

Resource

by Meera Nair

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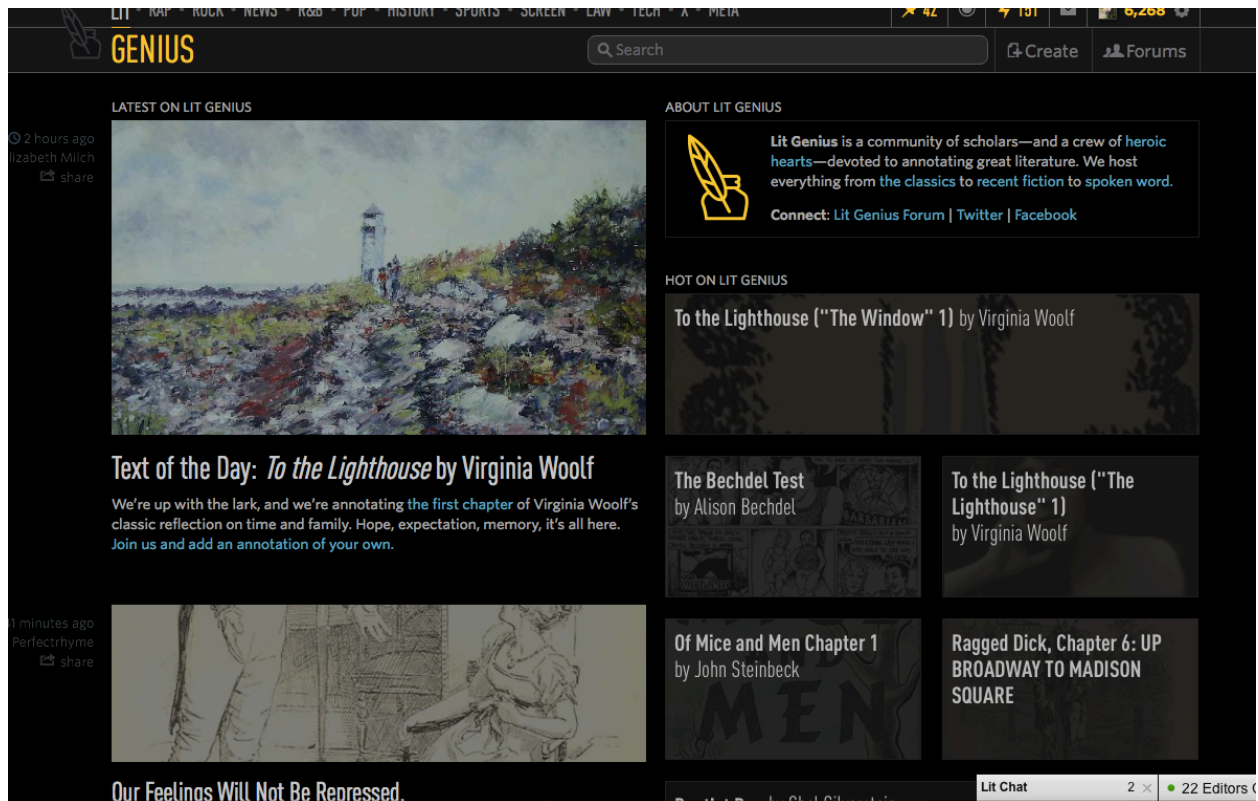
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Tags: Close reading, annotation, digital writing, fiction, workshop, play, maker

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) (formerly 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.



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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.

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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)

lay "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" and "I'll Be Back." He
After fifteen years on the road, he is finally settling
e woman he loves. She is still pretty. Her skin is
frosted curls resemble pencil trimmings.

by has come home to stay, he notices how much the
nged. Subdivisions are spreading across western
an oil slick. The sign at the edge of town says "Pop:
seven hundred more than it said twenty years before.
figure out who is living in all the new houses. The
used to gather around the courthouse square on
rnoons to play checkers and spit tobacco juice have
een years since Leroy has thought about the farmers,
e disappeared without his noticing.

a kid named Stevie Hamilton in the parking lot at the
g center. While they pretend to be strangers meeting
car, Stevie tosses an ounce of marijuana under the
eroy's car. Stevie is wearing orange jogging shoes and
says CHATTAHOOCHEE SUPER-RAT. His father is a
ctor who lives in one of the expensive subdivisions in
olumned brick house that looks like a funeral parlor.

Interesting lyrics, especially given the circumstances:
"At long last love had arrived, I thank God, I'm alive."

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Genius Annotation by Morgan927

Can't Take My Eyes off You - Frankie Valli and ...


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In Amy Hempel's brief and wonderful story, *Church Closes 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.

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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](#) +151Q

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.

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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.

The screenshot displays a digital reading interface. On the left, a text passage is shown with several lines highlighted in yellow. The text includes: "there." The woman continues to act as if she has known me all my life, but she tells my mother that we live beyond the area that Seaton serves. My mother is not convinced and for several more minutes she questions the woman about why I cannot attend Seaton. For as many Sundays as I can remember, perhaps even Sundays when I was in her womb, my mother has pointed across I Street to Seaton as we come and go to . "You gonna go there and learn about the whole world." But one of the guardians of that place is saying no, and no again. I am learning this about my mother: The higher up on the scale of respectability a person is—and teachers are rather high up in her eyes—the less she is liable to let them push her around. But finally, I see in her eyes the closing gate, and she takes my hand and we leave the building. On the steps, she stops as people move past us on either side. "Mama, I can't go to school?" She says nothing at first, then takes my hand again and we are down the steps quickly and nearing before I can blink. This is my mother: She says, "One monkey don't stop no show." Walker-Jones is a larger, newer school and I immediately like it because of that. But it is not across the street from my mother's

On the right, a sidebar titled "Genius Annotation by JohnWhalen" contains two annotations. The first annotation states: "This is the narrator's first time confronted with reality. 'You gonna go there and learn about the whole world' is a very optimistic sentence and idea, as if the world is always at one's finger tips. But it's not, and at the end of this scene, the author understands the world doesn't accept everyone, only the lucky." The second annotation states: "This is also a moment in which she is confronted with a reality about her mother—that her mother feels threatened by those 'higher up on the scale of respectability,' and feels the need to overcompensate for whatever she feels is lacking compared to those in positions of power, such as the teachers." Both annotations have a "+1" upvote and "accept | reject | send feedback" options. At the bottom of the sidebar, there is a "Lit Chat" section showing 0 messages and 8 E (likely 8 emojis or reactions).

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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.

	AdrianaCalandra 293	+ 120
	Sakhter 125	+ 110
	mikefursa 159	+ 66
	JohnWhalen 211	+ 60
	ecavoto11 128	+ 58
	JTalio 394	+ 58
	psingh14 105	+ 51
	jtumolo 92	+ 50
	bdavis19 110	+ 45
	Show all 15 scholars	

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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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