

Understanding (Through) Annotations: Introductory Remarks¹

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This article is the first entry in a debate on “Understanding (Through) Annotations” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/understanding-through-annotations>). If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue on “Understanding (Through) Annotations” and addresses the two topics that are fused into one by means of the brackets in its title, namely (1) the understanding of annotations, of what kind they are and how they are attached to texts, and (2) the understanding through or by means of annotations, their specific hermeneutic function. It assumes that the reflection on annotations furthers our insight into methods and functions of close reading, while, at the same time, also considering the functions of annotations in teaching. One of its major claims concerns the relevance of annotations to a text as a whole as well as the passage it immediately refers to. By positing a number of provocative examples and hypotheses it invites the critical debate on all matters related to annotations and their connotations.

Why *Connotations* and Annotations? This is a question we would like to address in our introductory remarks, together with some first ideas as to what it means to understand annotations, and what it means to understand through, or with the help of, annotations. The purpose of *Connotations*, founded almost 30 years ago by Inge Leimberg, has been to focus on “the semantic and stylistic energy of the language of literature

in a historical perspective" (www.connotations.de); in this phrase, "energy" is not a meaningless metaphor but chosen with the rhetorical notion of *energeia* in mind, that which makes literary expression have an effect. In other words, what *Connotations* aims at is the textual and linguistic properties that are responsible for each text having its specific meaning and effect. Such properties may often be local, i.e. consist in a particular word choice or turn of phrase, but they may also spread over a text, as in the case of characteristic motifs. We therefore believe that attention to detail is important in reading literature critically. And this is where annotations come in.

Of course, there are many ways of defining annotations, but even in the broadest sense they draw attention to detail. Reflecting on annotations helps us to get a clearer insight into methods and functions of close reading itself.² Addressing the central question, to what extent can/may annotations contribute to understanding a text, is also an excellent way of considering their functions in teaching.³ Both aspects, we hope, will contribute to the methodological agenda of this special issue of *Connotations*. We will then also see that annotations are not just a marginal issue; rather, they have a key function in literary communication but are still lacking a theoretical rationale as well as best practice models. Our special issue aims to show that both can be advanced and that doing so means furthering literary theory and critical practice. In the following, we will very briefly address the two topics that are fused into one by means of the brackets in our title, namely (1) the understanding of annotations, of what kind they are and how they are attached to texts, and (2) the understanding through or by means of annotations, their specific hermeneutic function. Both questions are linked by considerations of relevance, which can be expressed as conditions to be fulfilled: the annotation must be relevant to the text or the part/aspect of the text to which it is attached if it is to make sense, and the passage annotated must be relevant to the text as a whole if the annotation is to further our understanding of it.

1. Understanding Annotations

To understand annotations means to learn more about their forms and functions. Annotations may range from text tagging and markup to interpretive notes. They may be the personal notes of a reader and document his or her process of understanding, or they may be notes made for other readers, frequently as part of an edition. Depending on the (academic) context one moves in, the word “annotation” may accordingly refer to very different kinds of phenomena. All of them, however, are related, in one way or another, to understanding a text or understanding it better. This is even the case when we understand annotations as mark-up and tagging and use them for quantitative analysis and “distant” reading, i.e. not just when we understand them as explanatory annotations (which may include interpretive notes) and use them for a qualitative approach.⁴ Especially with regard to the latter, however, we can see huge differences whenever we open an annotated, i.e. scholarly, edition of a literary text. Editors do but rarely elucidate the approach they take in annotating a literary work; and even if they do, statements as to their practice remain vague. An example is the Cambridge School Shakespeare series edition of the sonnets that claims to encourage multiple interpretations but, in actual practice, then delimits ambiguity in the notes (see our paper on “Seven Types of Problems”). Obviously, annotations, in a school edition, serve a didactic purpose, but what that purpose is remains unclear. We see that, at least implicitly, annotations may serve a didactic agenda. Some critics suggest that the reader may even be pushed in a particular direction by means of explanatory notes (see Small 190; Hanna; cf. Bauer/Viehhauser/Zirker), e.g. because of the canonical effect of annotations (Martens 46). This effect, however, may have undergone some change with the upsurge of digital annotations; for example, in questioning the permanence of annotations and their authority, “how it is established and maintained” (McCarthy 371).

To our mind, annotations, especially explanatory annotations (see Bauer/Zirker, “Whipping Boys,” and Zirker/Bauer, “Introduction”),

contribute to understanding and interpretation without necessarily being interpretive themselves. This concept of annotations presupposes a certain degree of objectivity, which means that they should be valid beyond an individual's reading—or understanding—of a text.

Questions regarding the understanding of annotations may hence include the following:

Are they systematic?

Can we separate information from interpretation?

Are they placed plausibly in a text (anchors)?

Are aspects of the medium (book vs. digital annotation) considered?

What is the readership the annotator(s) has/have in mind?

The understanding of a (literary) text by means of annotations implies other issues, most of them of a hermeneutic kind.⁵ Most prominent, or so we would like to suggest, is the part-whole problem; or, in other words: how can the local note contribute to our understanding of the text as a whole? This is of course a question belonging to our second point (understanding *through* annotations) but the answer very much depends on the nature of the note whose prerequisite, as we have pointed out above, is the relevance of the annotation to the annotated passage.

In some cases, notes are hard to understand. They presuppose, for example, expert knowledge—but even given that are difficult to handle. In the edition by Joseph Duchac—*An Annotated Guide to Commentary Published in English, 1978-1989*, of Emily Dickinson's poems, one of the entries on "Myself was formed a carpenter" (J488) reads as follows:

1988 Wolff, *Emily Dickinson*, pp. 431-32

"Although the poem claims to describe a process in which power is transferred, the poem itself is finally without power. And if the image of 'Scaffolds drop' indicates liberation, it also carries the shadow image of an execution."
(266)

When we taught this poem in a class on "Annotating Religious Poetry," everyone was puzzled. There are no scaffolds in the poem, either stable

or dropping. Apparently, this note presupposes “expert knowledge” (our “problem” #3; “Seven Types of Problems” 216-18) but also leads the (non-expert) reader on to the wrong track (#4), and its function is unclear (#2). Because we could not make any sense of it, we started to google, and, alas, found that the line “Scaffolds drop” is from a different poem altogether (“The Props assist the House” J729). Checking Wolff confirms this: her passage refers to J729 but the editor turned it into an unintelligible note on J488. This example may be a particularly glaring case of an annotation that is hard (if not impossible) to understand, but it still exemplifies tendencies: notes often refer to other texts without sufficiently explaining why. And it may suggest a few answers to our next question, if and how understanding is furthered through annotations.

2. Understanding through Annotations

In order to address this point, we would like to give a few examples that may help illustrate links between understanding annotations and understanding through annotations. The examples are taken from different works and their editions in the field of English literature.

2.1 Annotations that Obstruct/ Complicate Understanding

We suggest that we can learn about the way in which annotations help us understand a text by looking first at an example of “annotations that obstruct or complicate understanding.” In the latest version of Jane Austen’s *Juvenilia* – published as *Teenage Writings* (OUP 2017), the editors, Kathryn Sutherland and Freya Johnston, point out that their notes were “written with the aim of expanding the reader’s sense of what the young Austen might have been responding to” (245), i.e. the notes primarily serve to point towards Jane Austen’s own reading and how it fed into her early literary creations, which means the emphasis of their

annotations is on intertextuality. This approach undoubtedly focuses on a relevant aspect of the text as a whole (our second condition); nevertheless, some of the notes obscure their relevance (our first condition) since all sorts of explanations are being mixed up with interpretations, which makes it difficult to separate factual information from subjective reading. What is more: there is no (clear) principle to be found as to which items are explained and which are not.

In “Frederic & Elfrida,” the opening passage of “Chapter the Third” reads as follows:

In the mean time the parents of Frederic proposed to those of Elfrida, an union between them,* which being accepted with pleasure, the wedding cloathes were bought & nothing remained to be settled but the naming of the Day.* As to the lovely Charlotte, being importuned with eagerness to pay another visit to her Aunt, she determined to accept the invitation & in consequence of it walked to Mrs Fitzroys to take leave of the amiable Rebecca, whom she found surrounded by Patches, Powder, Pomatum & Paint* with which she was vainly endeavouring to remedy the natural plainness of her face. (5)

Three items are given a note (see * in the quotation). While the first two refer to marriage conventions of the time (e.g. that naming the date of the wedding “was the bride’s prerogative” 250n), the third item is explained as follows:

Patches, Powder, Pomatum & Paint: an echo of the most celebrated list in 18th-century literature: ‘Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux’ (The Rape of the Lock, canto I, l. 138). ‘Pomatum’ is an ointment for the skin or hair. JA originally wrote ‘Rouge, Powder, Pomatum & Paint’; by changing ‘Rouge’ to ‘Patches’ she heightens the comic alliteration and makes the allusion to Pope more overt. (Austen 250n5/5)

Explanations seem to be scattered somewhat randomly. “Pomatum” is explained but “Patches” is not, nor is the fact that “Powder,” at the time, was used for hair not the face (as is common in our days). The note is helpful in spotting the link to Pope, which is confirmed by Austen’s afterthought of replacing “Rouge” with “Patches.” The reader is left alone, however, when it comes to possible functions of the echo. Is it

just to participate in the fame of the list? The point of Pope's list seems to be to mix articles of beautification with "Bibles" (NB the plural) and evidence of love-affairs. Austen studiously avoids the satirical mix, but why does she bother then to evoke Pope? Those readers who do not spot the allusion without the annotation would need some further explanation in any case, if the annotation is to be useful to them. How many undergraduates, one may ask, know what Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* is about? Since evaluation is included anyway ("the most celebrated list"), why not go a step further and include a few suggestions as to its meaning and connotations? Otherwise, the intertextual reference may leave a reader puzzled as to the significance of Pope for Austen's work: is this just a one-time reference? Was Pope an author that she frequently, if not regularly referred to? Particularly in the *Juvenilia* perhaps? Is the function of the list the same, or at least similar, in both works? What is even more pertinent to our interest in understanding through annotations: does the pointing out of this intertextual allusion explain Austen's text? Considering that the passage annotated should be relevant to the text as a whole if the annotation is to further our understanding of it, this annotation does not serve its purpose. A more integrative approach seems to be required which, to be fair, tends to exceed the limited space of a printed book.

2.2 Annotations that Further the Understanding of a Text

For all that, we are not confined to worrying about how not to do it. Our next example of an annotation is one that may further the understanding of a text. It is taken from the third Arden edition of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* by Peter Holland. In 1.3, Volumnia, the mother of Caius Martius, his wife Virgilia, and a friend who is visiting, Valeria, talk about the son of Caius Martius and Virgilia—and about how he tore apart ("mammocked" 1.3.67) a butterfly after, or rather while playing with it. The action is described by Virgilia, and her mother-in-law

comments: “One on’s father’s moods” (1.3.68). Holland writes in his note (182n68):

moods rages (*OED n.*¹ 2.b; cf. R3 1.2.244, ‘Stabbed in my angry mood’); but Volumnia may also have in mind *OED* 2.a, ‘Fierce courage; spirit, stoutness, pride’ if the meaning was still current.

The annotation opens up the historical meaning of the word “mood”; the last reference for this meaning in the *OED* is 1579 (and the definition in fact reads: “Fierce courage; spirit, vigour. Also: pride, arrogance. *Obsolete.*”).⁶ This historical meaning of mood as “courage,” “spirit” and especially “pride” gives us a hint early in the play as to the attitude of Coriolanus’ mother that will become relevant time and again in the course of the tragedy. “Pride” is one of the major characteristics of Caius Martius,⁷ and his mother is proud of her grand-child, because he is like his father. She, accordingly, does not condemn his brutal action (as we probably do) but praises it. The potential ambiguity of “mood,” opened up by the annotation, hence makes us understand something about the characters in this play.

2.3 A ‘Best Practice’ Model: TEASys—The Tübingen Explanatory Annotation System

Studying examples of annotations that hamper or further our understanding of literary texts, we have been wondering how to establish a methodical approach to the problem. With this end in mind, we started developing TEASys, the Tübingen Explanatory Annotation System. It is closely linked to our theoretical considerations and attempts to put them into practice while, at the same time, it helps us revise the theory based on the practical experience of researching and writing notes.

TEASys strives to make the processes entailed in annotating transparent in the annotations themselves. It therefore addresses both issues: make annotations understandable and make them contribute to the un-

derstanding of a text. We work with altogether eight categories of annotation⁸ on three levels.⁹ Annotations are created by students in peer-groups and go through an internal reviewing process, first by the peers and then by us, the supervisors. They are published electronically, which entails several advantages, e.g. the possibility to filter information (if someone is, for instance, interested in intertextuality only) and to set internal but also external links (see www.annotating-literature.org).

A challenge that we regularly meet in our work is relevance. To give an example: in Charles Dickens's Christmas Story of 1843, *The Chimes*, Toby Veck, the protagonist, prepares his dinner at one point:

Yet Trotty sniffed the savour of the hissing bacon—ah!—as if he liked it; and when he poured the boiling water in the tea-pot, looked lovingly down into the depths of that snug cauldron, and suffered the fragrant steam to curl about his nose, and wreath his head and face in a thick cloud. (120)

In the first version of this annotation, the student wrote the following note:

A cauldron is a "large kettle or boiler" (OED "cauldron/caldron, n. 1."). Due to different works of fiction, such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or the *Harry Potter* series, a cauldron is often associated with witches, wizardry and magic. However, in Dickens's time, the cauldron was primarily used to prepare food or drink over an open fire. Trotty, for example, boils tea in his cauldron. "cauldron/caldron, n." OED Online. July 2014. OUP. 02. July 2014.

When we read the note and commented on it, we remarked, apart from correcting the language, on the lacking relevance of the references to Shakespeare and the *Harry Potter* books. Our first condition was glaringly ignored. The student had read up on "cauldrons" and found that they were used in contexts of magic and wizardry; she probably found that information fascinating, perhaps even with regard to the multiplicity of contexts in which the word may be used. Accordingly, she found it hard not to share this information with other readers. Still, she came to the decision to mitigate its lack of relevance. She subdivided the note

in accordance with our levels and categories and introduced, after explaining the linguistic meaning of “cauldron” on L1, an L2 context note, titled: “Cauldrons and Witches.”

What often proves useful and also easier to approach than the composition of a note from scratch is the expansion of an existing note, e.g. from a scholarly edition, on an advanced level. In the annotations to SON 81, for example, existing annotations are used but expanded upon. For the phrase “common grave” in l. 7, the following language note is given on L1:

‘Common’ here means simple, ordinary, “of no special quality” or undistinguished (cf. *OED* “common, adj.” 11 a.+b.); i.e. “an ordinary grave, a grave shared with others” (Duncan Jones 272n7).

References:

OED “common, adj.” 11.a.+b.

Duncan Jones, Katherine (ed.). *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*. London: Thomson, 1997.

(<http://www.annotating-literature.org/annotations/read.php?pid=71>)

Duncan Jones goes on to explain how the fact that “Shakespeare was buried in an honorific position in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church, Stratford, is not, as has been suggested especially ironical (Brown and Feavor, 27ff.), for the contrast here is between any physical form of burial and the living monument of verse.” Our annotators, however, opted to leave this out and add an interpretive note that foregoes speculation (and its discarding) regarding Shakespeare’s potential foresight as to his burial place on L2:

The ordinary grave is contrasted with the monument in line 9. The speaker is only awarded a common grave, but the sonnet stands as a monument to the addressee. Even though his writing can make the addressee immortal the speaker assumes that his writing will not bring him enough acclaim, so that he will not be remembered.

(<http://www.annotating-literature.org/annotations/read.php?pid=71>)

Concluding Remarks

In order to trigger a fruitful debate on annotations, we have opened the special issue with a provocatively normative claim: annotations, at least

explanatory annotations published online and in scholarly editions, must be clearly subservient and conducive to the hermeneutic process. In order to fulfil that function, they must be relevant to the element of the text to which they are attached, and that element must be relevant to the understanding of the text as a whole. Whereas the first kind of relevance is comparatively easy to evaluate, the second one is much harder to assess. The objection may be made that we only know if an annotated text item is relevant to understanding the text as a whole when we have understood the text completely. This is either impossible or only possible if every *possible* contribution to such a general understanding is known, which in many cases requires annotations—a vicious circle. Still, for the time being, we would like to maintain our relevance claim because it may guide the annotator who has to decide about what to annotate. Such priorities can help, especially in a digital context in which there are no technical limits to the number of annotations. And what the annotator, especially after feedback from a group of readers and co-annotators, can show to be relevant to an understanding of the poem, play, or novel, should have first priority. But this is open to critical debate.

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NOTES

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²For some recent discussions of close reading, see Brooks; Devereux; Kontje; Lockett; McIntyre and Hickman.

³On the didactic aspects of annotation, see Brown; DiYanni; Feita and Donahu; Gailey, Porter-O'Donnell; Wolfe.

⁴For an intermediate approach, see e.g. Bauer and Ebert. On “scalable reading,” see e.g. Mueller; Weitin.

⁵See Gius and Jacke; Senger.

⁶The *OED* quotes from Fenton's translation of *Historia Guicciardin* ("Not waighin in their glorious moodes, how farre the daunger exceeded the attempt."), but we may assume that the meaning was not obsolete in Shakespeare's time. In fact, the passage in *Coriolanus* may speak in favour of its still being in use.

⁷The word "proud" is mentioned 15 times, mostly with reference to Coriolanus, e.g. 1.1.31, 1.1.35 by the First Citizen; but it is also used by Coriolanus himself, e.g. 1.1.260. "Pride" is mentioned ten times, e.g. 2.1.19, 2.1.25, 2.1.35 etc.

⁸The categories are: A linguistic (vocabulary, syntax, etc.), B formal (verse, narrative structures, iconicity, etc.), C intratextual (motifs, recurring structures, etc.), D intertextual (explicit references to other texts), E contextual (biographical, historical, philosophical, etc.), F interpretive (Synthesis A-E), G textual (Variants), H open questions.

⁹Level 1 (L1): basic information for text comprehension; L2: further information, based on information presented on level 1; L3: more advanced information, based on information presented on levels 1 and 2.

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