



First page of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, with marginal glosses (14th century).

Free Library of Philadelphia, Rare Book Department, Lewis E 170, fol. 1r

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Annotating Literary Texts: Overall Assignment

Most experienced readers of literature mark up the texts that they are examining. Insightful analysis often begins with notes jotted down in the margins of the texts under consideration. Notes can be written for a wide variety of purposes, including raising questions, highlighting details and images, noting the meanings of words and phrases, explaining historical and cultural references, proposing interpretive ideas, and many more. For students and scholars who are in the habit of annotating texts, the process of reading can naturally unfold into interpretation and critical writing. Making annotations helps readers actively think about what they read as they move from one sentence to the next. And once such notes are made, they make it easier to remember and re-examine key features of the text, whether one is drawing together ideas for a paper or reviewing materials for an exam.

To help you develop the habit of textual annotation, we will be using an open-source, online tool to annotate some of our readings together. This tool – Hypothes.is – allows groups of readers to view texts together online and to make annotations that appear directly on the online versions of the texts – though these will be visible only to group members. There will be five literary texts over the course of the semester that we will be reading and annotating using Hypothes.is. You will be required, on each of these texts, to make three brief annotations. These notes will be visible to me and to your fellow classmates (and to no one else); you will be able to refer to them throughout the semester. I will soon demonstrate in class how the Hypothes.is platform works and how you will be expected to use it.

We will be using the Hypothes.is software to annotate selected portions of the following works of literature: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, by Mary Wollstonecraft; *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass; “Sun-Down Poem,” by Walt Whitman; “The Dead,” by James Joyce; and “The Cabuliwallah,” by Rabindranath Tagore.

All these texts are available through the Hypothes.is group to which we will all belong. Here is the link to that group: <https://hypothes.is/groups/MLbpYQEZ/great-works-ii-alkon> Once you join Hypothes.is and join this group, you will be able to find links to the online versions of the literary texts.

Annotating Literary Texts: General Guidance

As you read the assigned texts, you can feel free to make notes about any words, images, or references that seem to you to be worthy of special notice, questioning, explanation, or interpretation. The one requirement is that your annotations make points about specific words and phrases that, when further considered, can help you to understand larger portions of the text that you are reading. In other words, your annotations should make focused points or observations and then say something about their broader significance – what your points might imply, what questions they might raise, or how they might be linked to other aspects of the text.

Here is some advice about how to find and make annotations of noteworthy details:

- Look out for words or phrases that you have trouble understanding. These may be words that you simply do not know, or words that are being used in an unusual or old-fashioned way. To understand words like this, you should consult a dictionary; you should also examine the way the words are used in the context of what you are reading. A useful annotation might suggest what the word or phrase means and how knowing this helps you to understand what is happening in the surrounding sentences or paragraphs.
- References to real-world places, to historical people and events, and to cultural or religious practices are all worthy of annotation. After doing research on this kind of reference, you can write a note explaining what it means and, just as important, how understanding the reference also helps you to understand the portion of the literary text where the reference occurs.
- Generally, you can make a useful annotation about any word or phrase or moment in the literary text that stands out to you – that you find surprising, moving, humorous, confusing, or interesting in some other way. As long as you make specific points, or raise specific questions, about what words and phrases mean in the context of the literary text, your annotations will be useful for everyone. In annotations, it is entirely appropriate to raise precise and focused questions about what an author means when using specific words or phrases. Questions are often just as illuminating as more definite interpretations.

Annotating Literary Texts: Specific Directions

For the texts that we are reading and annotating online, you will be required to make three notes before the class meeting when the reading assignment is due. Here are some additional guidelines about the kinds of notes that I am expecting you to write:

- Each note should be fairly brief – roughly 2 to 4 sentences long. Your notes do not have to be perfect: you are not expected to cover every possible interpretation, nor do you even have to be entirely “correct” in what you are saying. What matters is to make specific, concrete observations and to make some reasonable suggestions about why, in the context of our reading, your observations are meaningful and important.
- Your writing in your notes should be clear and understandable, without excessive typos and other mistakes. Your notes should not look like text-messages or Facebook posts. At the same time, I want to emphasize that this is not a formal writing assignment. I will not be grading the annotations as if they were short papers. You can think of your annotation work as a kind of collaborative online discussion, one that develops as you read and then continues in class.
- If, when you go online to enter your annotations, you find that one of your classmates has already entered a note about the word or phrase about which you were planning to write, do not worry! If you think carefully about the meaning of the word or phrase in question, your interpretation will probably not be exactly the same as that of your classmate. In your note, explain your ideas and how they are similar to and/or different from the ideas that have already been posted.

Again, for each one of the five literary texts that we will be reading and annotating together, you will need to enter your three notes before the class meeting when the reading assignment is due.

For each of these five assignments, I will provide text-specific questions that will help guide you as read the literary texts and prepare your annotations.

Questions to Guide Reading and Annotation

(These also appear as "Page Note" annotations on each of the assigned texts available via the Hypothes.is group page linked above.)

Wollstonecraft: In the portions of the book that you are asked to read (they are highlighted), Wollstonecraft is responding to the ideas of the French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that the education of women should focus on teaching them how to be pleasing to men. Some general questions to keep in mind as you read and prepare your annotations: According to Wollstonecraft, what are the results of educating women with the goal of making them pleasing to men? What kinds of pleasure are women supposed to provide? In Wollstonecraft's view, what is the basis for real personal virtue in men and women? How does virtue relate to equality between the sexes? What are some of the problems, according to Wollstonecraft, with women who focus too much on being beautiful and lack other interests and abilities?

Douglass: Here are some topics for you to consider as you read and annotate Chapters 1 and 2 of Douglass's autobiography: Note what, from the start, Douglass does not know about himself and is unable to remember. What are some of the other deprivations, mentioned in both Chapters 1 and 2, that Douglass and the other slaves had to endure? What were some of the many terrible aspects and consequences of the sexual abuse of female slaves by their owners? (This topic is explored in different ways throughout the first chapter.) How was the Great House Farm viewed by slaves on the neighboring farms? Note some of the various and complicated feelings expressed by Douglass concerning his fellow slaves. What are some of the reasons why Douglass is so upset as he remembers the singing of the slaves? What does he say about the meaning and interpretation of these songs?

Whitman: In "Sun-Down Poem," the poet is riding on a ferry across New York Harbor (there were no bridges then) and reflecting on his relationship to other passengers, both those on the boat with him and those who will ride in the future. The poet also reflects on his relationship to elements of his environment and to people who will one day read his poem. The word-choice in Whitman's poetry is very distinctive; it would be helpful to note and discuss the meanings both of unusual words and of more ordinary words that are used in extraordinary ways. It would also be worthwhile to note and explain moments in the poem when there seems to be a change in whom the poet is talking to (a change in his imagined audience). Also try to notice changes in the way the poet is talking – is he making statements? Asking questions? Providing reassurance? Issuing commands? And there are also noteworthy shifts in the way the poet relates to his immediate surroundings. Finally, can you find any clues that might help to explain why the poet feels so closely connected to us?

Tagore: In "The Cabuliwallah" there are a number of specific cultural references that can be usefully explained in notes. What is the Cabuliwallah doing in Calcutta (a city in the region of Bengal, which is today divided between India and Bangladesh)? Look for details that might provide information concerning the Cabuliwallah's life and background. Your annotations might also concern key moments and details in the development of the story. Note the descriptions of the growing relationship between

the narrator's young daughter and the Cabuliwallah. Do either or both of the responses of Mini's parents to the friendship seem reasonable to you? Are there moments in the narrative that you found surprising or ambiguous – when, perhaps, you were unsure what was going on between the young girl and the older street vendor? Overall, it is important to look for the several moments in the story when there are changes in the narrator's thoughts and feelings about the Cabuliwallah – it is worth pointing to these shifts and considering what causes them.

Joyce: Here are some aspects of "The Dead" to watch for and think about as you read the story and prepare your annotations: "The Dead" is filled with vivid and precise descriptive details; you can note details that stand out to you and try to explain what they show you, or how they make you feel, about characters and situations. A contemporary historical issue discussed in the story is the growing Irish opposition to British rule (Ireland was not independent of the United Kingdom at this time, though Irish nationalism was gaining strength); note Gabriel's feelings about this issue in relation to the views of other characters. Try to observe how Gabriel feels about his interactions with different female characters. And note some of the ways in which Gabriel thinks of his wife and of his sexual desire for her. Overall, "The Dead" is a rich and complex story, filled with details and references and striking descriptive images – if you can each simply discuss how or why some of these details grab your attention, you will make some very useful annotations.

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Authorship credit: Gabriel Alkon, Adjunct Lecturer, Baruch College Department of English. I have taught both 2800 and 2850 at Baruch for many years. I would be happy to discuss this project with anyone who has questions about it or is interested in using or adapting it.