

# ***The Importance of Recognitions in William Gaddis's A Frolic Of His Own***

## ***A importância de Recognitions na obra A Frolic of His Own, de William Gaddis***

Valéria Brisolará Salomon

### **Resumo**

*Este trabalho oferece uma breve análise do romance A Frolic of his Own de William Gaddis à luz de sua produção literária prévia. Ele enfoca as relações intertextuais presentes em A Frolic of his Own com as obras anteriores do autor e chama atenção para a importância desse diálogo na obra de William Gaddis.*

**Palavras-chave:** William Gaddis, intertextualidade, diálogo.

### **Abstract**

*This essay offers a brief analysis of William Gaddis's latest novel A Frolic of his Own in the light of his previous literary production. It focuses on A Frolic of his Own's intertextual relations with the author's preceding novels and highlights the importance of this dialogue to William Gaddis's fiction.*

**Key words:** William Gaddis, intertextuality, dialogue.

There must be something in the notion that every writer writes only one book and writes it over and over and over again.

William Gaddis

*A Frolic of his Own* is William Gaddis's fourth novel and was published in 1994. It received the National Book Award of that year and brought Gaddis once more to the limelight. Before this novel, Gaddis had published *The Recognitions* in 1955, *JR* in 1975, and *Carpenter's Gothic* in 1985.

This novel had been long expected by Gaddis's many critics and his, not so many, readers, who knew the book would deal with

lawyers, a beloved topic in the United States. However, those who expected a novel whose main subject would be a mockery and criticism of lawyers may have gotten disappointed. The law is only the apparent subject of *A Frolic of his Own*. It is an apparatus, a "pretext" Gaddis uses to develop the themes that have haunted his fiction since his first novel in the 1950's.

The title of the novel comes from the language of the law. Sven Birkerts (1994, p. 28) explains that 'frolic of his own' is "a legal locution referring to an employer's lack of culpability when an employee commits an indiscretion, while not on company business".

The novel itself is also full of frolic. It is

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an extremely funny novel that portrays contemporary culture in the United States and mocks at it. The central character, or, voice, is Oscar Crease, a middle-aged history teacher who is litigation-happy and tries to fight for justice in a society where the law seems to prevent justice. Oscar wants to prove that he is the author of a play that has inspired the movie script of a box-office hit about the Civil War and ends up suing the movie studio and the producer of the movie for copyright infringement. Oscar's pursuit of this case, as he goes on a quixotic defense of originality, is the central motif of this novel that asks for listening as much as for reading.

From the very beginning of the novel, readers are thrown into *A Frolic of his Own* and have to find their way into this dialogue-driven narrative. In order to do that, readers have to sort information and learn to 'listen' to characters' voices, accents, vocabulary, idiosyncrasies; for there are just a few narrative passages in the novel, and they do not provide any explanation or interpretation. Gaddis demands that his readers use repetitions to learn patterns and identities. He demands that they make recognitions. Besides listening to character's voices and other noises such as fragments of TV commercials or programs, while reading *A Frolic of his Own* readers have to read Oscar's play, *Once at Antietam*, whose fragments are scattered along the novel, and try to make sense of it. As the novel itself is composed almost entirely of dialogue, it seems like a play without stage directions. Besides Oscar's play, there are also many legal texts, such as opinions and the transcript of a deposition, inserted into the novel.

This deposition is the turning point in *A Frolic of his Own*. During the deposition, when Oscar and his lawyer are faced with the attorney for the defendant and Oscar should prove he had written the play, he is accused of having lifted whole passages from speeches by Plato and inserted them into the play. He is also accused of having stolen the title for the play from William Shakespeare's *Othello*. Oscar defends himself saying that he expected his readers to identify these reverberations and that they were a kind of homage to their authors. Thus, Oscar ends up having to defend himself

and has no opportunity to talk about the similarities between his play, *Once at Antietam*, and the movie, *The Blood in the Red, White and Blue*. When the attorney for the defendant asks Oscar to confirm if some fragments are similar to the works of Plato and Eugene O'Neill, Oscar merely responds that "It is nearer to parody, this passage."

What Gaddis himself does most of the time is ask his readers themselves to perform similar recognitions. The opening lines of the novel are "justice? You get justice in the next world, in this world you have the law" (13) and are taken, or perhaps lifted, as Oscar says, from *JR*, Gaddis's second novel. The epigraph of the novel, taken from Henry D. Thoreau, had already appeared in *The Recognitions*. What becomes evident is that Gaddis is dialoguing with his former novels and making this clear from the very first lines of his novel.

*The War at Antietam* is a historical play that attempts to tell the story of Oscar's grandfather and his participation in the Civil War. It also deals with the theme of justice and the law. Its title is the same of a play Gaddis started writing in 1957 and later abandoned (Knight, 1997, p. 282) and that has been proven to be more than a mere coincidence by some of Gaddis's critics who have had access to fragments of the play.

And that is what Gaddis seems to expect from his readers, that they be able to make recognitions, since Gaddis uses several elements from his previous literary production in this novel: the play, the epigraph, the opening lines... In some way, he rewrites himself and is at the same time original. We can conclude that originality is different from novelty. The main element, however, is the discussion about the possibility of being original and the concept of originality in contemporary society.

Many of Gaddis's characters are artists, and all of these artists are threatened with a breakdown and with the challenge of being original. They, and mainly Oscar, are at the frontier between being deemed an artist and a faker. Gaddis's characters can be said to verbalize the author's own dilemmas and pains.

Doctorov, a friend of Gaddis's for many years, when interviewed after Gaddis's death stated that, "He was always wrestling with the

form and making its own, pinning it down into *Gaddisness*". Doctorov also said that, "He was always, I think, possessed by the idea of inauthenticity and the unattainable ideal of authenticity".

While most of Gaddis's artists are failed artists, Christopher Knight calls our attention to the fact that, "it would be a mistake not to notice the failures of all of his characters and his own achievement" (1997, p. 5).

Peter Wolfe calls our attention to the fact that, "In writing *War at Antietam*, Oscar, a historian based at a local community college, performs a frolic of his own; the play falls outside the scope of his classroom duties" (1997, p. 272-273). For Steve Moore, *A Frolic of his Own* is "a playful of Gaddis's own" (1994, p. 209). Christina, Oscar's step-sister, provides a hint about the role of the artist when she says that Oscar really went on a frolic of his own and did something nobody had asked him to do and asks, "Isn't that really what the artist is all about?" (1994, p. 249).

Oscar Crease had a quest. He wrote an original play, but as he was reminded in the deposition, the materials he used in the making of his play were not raw. Just like Oscar's play was not original for Gaddis. Oscar wanted his readers to recognize his references or homages, as he called them, to other writers. William Gaddis also had a quest. It was also a quest for originality. In order to attain that, he did something very similar to what Oscar did. Gaddis also wanted his readers to do this. Oscar definitely has a point when he defends that what makes a work unique is the way it is constructed. He states that "I'm talking about work, you can't divide a work of art, the idea from the technique that expresses it" (200). Originality is not merely in the idea or in the technique used to convey this idea, it lies where these two merge. The play is not new, but its use is new.

Both Oscar and Gaddis want to be taken seriously. They want people to understand their works have significance and that this significance depends on their addressing important ideas that have already been addressed, but not exhausted.

The allusive nature of *A Frolic of his Own*, as well as of Gaddis's other novels, and of

Oscar's play makes it clear that, as John Johnston has pointed out, for Gaddis, "intertextuality is a compositional procedure from the outset" (1990, p. 5). Oscar and Gaddis share the conception that all books are more or less "built from other books", as American novelist Cormac McCarthy has put it..

It becomes evident that all the issues addressed in *A Frolic of his Own* had already been posed by Gaddis. According to Wolfe, 'His corpus makes-up a four volume "Song of Myself", commenting by turns affectingly and hilariously, on both itself and its author' (1997, p. 47). This becomes even more important if a statement by Gaddis is taken into account. He once said, "there must be something in the notion that every writer writes only one book and writes it over and over and over again".

It is possible to say that *A Frolic of his Own* is one of the rewritings of his unique novel. A novel which Gaddis has rewritten and published his entire life; and whose last version was to be published when he passed away in December of 1998. It was entitled *Agape Agape: The secret History of the Player Piano*.<sup>1</sup>

Gaddis had already demonstrated his interest in player pianos. Player Pianos have had an important role in his literary production and are recurrent in his fiction. He published an essay on player pianos in the July issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1951. There are several mentions to them in his works, but the most important one is in *JR*, where one of the characters, Jack Gibbs, is writing a book on the history of player pianos and "the mechanization of art in society". Allen Peacock, Gaddis's publisher stated that *Agape Agape* would be about, "art and mechanization, and the merging of the two... and would share many of the same themes as Gaddis's fiction". In sum, according to Johnston, Gaddis's fiction is concerned with "the question of art in the almost totally commodified world" that he had depicted in *JR* (1998, p. 48).

Thus, Gaddis's last book *Agape Agape* will be the book his character in *JR* had intended to write, but could not finish. Just like Eigen in *The Recognitions* could not finish his play about the Civil War, which Gaddis, or Oscar, did. Oscar stole Gaddis's manuscripts from the 50's

<sup>1</sup> According to *Publisher's Weekly*, January 6, 1997. P22.



and made the play his own. In sum, *A Frolic of his Own* is a book about a character who stole Gaddis's play and pretended it was his own, which is what he accuses the movie director, Kiester of doing. The copies of Oscar's original play had been stolen. Perhaps it was Gaddis who stole them from Oscar and went on a frolic of his own.

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