Resource

by Meera Nair

**Tags:** Close reading. annotation, digital writing, fiction, workshop, play, maker

As the Visiting Fiction Writer-in-Residence at Fordham University I taught fiction writing to undergraduates and undergrads in courses titled Fiction Bootcamp and Writer's Workshop. These courses were craft-based workshops where my students and I pondered the big questions of how fiction is constructed and what makes it work. We looked under the hood, took the back off the clock, peered into the innards in order to study the formal decisions necessary for effective story-telling. Our inquiry included point of entry; character and plot; creating meaningful scenes; interiority v/s external action; exposition; the management of time; the position of the narrator; linear v/s modular design; dialogue and its uses; conflict and resolution; image systems and so on. In order to learn to "read like a writer," students tackled a collection worth of stories and paid attention to details like how sentences are constructed, dialogue is set up and narrative is designed. This exploration and study of published work was a necessary step in their project to become active makers of fiction.

Fifteen Teachers in the Classroom

Last semester, I discovered Genius.com (www.genius.com) (formerely RapGenius), a new site that allowed media-rich digital annotation for text. Several of my students had used the site to annotate rap songs and were enthusiastic (and a little bemused) when I suggested we use it in our class.
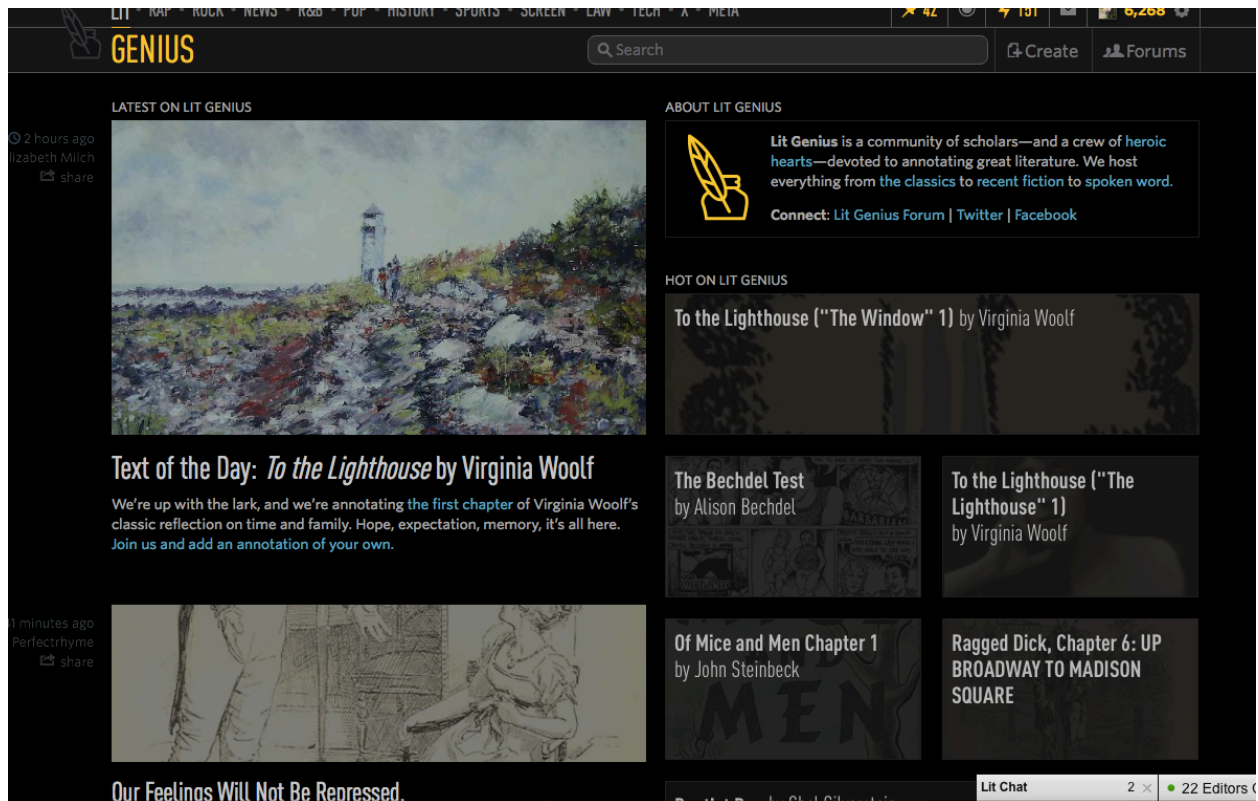
We decided to use **Genius.com** as a platform to collaboratively engage and connect with several stories that we were close reading. Genius.com not only allows students to annotate or create digital marginalia or notes, but also share comments on peer annotations. The site's interface also lets students enhance their annotations with links, images and embed video and audio from popular social media sites like Soundcloud or Youtube.

My students created free accounts on the site. Even though anyone in the world with an internet connection can annotate on the site, Genius.com also allows Verified Educators to create Educator accounts and **"class pages"** (lit.genius.com/Education-genius-a-teachers-guide-to-genius-annotated) for the exclusive and private use of their classes. After I had uploaded the texts we were going to use and created class pages, I also set up easy-to-follow **guidelines** (lit.genius.com/Meera-nair-annotation-exercises-for-fiction-boot-camp-annotated which detailed best-practices when it came to annotating a given text. These guidelines helped define the parameters by narrowing the focus of the textual analysis to craft elements and interesting background details.

An excellent fiction annotation will:

• **Give well-researched, accurate background information** about historical events, locations, people, terms etc. mentioned in the story. For example, what do think of when you see Norma Jean? Which famous celebrity also had that name and do you think Mason chose that name deliberately (of course, she did!) See

 • examples of annotations:

• **Explain, in a concise manner, lines or ideas** that you feel may be difficult to understand. Remember this is not an essay. Your explanations probably shouldn't exceed a short paragraph. Spend some time looking at other annotations to see what kinds of explanations work well. Avoid explaining the meaning of lines that are relatively straightforward—ie, "the wife works in a cosmetic store." This information is easily gleaned from Mason's story. Instead, the reason why Mason chose to characterize Lenny through his use of Lincoln Logs and craft kits may be a more interesting choice and invite more interpretation.

• **Be ruthless in correcting your grammar.** Proofread at least twice. You are in a classroom and we do not use texting terms (bcuz,lol) in formal writing.

The project went much better than I could have imagined. Suddenly, with this model there were 15 teachers in the classroom. We talked about the fact that we were all teaching each other something new with every insight about the text. There was a sense of shared responsibility-a feeling that we were all collaborating on a single important project and enhancing it line by line.

From static short story to rich multi-media resource

Students added songs, images and video to complement their indepth analyses of a writer's narrative moves. These enhancements helped transform the stories into a rich, multimedia resources and create layers of additional, sometimes surprising, meaning.

For example, while annotating **Shiloh** by Bobbie Ann Mason, students embedded the songs mentioned in the story and we discovered that their lyrics reflected directly on the events detailed in the story. This led to a discussion of the use of "objective correlative" and how the songs stood in for an emotion that Mason wanted to convey.

Shiloh by Bobbie Ann Mason

(lit.genius.com/Meera-nair-shiloh-by-bobbie-ann-mason-annotated)

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In Amy Hempel's brief and wonderous story, *Church Cancels Cow*, students found that Hempel's choice of scenery and setting had symbolic resonance in the text.

Or not, according to the woman at the wheel of the red Honda Civic that appears from behind the Japanese maple and proceeds past the hedge of arborvitae where she slows and then rolls down her window to say, "You should keep that dog on a leash." She says, "That dog left faces on my mother's grave."

When I realize she means feces, I say my dog didn't do it. She says yes, my dog did it. I say, "Did you see this dog leave feces on the grave?" She says, "I found faces on my mother's grave. I had to clean them off." I say there are other dogs that walk here. I say my dog goes in the woods before the place where the headstones start.

I leave her talking to me from her car. I walk away with my dog in the direction of my house, and she follows in her car so I turn back

Interestingly, Arborvitae translates to "tree of life" in Latin. These types of trees are generally used as a natural boundary, a fence. The hedges of arborvitae could be separating the dead from the living, between the cemetery and the neighborhood.

ACCEPTED COMMENT: This also can be symbolic of the divide between the dead and the living, not just from the cemetery and the neighborhood, but physically keeping one from another as well.

They not only engaged with the text at multiple levels, but also discovered that every choice the writer makes is deliberate and deeply relevant to the image systems, themes and meaning of the story.

Church Cancels Cow by Amy Hempel

(lit.genius.com/Meera-nair-church-cancels-cow-by-amy-hempel-annotated)

For peace of mind I will lie about any thing at any time.

In fact, she says, she has counted three dogs the other day from her car. Like counting cows, in the game I played in cars when the family went out on long drives. My brother and I were told to count cows in the fields we passed along the way, me counting cows on one side of the road, my brother counting cows on the other. But if we passed a church, the person on whose side the church appeared had to start their count over again.

Add Your Verified Annotation +15IQ

Genius Annotation by AllisonMB

Here Hempel masterfully uses a small line to connect the reader with the character. Instead of using a back-story dump or lots of exposition, she has identified the character as a sister who had a relationship with her brother as children. This backstory is woven into the main plot of the story subtly and sufficiently.

edit | delete | send feedback

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The site's built-in functionality also let students comment on annotations, comment on comments, or ask questions, in a recursive, constantly evolving inquiry/parsing of meaning. As their professor, I (and students) could accept or "upvote", reject or send feedback to individual students. The screenshot from the story

The First Day

(lit.genius.com/Edward-p-jones-the-first-day-annotated) by Edward Jones below shows just such a comment thread.

Becoming better writers online and off

I was also surprised and delighted to find that students who often remained silent during class discussion became articulate online. Their analyses were fuller, more engaged, focused on digging deep into the text, and refreshingly free of jargon or slang. They fluently parsed paragraphs; commented on their classmate's posts with sudden authority. B., told me he liked the fact that his comments were helping other scholars understand the text, that it was almost like they were

"writing micro papers online."

When I marveled at T., transformation from silent spectator to active participant, T., shrugged:

"I sort of live online—it just comes easier."

The site also has an additional feature of gamification--students can win points for annotations and comments. Students competed against one another to rack up points-which meant they spent more time engaging with the text. For me, the class scoreboard was an easy way to keep track of who was doing the assignment and who was slacking off.

When it came time to write their own stories, I found that exercising their annotation muscles had helped make their own writing lean and mean. In our fiction workshops, students were well able to explain their narrative choices of setting, images or characterization in terms of their relevance to the story they were trying to tell.

A sense of ownership

Finally, there was also an aspect of play to the whole exercise that perhaps contributed to the enthusiasm with which students approached the assignments. They were "reading" the text in ways that they had never done before and creating/making/ transforming the text as they went along. It gave them more control over the process of learning to read like writers, and relieved them of their hang-ups when it came to writing. Because it was on the internet, in a format familiar to them, it was somehow less "formal" than college level papers.

It also helped them to "see" the text in novel ways, as something that can and should be open to interpretation. They were no longer thinking of writing as "a mystery, a privilege of caste," as David Bartholomae so eloquently put it, but as a skill that can be acquired, manipulated and enhanced. From passive consumers of text, they had become active producers and collaborators in the creation of meaning.

They were making these stories their own.

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