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Web Publication and Display of Literature

An Interactive Qualifying Project Report

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by

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Abstract

This project involves the display and celebration of both famous literature by James Joyce and new creative writings by WPI students. It includes detailed information about the creation of two exhibits in WPI's Gordon Library: one for the centennial celebration of Bloomsday on June 16, 2004, and another for new creative works. The project required extensive reading of the literary works, planning of the display cases, and attention to aesthetic details.

Introduction

The purpose of this project is twofold: to exhibit creative writings by WPI students, and to create a display for the celebration of the 100th Bloomsday.

WPI's creative writing class produced books and several Zines packed with rich poems and imaginative short stories. Every other year since 1999 these works are displayed in the Gordon Library's entrance. One particular project from the class was to publish a Zine of creative works. That project included such tasks as writing a call for works, editing, writing rejection letters, writing acceptance letters, and publishing a Zine. The result is student edited works of brilliance like *Word* by editors: Caton, Gilbreath, Ryan, Salazar, and Servatius. The table of contents of this Zine could fool the reader into thinking they were reading *Time* or some other professionally published magazine. The class produces works that, though not celebrated like *Ulysses*, are not lacking in creativity. Works from the class can be found in every kind of persuasion from humor to satire to poems about love for tractors. One poem I found particularly noteworthy was "The War of Love" by Matthew Ryan, another was "Captivated" by Samantha Michalka (see page 8).

The audience targeted by the creative writing display was students, faculty, and staff of WPI, along with any other people who entered or left the Gordon Library during WPI's C term (January through early March). In June the Bloomsday exhibit will be displayed, again in the Gordon Library entrance, targeting the same audiences.

Bloomsday celebrates James Joyce's self proclaimed "damned monster-novel" *Ulysses* (O'Grady: 2002). The book follows Leopold Bloom through his travels in Dublin, Ireland on the day of June 16, 1904. The whole book takes place on this one day. Joyce said "I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book" (O'Grady: 2002). The story is

modeled after Homer's *Odyssey*, with Stephen Dedalus playing the role of Telemachus and Leopold Bloom playing the hero, Odysseus. A masterpiece of fictional literature, not only is the story of *Ulysses* epic, but the writing in it is, also. Joyce pioneered the "stream of consciousness" writing style in this book. He wrote every "chapter" in a different style. Bloomsday, the celebration of this book and its hero, is observed worldwide every year.

Goals

Creative Writing Display

There are several goals associated with the creative writing display section of this project:

- Present creative writing works to the public.

- Introduce the creative writing class to students, faculty, and staff.

- Attract prospective students to the course.

Bloomsday Display

The Bloomsday display has similar goals:

- Attract more people to the Bloomsday celebration on June 16th.

- Present Bloomsday related artwork and texts to celebrators and passersby.

General Method

The general method used to construct the creative writing display was similar to an art gallery's procedure for constructing an art show. First, the works were collected and viewed (in this case read). Next I accepted several works while rejecting others, and finally arranged the works in the display cases. One problem with this methodology was that this display was not an art show. All the students were to be represented. After some rereading and redesigning, I finally constructed a complete display. This display contained work by every student in the course. While no one student had all of her or his works exhibited,

every student was represented in some way. Many students in the class worked very hard on the books themselves, not just the writings in them, with beautiful results. With such wonderful pieces of art like this, it was not very difficult to construct a display that was pleasing to the eye.

Fortunately, with the Bloomsday display, I can use the same art show methodology that I used early on in the creative writing display. In the creative writing display I was required to use at least one work from every student. Without this restriction, I have much more flexibility in choosing what to include in the display, or more specifically what not to include. The procedure for this display will be very similar to the last. First collect artworks and view them, then select what to include and what to reject. Next, acquire texts that relate directly to the images. Lastly, arrange selected artwork and related texts into display cases and tables, hanging any posters or other large works.

While both displays will be in the Gordon Library entrance, they differ markedly in many ways. The most obvious of these differences is that James Joyce is a celebrated author, recognized around the world for his remarkable literature, while the students of creative writing are not even authors by trade: they are (most of them) technical students. *Ulysses* is just one book, however large, and the display is centered about it; the creative writing display is centered around a collection of works, many of them under a page in length. The most obvious similarity between the displays is that they both focus on literature, they both celebrate the process of writing creatively.

Just like creative writing, the act of designing and building a display is an art form. Mess and art are in a delicate balance. It is quite easy to throw several items into a glass case and forget about it; it is very difficult to arrange works into a space in an artful way. One thing to consider is the path an eye takes as it observes the scene. Skillful artists can direct the viewer's eye around the canvas. Another thing to consider is how objects take up space.

The empty space around the object affects how one views the object. The first creative writing display (before I realized I had to include work from every student) had no books or Zines overlapping. Every work occupied its own space, every work was independent. Once I included all the other works, there was not enough room in the display cases to continue this practice. I was worried the display would end up looking like a big mess instead of a readable collection of works. Fortunately most of the books were small. I was forced to overlap, but I made sure that no work was entirely hidden under anything else. I also kept in mind that if any words in a displayed poem were covered up it would cause unrest in the viewer. I avoided this at all costs. The last, and most important consideration to keep in mind, was readability. All but one book was printed. This one book, "The Allure of Imperfection" by Geoff Caton, was etched with a calligraphy pen and had an intentional sloppiness to it. It was still readable, however, and made for an interesting departure from the standard printed text.

The War of Love

Love is that something that hides,

something that will never be mine.

On the verge of feeling it,

but it's just a cruel trick,

for now it's ever so far.

Its pain will never leave me

but down in the dust.

For love is war,

and I am a soldier.

War is that dreadful thing,

the monster that slaughters millions.

The shells whine high overhead,

and explode as if thunder.

Flesh cut to ribbons,

bone turned to sand.

A scream pierces the heavy air.

For war is hell,

and I am a soldier.

I stand before you,

a broken, sad young man,

for I have been through the

horrors of war, the gates of hell.

I'm back here for you, but have been turned away.

My heart cut to ribbons,

my soul to sand.

For love is hell,

and I am a soldier.

Captivated

I stopped.
I stared.
I watched.

And for that moment,
that second,
you were mind,
and I was yours.

Objectives

Library displays

- Read works and construct a general image of the class.
- Select poems and short stories to feature in display that represent a good cross section of the different styles in the class.
- Create temporary display while reprinting works and designing display.
- Design how the display will look after reprinting is finished.
- Construct final display including props, stands, and paperweights.
- Acquire related artwork, photographs from Dublin, and any artifacts related to Bloomsday and *Ulysses*.
- Design Bloomsday display(s)
- Construct Bloomsday display(s)

Web pages

- Collect any available digital copies of works to be featured on the pages.
- Convert all materials to digital format, scan or photograph all Zines and book covers. Scan works where digital copies were unavailable.
- Design layout, page structure, look and feel, and color scheme(s) of the web page.
- Write the pages.
- Test the site with different browsers and at different resolutions.
- Move all HTML and helper files to the Library's webspace.

Live feed from Dublin

- Locate transmission and reception points in Dublin and Worcester.
- Synchronize time difference
- Coordinate timing and placement of WPI's Bloomsday activities with access points.
- Technical setup of access grid.
- Prepare spare footage in case of technical difficulties: videos or slide shows of the Dublin area.

Methodology

The very first thing to happen on this project was the construction of a display of creative writing works. In mid January Professor Laura Menides handed me a box of odd little handcrafted books and magazines that students had made for her creative writing class. I read a great deal of the poems and short stories before selecting several to place in the display. The selection process was enjoyable, if a bit tedious. I wanted to include a few poems, two or three short stories, and as many of the books as possible. I thought if someone was in a hurry, they would be more likely to read a short poem than a several pages long story. Since the creative writing exhibit was set in the entrance (and exit) of WPI's Gordon Library I knew many people would rush past the displays and barely notice they were there. My hope was that I could make the display attractive enough to make people pause and look before running off to their next appointment. The books are visually interesting, and I knew they could catch a person's attention if placed properly. Once a person has stopped to look at the books, I knew they were much more likely to read something. I placed short poems near the books, as I knew people were more likely to read something short than something that spanned several pages. I wanted the first poems people read to be powerful or entertaining, to encourage them to read more. With this mind frame, I selected poems and short stories that would catch and hold people's attention.

A previous display in the library's entrance was removed on Friday, the 16th of January. This gave me a weekend to look over the works and select the ones I thought would work best. Some of the works needed to be reproduced, and so to keep the cases from being empty for too long, I set up a temporary display with several of the books and Zines. The temporary display stayed up from the 19th to the 27th, while wrote out poems by hand, selected works for the display, and copied short stories. Since the display was about a creative writing class, I thought it would be an appropriate idea to include some of the

poems written out by hand on paper. Another idea I had was to write an excerpt from one poem on a napkin in pen. I wanted to give the impression that someone had simply jotted down an idea while enjoying a cup of coffee or tea. I discarded the idea because my handwriting is very sloppy, and I felt any poem to be displayed deserved to be presented well. I still enjoy the idea, however, and would definitely consider having another person hand letter poems in the future. The reason I hand lettered several poems in pencil is that I could write very slowly with a pencil. I needed to write slowly in order to write legibly. Writing slowly with a pen, and on a *napkin*, produced large ink blots as the napkin soaked in the ink so quickly. While this idea was thrown out, a similar idea stayed. Along with several poems written on paper with pencil, I included the pencils I used to transcribe them. I did my best to overcome my own sloppy handwriting by copying those poems several times. Wherever I could manage I included the actual book, opened to the poem or poems I wanted to display. The students presented their poems with style and beauty. There was textured paper, marbled paper, cardboard cut-outs, borders and bindings that simply could not be reproduced with a copy machine. The books themselves were works of art. Carefully crafted by hand, each book was unique. One student (Marissa Cartwright) covered her book with suede, bound it with nuts and bolts, and used metal fasteners to keep it closed. After the reproductions were completed, I carefully placed all my selections in the display and declared it finished.

Oops. I had forgotten that all of the authors were to be displayed in the exhibit. I finally finished the display around the 30th of January; at last I could take down those terrible "under construction" signs. I was worried that with too much material in the cases they would look messy, but they turned out beautiful.

The next step in the creative writing section of the project was writing a webpage for the works. University Archivist Rodney Obien told me what he had in mind for the page, and I began designing it to his specifications. The basic idea of the page was to have

different color combinations for different people. I chose to keep the layout of the pages the same for every section of the webpage, and only modify the color combinations. I did this to keep all of the pages related visually. I knew if the pages all looked completely different, users would become disoriented when they browsed to each new page. One thing I kept in mind while writing the pages was screen resolution. Many people keep their screen resolution at or near 800x600 pixels. It was easy to write the pages to look pleasing on large resolutions, but I wanted to accommodate as many users as possible. I wrote the pages to look best at the next standard size up (1024x768 pixels), and tried to maintain readability at lower resolutions. Another aspect of the webpage to consider was browsability. Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) offers many way to alter the look of a webpage. One such alteration is the ability to remove the underline and coloration from links. I chose to implement this style, but did my best to keep all the links in one section so that browsing would stay as intuitive as possible. The major reason I chose to use CSS on the webpage was to keep maintenance very simple and modular. With CSS, only one line of any page need be changed to give that page a different color-scheme. Generating new color-schemes is simple with any graphical editor; I chose to use The GIMP (www.gimp.org). To make a new color-scheme, pick two colors and make rounded corners with them. The purpose of these rounded corners is to give the content section of the page a softer appearance, instead of sharp right angles. Next generate a new color-scheme.css file by copying any other color-scheme.css file. Change the colors in the new file to the new colors you are using, and make sure all of the text will still be readable (beware of black text on black background). The last step is to place your rounded corner images in a new directory under the colors directory. Now any new page required can be copied from an old page, and changed in only one place: the reference to color-scheme.css. The color-schemes I created were robust such that they can represent a wide range of moods. The color-scheme for a particular student should

reflect the poetry of that student. Dark poetry should be presented on a dark color-scheme, whereas happy poetry should not.

Midway through April, the time came to take down the creative writing display. After removing all the books and Zines from the library entrance, the main goal was to digitize some of the works for use in the webpage. The original plan was to retrieve as many works from the students as possible through email, in order to minimize reproduction time. Due to the wide spectrum of file formats and pesky browser support issues, I decided to simply scan larger works to image files, and type in smaller works by hand.

Upon starting this project, I had never even heard the name James Joyce. There was much reading to be done. I started by reading articles on Bloomsday and *Ulysses*, a trot by Stuart Gilbert, and Homer's *Odyssey*. Gilbert's trot had such a rave review of *Ulysses* in its introduction that I was compelled to borrow the book and start reading it myself. During the third 'chapter' of *Ulysses* I became so lost I simply had to put it down and read the rest of Gilbert's trot. During all this reading, I began to collect materials for the exhibit. Early materials included postcards and news articles. Later I acquired a treasure trove of materials from Lance Schachterle, who had been to Dublin several times and collected a few items. These items included a map of Dublin which traces Leopold Bloom's travels during the book, two very beautiful stippled illustrations, and magazine titled "James Joyce's Tower" about the tower in which the book opens. Later still Joel Bratton loaned a vintage ceramic bowl stamped "Plums Potted Meat" which also appears in the book.

Results

Creative Writing Display
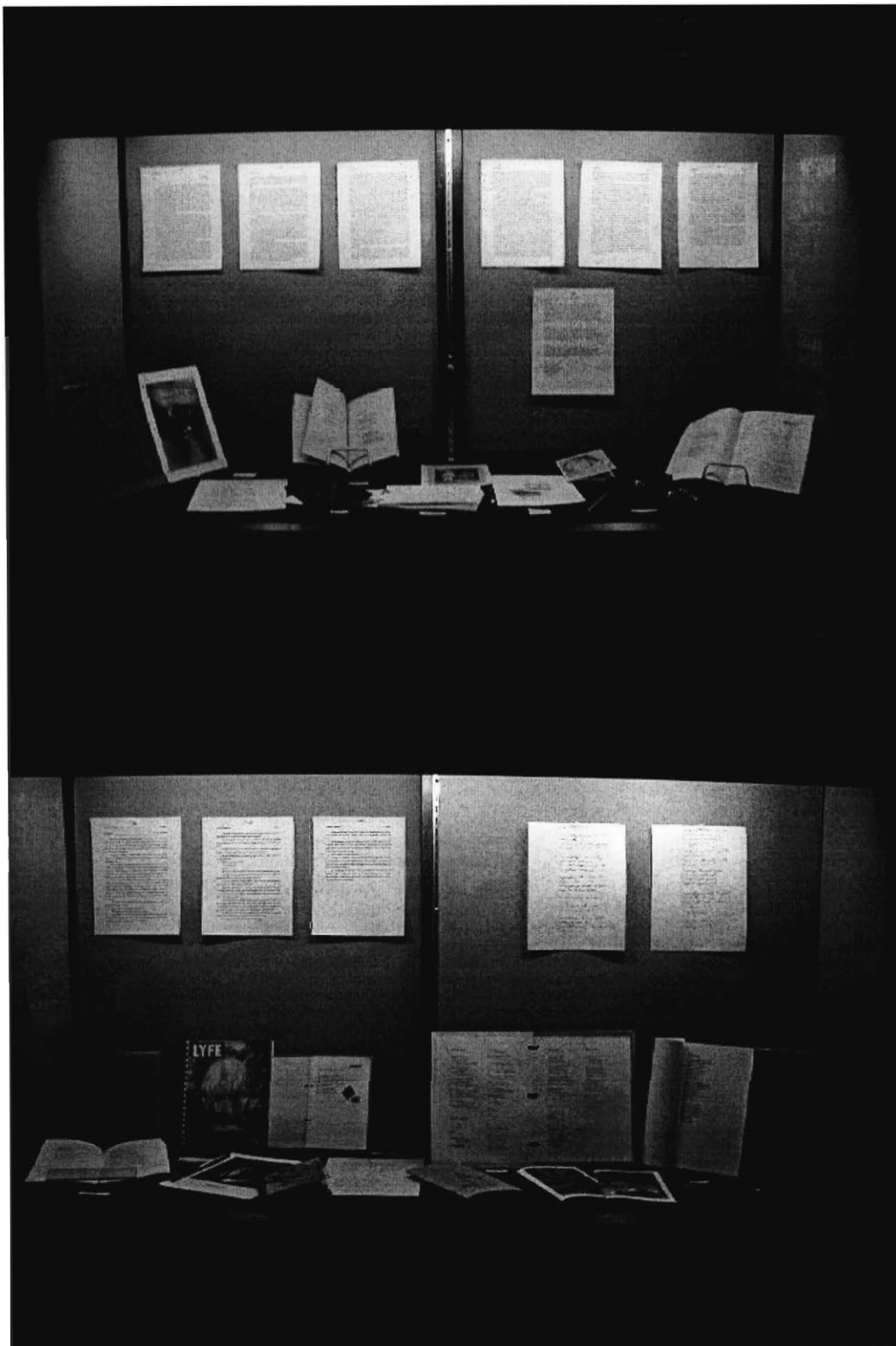
These images (1 and 2) are the entrance and exit creative writing displays.

(3) This is a photograph of Joyce at the age of 22, taken in 1904.

(4) This is an engraving of Stephen Dedalus from the "Oxen of the Sun" chapter of *Ulysses*.

(5) This is a vintage G.W. Plumtree Potted Meat container from 1904.

"Potted meat" is mentioned in the "Lestrygonians" chapter of *Ulysses*.

Analysis

Webpage analysis

From the start I knew that writing the web pages would be easy, but designing them would be hard. As with any programming task, one could start without a design, and just start writing code from scratch. One benefit to writing code this way is the author can see results very soon after starting. Compared to detailing a design, which can take weeks and have no measurable output, this seems very appealing. The biggest drawback to starting without a design is lack of foresight. It is likely (unavoidable in large projects) that you will stumble onto some problem you did not expect, and be forced to negotiate a bizarre solution. Often this solution involves re-writing sections that were already finished. This decreases efficiency. If you make a design first you find these problems before you write any code. While you may still find problems, and need to rewrite code, these are problems you would have had even if you had not started with a design. Another benefit to making a design first is time independence. If you start from scratch, at the very least you have some idea in your head about what to do. When you take a break, or go to sleep, you may forget things. In order to remember what you were doing, you would have to re-read code. When you have a design, you do not have to worry about forgetting because you can simply look at the plan. I chose to write out a design plan for the web pages before I started coding them.

There are several web programming languages available, so there were several ways I could have written the web pages. The most straightforward way would have been to write everything in HTML. While this would have produced the same end product visually, it would have been a nightmare to write. Even in the best case, I would have had to write one page as a template, and then make a new copy for each student in the class. I would then have to hand edit every change I wanted to make, on ever student's page. With a small number of pages (say two or three) this would have been an acceptable process. As soon as

you are dealing with more than ten different pages, this becomes ridiculous. There are two alternatives to writing every page by hand: CGI and CSS. Since I have used CGI with the perl programming language in the past, I would have used perl this time, too. CGI is a protocol for passing information to and from the user (the person browsing the page). Using CGI I could have made one program to generate the HTML every time someone requested the page. When a user requests a page, the program runs and outputs HTML specific to the request. One benefit of this is having one control point to work from. This one CGI script would control all the pages on the site. If you wanted to add something to every page, you would only have to alter the control file. One drawback is a lack of flexibility. You can either append to the control file, or write a totally new page from scratch each time. CGI would have been the only choice if this project had to deal with hundreds of students, but with only about 30 students, CGI was overkill. The second alternative is CSS. CSS stands for Cascading Style Sheets, and it lets you override parts of your HTML. I chose to use CSS for two reasons: ease of use, and modularity. Using CSS means making some trivial changes to the HTML so that it references a style sheet. Then, any time I want to change the style of the HTML page, I only need to change the style sheet. To change a pages style completely, I can have it reference a different style sheet, by changing only one word in the page. After implementing this method, I was able to quickly and easily generate as many *different* pages as I liked.

I wanted to keep the web pages similar in some ways and different in others. The content of every page would be different, as each page represents a different student, but I wanted the style of each page to differ slightly to emphasize this change in content. In any image (and this includes text) there is composition and color. Composition has to do with shapes, space, and negative space. Black and white images rely almost entirely on composition for artistic merit. I could have made subtle changes to the composition of each page, or in the color of each page. I wanted to keep the changes similar, which is to say,

make changes only in composition or only in color. Keeping the changes similar in this way also helped associate the pages together. Visually, there is no reason to chose changing composition over changing color, nor vice versa. I chose to change the colors of each page because it would be easiest to do.

After choosing to change the colors of each page, I had to decide how to do this. Using CSS I could specify the background color of the page, and even background images, but that still meant I had to *create* those images. Given the format I created for the pages (remember, I planned to keep the composition the same every time, and only change colors) I needed to create four corner images. I wanted the content to be in a rounded rectangle, so I had to create rounded corners. Each page has two background colors, one exterior and one interior. The rounded corners needed to have both of these colors. There were three ways to accomplish this. I could have made transparent GIF images of the exterior color, I could have made transparent PNG images the same way, or I could have made JPEG images that were not transparent (and thus would need to include both the exterior color and the interior color). The algorithm for making GIF images is copyrighted and thus not free. The PNG image format is free, but not supported by the Internet Explorer browser. Internet Explorer is the most widely used browser. The JPEG image format is the most widely supported of the three, so I used it. This choice made creating new color-combinations harder, but it was more important that everyone view the pages the correctly.

There were four ways to display the creative writing works on each student's webpage. The ideal way would be to include each work in HTML. The drawback to this is it would mean typing out every work by hand. Since all of the works were in my possession, I could scan them in as either JPEG images or acrobat PDF files. The major drawback to scanning the works in as images is that the images would be very large and difficult to read. PDF files require a browser plugin to view, so they would not display with the rest of the content on the page. Word documents work the same way as PDF files, you need to have

Word, or some Word document reader to view the files, and they do not display with the rest of the content.

Display analysis

When constructing the creative writing display, I was faced with so many options that I will have to be very general in this section. As I mentioned above, two parts of any visual art are composition and color.

As far as colors are concerned, I could have either placed all the similarly colored books together, or not. Placing all the similar colored items together would be a bad idea because then objects in the middle (of the group) sink back and don't get noticed. On the other hand, if you set items with contrasting colors next to each other, they draw your attention. Too much contrast, however, is painful to look at.

The colors themselves are also important to consider. Red is a warning color, and is thus excellent for attracting attention. Blue is a soothing, calming color. It was unfortunate that there were no blue books to put in the display. I used the two red books to attract people's gaze, one in the entrance case and one in the exit case. I would have used blue books to try to make people calm, maybe get them to stop and look around.

As for composition, the main concerns are size, shape, and negative space. Negative space is the space that *is not* what you are looking at. It is the space around the object. In any kind of display, weather it be an art exhibition or a sculpture garden, you must pay attention to the area around your subject. In the creative writing display, one of my biggest worries early on was that with too many poems and books, there would be too much clutter. In the first display I created, none of the works overlapped each other, in fact, none even came close. When I remade the display, I had to be careful how I overlapped things. There was simply too much material to give everything its own space, so I had to be creative about it. Placing all the items horizontal to the viewer would have been boring, there would have

been nothing to keep your eyes moving. I put many books on the diagonal, sometimes with one corner just intruding on another item in the case. When the viewer tilts her or his head, they notice things nearby on the same diagonal as what they are looking at. At the same time, they ignore things not on that diagonal. This is very important. By placing some items on the diagonal, I could create negative space. If I had not done this, the display would have looked cluttered and messy and full.

Conclusions and recommendations

Website

I am quite happy with how the website turned out. It is easy to navigate, and interesting to look at. I would have liked to add a biography section to each student's page. I would have interviewed each student and requested a photograph. I would be able to find out what each student's favorite colors are, and personalize every page accordingly. Another change I would have made is I would have added many more color-schemes.

Displays

Overall I am very pleased with both displays. The creative writing display challenged my creativity, and so I am proud that it turned out the way it did. I wanted it to look like the works had simply fallen out of somebody's bag, not that they had been carefully placed. The Bloomsday display was an enormous undertaking. *Ulysses* is a very dense book, rich in language, meaning, symbolism, comedy, and wit. If I were to do this project over again, I would dedicate a few months just to reading *Ulysses*.

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