English 2850 – Fall 2014

Research Project: Annotating Literary Texts

Scholarly annotation is the art of writing brief notes that help readers understand a particular text. The kind of annotation—how many notes, how long they are, what they focus on, etc.—can vary greatly. The variation in part depends on who writes the notes and for whom they are written. Notes written for professional scholars can be very extensive and complicated. Notes written for students often focus more on basic definitions and necessary background. Sometimes notes can be creative and inspiring: they raise new questions, they connect the text with other historical, linguistic, literary, and cultural phenomena, and they encourage readers to look at the text in new and surprising contexts. For this assignment, we will be focusing especially on this last kind of note: be creative and inspiring.

Elements of the Assignment

The Annotation Process
You will be asked to annotate one of five texts: “Bewitched” (1776), a Japanese ghost story; the 1831 “Author’s Introduction” to the revised Frankenstein; the short story, “Diary of a Madman” (1918), by LuXun; James Baldwin’s essay, “Notes of a Native Son” (1955); or the short story, “In Camera” (1980), by Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi.

You will be working in small groups of 3-8 students, depending on the length of the text to be annotated. The first step in this project (after carefully reading the literary text) will be to meet with the other members of your group in order to discuss possible subjects and reasons for your textual annotations; I suggest doing this work in Google Docs, though you can certainly meet in person if you prefer. Together you will generate a list of specific words, details, references, themes, issues, passages, or sections that need further research and explanation. One person in the group will e-mail this list to me and we will discuss it during a brief in-class meeting. You will then divide up this list among the group members so that each student is responsible for researching and writing up 3 good notes. Please avoid repetition in your notes; group members should take charge of different sections or issues. You will insert your 3 annotations into the text on our Great Works Annotation Site.

Additional Requirements for Each Student: Companion Essay and Informal In-class Presentation

In a companion essay of 2-3 pages, you will write up your 3 notes and briefly reflect on how your notes help illuminate the reading. Submit this essay to me by email as an MS Word attachment BEFORE class on the day it is due. Each student will be expected to present one note to the class. In both writing and presenting one’s notes, the key task is to explain clearly how your annotation helps us better understand the literary text.

Your emailed list of possible points for annotation and your Annotation/Essay (and presentation of one note) will be due on the following dates:
“Bewitched”: one person email me your group’s list by 10pm on Wed Sep 10; Annotations posted and Annotation/Essay due Tue Sep 16

Author’s Introduction to Frankenstein: one person email me your group’s list by 10pm on Tue Sep 30; Annotations posted and Annotation/Essay due Tue Oct 7

“Diary of a Madman”: one person email me your group’s list by 10pm on Tue Oct 21; Annotations posted and Annotation/Essay due Tue Oct 28

“Notes of a Native Son”: one person email me your group’s list by 10pm on Sun Nov 2; Annotations posted and Annotation/Essay due Thursday Nov 6

“In Camera”: one person email me your group’s list by 10pm on Sun Nov 16; Annotations posted and Annotation/Essay due Thursday Nov 20

Pointers for the Assignment

How to Write Good Annotation Notes

Your notes should go beyond providing basic background information. In your notes, you should raise questions, make interpretive points, comment on translation choices, and discover links between your text and many other phenomena (other works of art, key historical events, political movements, etc.). Any research that illuminates the text will be useful for your fellow readers. Remember that your notes should be connected to specific, concrete details in the actual text.

Thinking about Your Research

As you read your assigned text, and as you discuss it with fellow group-members, you should look for words/details/references that might serve as the subjects of explanatory notes. Here are some questions to consider as you think about possible annotations:

- Are there references to real-world places, historical events, or famous people? Would knowing about these places, events, or people help you understand the text?
- Are there specific words that you do not know? Or are there words that are being used in a strange way -- perhaps because the word meant something different a long time ago?
- Are there any interesting translation choices or effects of translation that you note and could comment on?
- Are there references to particular religious or philosophical or political ideas?
- Are there references to cultural practices (like marriage, gender roles, child-rearing, or ways of making a living) that vary according to time and place?
- Are there references to other works of art (literature, music, visual art, or other art-forms)?
- Are there particular words or phrases that seem important to note, perhaps because they are ambiguous or particularly suggestive?

There are many options for research. You do not need to worry about “explaining everything” or writing every possible relevant note. You just need to make sure that your small set of notes provides concrete, useful information that illuminates the text for your classmates.