courses, where students rarely feel like "experts." By returning to something they've read previously, they have the opportunity to demonstrate improved reading comprehension and to gain a greater understanding of the work, thereby coming closer to grasping it in all of its complexity. In class, I often find myself discussing the ways my interpretation of crucial scenes evolves over time; here was a chance for them to practice this first-hand. If I was correct in my pro-rereading stance, having so many rereaders in class would prove an advantage for my two sections.

So, how did the presence of so many rereaders alter the classroom dynamic? Roughly forty-percent of the students in each of the sections had read at least one of the books before, and many of them had previously read both The Awakening and The Great Gatsby. My first, most obvious observation is that the students understood the plots of the novels better. As a result, we were able to dispense with story-related questions much more quickly in class, often through quick group exercises where rereaders served as "experts" on the texts, guiding the first-timers in noting the key moments and important details. Because we were able to cover the surface so much more quickly, we had time to dig deeper, to do the type of criticism Galef encourages in "Observations on Rereading."

Just as a rising tide lifts all boats, the presence of so many rereaders raised the level of discourse in the classroom. As the rereaders noticed and synthesized details they had glossed over during their first reads, their enjoyment of, and enthusiasm for, the books increased, never a small thing in a general education course, but of particular advantage when one of the sections meets at 8 AM. The more excited the rereaders grew, the more engaged the first-time readers became as well. It was one thing, I learned, for me to share my enthusiasm for a book with my students; it was quite another for them to see that emotion shared by their classmates. As one student remarked while discussing his rereading of The Awakening, "It feels like a completely different book. I see so much I missed the first time." This was particularly helpful when we reached the final chapter of Chopin's novel, with its many references to language and images from earlier in the book. By comparison, the
following semester, when I had only one student who had previously read *The Awakening*, we spent so much time tracing such references to their sources that we had little time left to discuss why Chopin might have chosen to incorporate so much repetition.

One other advantage to having so many rereaders in class was that students saw that great books can be read in different ways by the same readers. Seeing classmates willingly rereading a book they’d studied in high school made the first-time readers intrigued to see what all the fuss was about. This was particularly evident in my second section, which included a vocal student who openly compared all reading experiences to his love of Dan Brown's books. While he was broad-minded enough to acknowledge that though *Daisy Miller* lacked the propulsive plot of *The Da Vinci Code*, the novella still had some merit, the class progressed much more smoothly when I had rereaders on my side who could serve as advocates for the works under discussion. This same student's appreciation grew to the point that he privately asked me for recommendations based on his newfound love of *The Great Gatsby*, a book that he came into the course thinking was "just" a movie. While I would like to take credit for this reversal, I believe it had just as much to do with his fellow students' awareness of the ways in which their second readings improved upon their first ones.

What do I mean by "improved upon"? In order to answer this, I'd like to discuss the questionnaire I shared with my twenty rereaders. I asked my students nine questions, ranging from their original attitude toward the novel to how their attitude changed through rereading to whether or not they intended to reread a book, any book, in the future, based on this experience. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. Seventeen out of twenty students reported that the rereading experience was enlightening enough that they would reread books in the future, with all but one of these respondents stating that they would be open to reading either *The Great Gatsby* or *The Awakening* for a third time. In their initial responses to the novels, many students mentioned being confused by various aspects of the plot, in relationship to *The Great Gatsby*, or by the prose, in conjunction with *The Awakening*. As one young woman wrote about rereading *Gatsby*, "the things that didn't make sense the first time, I now understand. I picked up on more details and 'hidden' things." Similarly, a student who had enjoyed the novel the first time for its "awesome love story" stated that "the second time

---

1 See Appendix for the full questionnaire.
I read the novel I could focus on all of the details rather than main events to deepen my understanding of the novel."

Many other respondents cited similar experiences, but one particular student's comment stood out. A male student wrote that reading *Gatsby* for the second time was "[a]n overall better experience" as he made what I take to be a significant connection between the book and his life. In answering a question about what insights he gained as a reader, he wrote, "I took a look at myself and my surrounding people [sic] to see if there were any similarities with the book and I would say that even in our society now, we still have some of the selfishness they had in the book." Convoluted prose aside, this young man showed some of the growth that Spacks believes can be measured through rereading. Upon first reading the novel, this student mainly remembered "[t]he people, their attitudes [and] all the lies"; in rereading he was able to make connections with the world around him, thereby seeing that the novel isn't merely a well-preserved historical document. Instead, he was able to use its themes to interrogate the world around him, thereby taking part in some of the "rethinking" Galef referred to in "Observations on Rereading."

Interestingly, one student who "wasn't super enthused about reading *The Awakening*" the first time, and whose main memory of the book was its "HORRIBLE ENDING," found herself drawn into the book in a new way upon rereading it. This student explained that "[d]iving deeper into the context, themes, and symbolism really helped me appreciate it more." Her attitude upon rereading the novel diverged greatly from her earlier, all-caps complaint: "I appreciated [the] fantastic writing." In response to whether or not she envisioned rereading this, or any other, book in the future, she wrote, "Yes, because there is value in revisiting old works with new eyes." I find this turn of phrase fascinating, as this respondent, a college senior, echoes Spacks's assertion in *On Rereading* that "[b]ooks help to constitute our identity." As this young woman's stance on Edna Pontellier softened upon rereading, she realized that it wasn't the book that had changed, or the level of her engagement with it. No, she had read it "with new eyes." To her, she was fundamentally different when she reread the book, no longer the immature high school student she had been the first time around. This time, she enjoyed "the feeling I get by being an informed and philosophical reader."
Unfortunately, a handful of rereaders did not share this sentiment. While three of the four who responded negatively to the questionnaire stated that they "weren't big readers," by the time we got to *The Great Gatsby* in class, we experienced a pronounced drop-off in attendance in one section. For this reason, I decided not to assign *Gatsby* the following semester. My hypothesis, which was reinforced during a class-wide discussion, is that while the students saw the value in rereading one work, the law of diminishing returns was in effect. Once they'd been through discussions of one work they had reread, they were less concerned with attending class for the second book. Interestingly, when I shared this with my students, they became quite vocal in their opposition. A number of students felt connected to this article and my project and saw my decision not to teach *The Great Gatsby* as a softening in my stance on the importance of rereading. Others insisted, as I learned when I read their post-semester questionnaire, that though they may not have found class discussion as valuable as I had hoped, they did see the value in rereading, as evidenced by the fact that only one respondent admitted to skimming portions of the novel instead of rereading it line-by-line.

This experiment has left me with several questions to consider for the future. As high schools rely more and more on the Young-Adult genre, it becomes difficult to make assumptions about what capital-L literature students have read before they get to the survey course. If I continue to believe in and emphasize the importance of rereading, as I intend to do, I wonder how I can account for this uncertainty. One thing I've considered is teaching shorter works—like *Daisy Miller*, which some students reread on their own in preparation for the exam—but I've found in recent semesters that using novel-length works has led to greater engagement. Engagement, though, isn't always a given. Therefore, how can I make reading, and rereading, more meaningful activities for those who aren't "big readers"? In conclusion, one student characterized her two experiences with *The Great Gatsby* this way: "I got really emotionally involved the first time around, but the second time I was more analytical with my thoughts." Responses such as this serve as justification for the value of rereading, even in a course that will provide many students with their final exposure to serious books. If this student's "more analytical" second reading encourages a few students to deepen their own engagement with the work under consideration, rereading will have served its purpose.
Appendix

Survey of Student Attitudes Toward Rereading

1. Choose a novel you reread for this class and list the title below.
2. What was your overall attitude toward this novel the first time you read it?
3. What stood out to you about the novel during the first reading experience?
4. What was your overall attitude toward this novel after the second time you read it?
5. How did your attitude toward the book change during your rereading?
6. How was your experience with the book different the second time?
7. Did you find rereading the book helpful? Why or why not?
8. Did you gain any insights into yourself as a reader or the book from the rereading experience?
9. Do you foresee re-reading this, or any other, book in the future? Why or why not?
Works Cited


MATTHEW DUFFUS is an Instructor of English and Writing Center Director at Gardner-Webb University, in Boiling Springs, NC, where he specializes in composition and American literature. He has recently published articles in Pivot: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Thought and Studies and Critical Insights: Flash Fiction.