

Aboutness and Meaning: How a Paradigm of Subject Analysis Can Illuminate Queer Theory in Literary Studies

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Abstract

This paper uses the paradigms of subject analysis in information studies to study the treatment of homosexuality in academic literary criticism. Both subject analysis and contemporary gay and lesbian culture are concerned with the distinction between “aboutness,” defined as intrinsic intellectual content, and “meaning,” defined as the various uses to which a user might put that content. An examination of the treatment of homosexuality in various critical analyses of Melville’s *Billy Budd* suggests that literary critics are divided on whether homosexuality is part of the story’s content, or merely part of an interpretive strategy. Furthermore, trends in literary theory have questioned the possibility that we can find any innate “aboutness” in any literary work. Nonetheless, gay-positive readings of literature, particularly works of queer theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, are re-enacting the activities of subject analysis in their works: placing literary works within broader contexts of literary, social and intellectual relationships. Furthermore, Sedgwick’s binarism between homosexuality as an explicit and visible cultural minority and homosexuality which pervades culture as a whole recreates the aboutness/meaning dichotomy of subject analysis. The paper concludes that literary theory and subject analysis, while very different, exist on a continuum with each other, and that each can benefit from the insights of the other.

1. Introduction

Aboutness analysis—the process whereby subject analysts attempt to describe the intellectual content of documents for purposes of retrieval—has a long history

in information science theory and practice. At first glance, its importance may seem confined to the area of classification theory: however, like many activities in information science, an analogous and highly important activity is developing outside the information community.

Gay and lesbian communities have emerged into visibility in Europe and North America, giving rise to an interest in gay and lesbian cultural studies, including explorations into gay and lesbian life in ages other than our own. With the rise of gay and lesbian studies has come the emergence of what has come to be known as “ queer theory” : a body of theory grounded in concepts of gender orientation, and which bring a fresh collection of methodologies and approaches to bear on the study of social, literary, artistic and cultural artefacts, including literary texts.

The rise of gay and lesbian communities, gay and lesbian cultural history and queer theory have led a renewed interest in canonical texts and authors of English and American literature. This interest arises partly from a desire to find historical precedents for homosexual and homoerotic desire beyond our current social setting, and partly from a desire to incorporate our sexual identity into our very reading strategies. As a result, debates have arisen concerning the sexual preferences of famous authors and public figures, including William Shakespeare and Jane Austen. The speculation also concerns the works themselves, giving aboutness analysis a new urgency. As gay readers trying to redefine our relationships with canonical works, or as readers trying to defend canonical works from threatening new readings, we find ourselves asking the same question: to what extent is a particular work “ about” homosexuality?

These debates can become complicated and acrimonious for many reasons. To begin with, homosexual behaviour has traditionally been expressed elliptically: “ homosexual novels are characteristically subtle, allusive and symbolic...and form an eighth kind of literary ambiguity” (Meyers 1977, 1). Second, many theorists begin with Foucault’ s concept of the construction of the homosexual identity: a shift from an emphasis on the act to the person which took place

towards the end of the nineteenth century (1978, 105). If that is the case, identifying literary characters as “ gay” in the modern sense becomes problematic, and gay and lesbian history is difficult to reconstruct before 1900. As a result, readers and scholars are frequently scrutinizing the content of literary works, looking for evidence that the work has homosexual characters, or homosexual behaviour, or even a “ gay sensibility.” Criticism of literary works, therefore, often centers around two troubling questions: Is this work about homosexuals or homosexuality? If so, how can one tell?

These questions raise an intriguing resemblance to questions posed in Information Studies, particularly in the field of subject analysis and classification. The strategies of subject analysis—analyzing the content of a work, and then translating that analysis into the language of a controlled vocabulary or classification system—may have relevance for us. Subject analysis also tries to capture the intellectual content of documents, although the purpose of the exercise is the retrieval of documents, rather than the study and explication of them. And while the subjectivity of the exercise troubles information practitioners as deeply as it does critics, both theorists and practitioners of subject access have developed paradigms and procedures for defining and articulating the content of documents.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the academic criticism of a canonical work of American literature from the theoretical perspectives of subject analysis, with a special emphasis on the question of homosexual content. The work in question is *Billy Budd*, by Herman Melville: a canonical text of American literary studies, which has sustained a variety of interpretations over the years. *Billy Budd* has recently become a prominent text in gay and lesbian studies, particularly since Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s analysis of the story in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1989). This paper does not try to impose the subject analysis activity onto *Billy Budd*: it does not, in other words, attempt to index the homosexual content for purposes of retrieval. Rather, it seeks to use the methods and paradigms of subject analysis to understand the process of

explication in Melville criticism, particularly as it relates to the existence or non-existence of homosexuality in the story.

2. Subject Analysis

Determining the subject content of a document has always been a highly subjective procedure. While the tools for translating the analysis of content into a retrieval system are complex and sophisticated, “ there are few, if any, formal rules for the conceptual analysis of documents” (Williamson 1996, 156). The task becomes even more complicated with imaginative literature such as works of fiction, because the line between what is “ there” in the text and what the reader brings to the text is difficult to negotiate. It is very difficult to determine “ what kind(s) of factual, relatively unvarying data is present in fiction In a way, every reader reads a different book” (Beghtol 1994, 125). Determining the content of a work like *Billy Budd*, therefore, requires some theoretical framework for distinguishing data from interpretation: what can be relied on as stable content that everybody reads?

Literary studies has never been able to define such a theoretical framework, for reasons that will be explained later. Subject analysis and classification theorists, however, have made some progress in this direction. Fairthorne (1971) distinguishes between what discourse “ mentions” and what discourse is “ about” :

What discourse speaks of,—that is, what it mentions by name or description—, are amongst its extensional properties. What discourse speaks on,—that is, what it is about—, is amongst its intensional properties. This, its topic, cannot be determined solely from what it mentions. For this one must take into account extra-textual considerations, such as who is using it for what purpose, what purpose the author intended it to be used for, and for whom and for what the librarian, or other manager of messages, acquired it. (361)

Fairthorne bases his distinction on the concept of explicit “ mention” : equally important, he suggests that the “ aboutness” of a document, in any meaningful sense, often needs something beyond what is explicitly mentioned.

Beghtol (1986) reinterprets this distinction as one between “ aboutness” and “ meaning,” the former being the intrinsic content of the document and the latter the uses to which a reader may put the document:

For the present purposes . . . we may take the general position that texts of all kinds have a relatively permanent aboutness, but a variable number of meaning (s). . . . A recognition of the relatively permanent quality of aboutness in documents is one of the assumption upon which bibliographic classification systems have traditionally been based. Classificationists have endeavoured to create classification systems conceptually and notationally hospitable to any aboutness a document might present, but it has not been suggested that the inherent aboutness of the document changes when a particular meaning is attached to it or a particular use made of it by the reader. (85)

While the “ meaning” of a work, then, can vary from reader to reader, aboutness is relatively stable, and can be identified and translated into a classification symbol or a set of controlled descriptors.

If the aboutness is stable, then ideally the subject analyst should be able to identify it accurately and consistently all the time. Consistency has always been a primary objective of subject analysis: “ In the current environment of global bibliographic information systems, it is essential to provide guidance in the design and development of the tools used in order to achieve, insofar as possible, inter-system and intra-sysetm consistency and compatibility” (Williamson 1996, 158).

Subject analysis theory, then, brings a recognition that a complex distinction must be made between data and interpretation; it brings a strategy for distinguishing between stable content and variable meanings; and it employs that

strategy in an attempt to bring about consistent and replicable indexing activities. How can these contributions enlighten us about the way critics deal with homosexual content in *Billy Budd*?

3. *Billy Budd* and the Critics

Let us begin with Fairthorne's extensional properties, and attempt to summarize the plot of *Billy Budd*, solely in terms of what is explicitly mentioned. The story concerns a British warship, the *Bellipotent*, in the late eighteenth century, under the command of Captain Vere. A young foretopman, Billy Budd, has been impressed into service, and his cheerful manner and handsome appearance make him a popular and valued member of the crew. He also attracts the malice of Claggart, the master-at-arms, who arrests him on a trumped-up charge of being a mutineer. Billy, when confronted with this, strikes Claggart, and accidentally kills him. Captain Vere, while sympathizing with Billy, feels impelled to uphold navy justice and discipline, and Billy is sentenced to hang.

As any literary critic would point out, even this stark description distorts the text into an interpretation, by virtue of the plot details it chooses to omit. So let us supplement this with a single quotation from the text, from a scene that figures frequently in criticism. In this scene, Billy Budd, unaware that he has become the object of Claggart's malevolent interest, accidentally spills his soup on the deck, just as Claggart is approaching.

[Claggart] happened to observe who it was that had done the spilling. His countenance changed. Pausing, he was about to ejaculate something hasty at the sailor, but checked himself, and pointing down to the streaming soup, playfully tapped him from behind with his rattan, saying in a low musical voice peculiar to him at times, ' Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!' And with that passed on. (321-22).

We are never explicitly told why Claggart is obsessed with Billy Budd: the narrator instead alludes enigmatically to " an antipathy spontaneous and

profound” (323), to Platonic concept of “ Natural Depravity,” and the difficulties of trying to “ enter his labyrinth and get out again” (324).

These teasing hints of things unsaid have fascinated critics since the story’ s first posthumous appearance in 1924. John Middleton Murry (1924) commented that “ something was at the back of [Melville’ s] mind, haunting him, and this something he could not utter” (549). Early criticism has attempted to fill the gaps left by the narrator with the political, archetypal, generic or religious concerns that have always been hallmarks of literary criticism. Some treat the story as a moral problem play concerning war, mutiny and discipline. This has led to an entrenched debate about the nature of Captain Vere and his decision to hang Billy Budd: “ At the end of the 1950s, the interpretation was polarized—Vere was good and Melville liked him (as any decent person would), Vere was bad and Melville despised him (as any decent person would)” (Parker 1990, 76). Also common in the early criticism is the religious interpretation which interprets Billy’ s goodwill as “ the kind of dynamic pervasive innocence credited to Jesus rather than the savage kind appropriate to Adam” (Mason 1951, 250). Arvin’ s influential study also argues that Billy’ s physical beauty is that of the “ First Man,” and reflects “ the purity of his innocence” (1957, 294). He describes Claggart in terms of “ the great Enemy in *Paradise Lost*” : “ it is only his strangely protuberant chin and his unwholesome pallor of complexion that hint at the depravity of his being. That depravity is inherent and terrible, but it does not express itself in what are called vices or small sins” (295). Claggart’ s “ instinctive hatred of the innocent and the good” is “ so insane that it suggests a dreadful perversion of love” (298).

All of these critics impose an interpretation upon the story, and the story’ s explicit refusal to be explicit gives them the room to interpret the story in many different ways. One senses, however, that the nuances of the tale—particularly Melville’ s extensive discussions of the “ Handsome Sailor” as a naval type—make some of these critics uncomfortable, and only too ready to retreat into allegorical discussions of primal innocence. Other critics have been more willing

to concede the possibility that something sexual is going on. As early as 1933, Claggart' s orientation was boldly labelled: " in so conscious a symbolist as Melville, it would be surprising if there should be no meaning or half-meaning in the spilling of Billy' s soup towards the homosexually-disposed Claggart" (Watson 1933 324-25). Matthieson (1941) is more cautious: " this may be one of the passages where a writer to-day would be fully aware of what may have been only latent for Melville, the sexual element in Claggart' s ambivalence. Even if Melville did not have this consciously in mind, it emerges for the reader now with intense psychological accuracy" (161).

As time goes on, we find critics getting bolder in their speculations, and in their willingness to connect *Billy Budd* to a broader literary tradition of homosexuality. Parker, for instance, argues that Billy, as the " Handsome Sailor," is an explicit rejection of the " Billy-be-Dame" character type of nineteenth-century nautical fiction (1990, 103): a stereotype of the effeminate sailor which goes back to Smollett' s *Roderick Random* in the eighteenth century. Martin speculates that Claggart' s hostility is rooted in a desire for rape: " Claggart' s desire for Billy is not only a desire to hurt Billy, but also a desire to *provoke* Billy, so that he (Claggart) can be raped by Billy" (1986, 112). Implicit in these treatments is an assumption that *Billy Budd* is, to some degree, " about" male homosexuality, even if that homosexuality is presented as an ambivalent possibility rather than as an expressed desire or act.

Others object to such a reading, on the grounds that the work is in fact " about" ambiguity and ambivalence, rather than the hidden causes of that ambiguity. Brodtkorb argues that we should accept Melville' s elliptical reticence on its own terms, rather than replacing it with similarly elliptical rationalizations: " the narrator resorts to Plato on natural depravity to buttress his intimations of Claggart, just as many critics resort to Freud on homosexuality to buttress theirs" (1967, 604). Johnson' s influential study, " Melville' s Fist," similarly argues that the story is *about* ambiguity: in particular the ambiguity that arises when the relationship between character and appearance cannot be treated as a

relationship between signifier and signified. Arguing that Billy' s external appearance perfectly reflects his inner character, she goes on to argue that " Claggart ... is the very image of difference and duplicity, both in his appearance and in his character....Claggart is thus a personification of ambiguity and ambivalence, of the distance between signifier and signified, of the separation between being and doing" (1979, 573). For these critics, the story is about the silence, not about the unexplained reasons for the silence.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick' s interpretation of *Billy Budd* takes the process one step further, by presenting, not just an interpretation of the story, but a fully-realized strategy for reading, one that is founded on gender orientation issues and which can be applied to any work, regardless of the work' s explicit content. In so doing, she makes three assertions about Melville' s story:

- John Claggart *is* a homosexual, and therefore different from, and isolated from, the other characters in the story (1990, 92).
- All desire expressed in the story is homosexual desire, since it is expressed by men towards other men (92).
- A homo/heterosexual definition structures "many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture" (1); therefore, all texts, including *Billy Budd* are to some extent "about" homosexuality.

Sedgwick' s broad claims have been roundly challenged by various critics, particularly David Van Leer (1989) and Christopher Benfey (1991). Her work has been extraordinarily influential, however, for several reasons. First, even critics who resist her general claims or dislike her writing style admire her analyses: " the Melville chapter, the brilliant complexity of which my description barely touches, is one of the best critical essays I have read in the past five years" (Edmundson 1991). Second, she has integrated Herman Melville into a set of relationships with other important authors, including James, Wilde, Nietzsche and Proust: relationships defined by homosexual/heterosexual definitions and concerns. And finally, she has integrated all of her readings into a social, cultural

and intellectual world view based on a series of binarisms, including knowledge and ignorance, secrecy and disclosure, natural and unnatural. The result is more than a work of literary criticism. *Epistemology of the Closet* places *Billy Budd* and its companion texts into a coherent set of inter-relationships, based on a perceived cultural tension between homosexuality as the activity and expression of a minority group and homosexuality as an intrinsic part of social discourse as a whole.

4. Imposing the Aboutness/Meaning Grid

We have, then, a collection of critical treatments of the same text, which make very different statements regarding the story's content. Is it possible, then, to use the distinction between aboutness and meaning as defined by Beghtol, to make sense of these differences? Can we say with any confidence that homosexuality is a meaning that some critics ascribe to *Billy Budd*? Or can we say that it forms a fundamental part of the story's aboutness that every critic encounters, whether he or she decides to discuss it explicitly? The question is complicated by a number of troubling factors.

First, critics define homosexuality in many different ways. These include:

1. The explicit occurrence of homosexual acts by individuals who may or may not be identified as homosexual.
2. The occurrence of characters who are explicitly defined as homosexual, whether or not their sexual activities are described.
3. The presence of a "gay sensibility": in particular, the use of an author's sexual orientation as an interpretive key to his or her work.
4. The presence of an ingrained cultural attitude to homosexuality that pervades the text, regardless of the presence or absence of explicit homosexual content.

Furthermore, the objective of the subject analyst is different from that of the literary critic. The critic, as a member of a scholarly research community, aims for originality: for a reading and a study that differs significantly from those that have preceded it. The subject analyst, by contrast, aims to master a process which

can be replicated with the same results by other subject analysts. Subject analysis has strong roots in the concept of social, scholarly and community consensus. Consensus, argued Henry Evelyn Bliss, should be the foundation of any knowledge structure:

The more definite the concepts, the relations, and the principles of science, philosophy, and education become, the clearer and more stable the order of the sciences and studies in relation to learning and to life; and so the scientific and educational consensus becomes more dominant and more permanent. (1934, 47)

This is not to suggest that all classification theory demands conformity to a social, academic or political norm. But classification theory does concede that successful retrieval depends at least in part on the ability to implement subject cataloguing procedures with consistent results. If we are to import a feature of subject analysis theory into literary criticism, we must recognize from the outset that it will be used for very different aims.

A further complicating factor lies in the trends of literary theory over the later part of the twentieth century, and its effects on literary analysis. The early Melville critics use a universalizing rhetoric that links their own meaning to the story's aboutness. Arvin, for instance, argues that his interpretation is inevitable, and as "extensional," in Fairthorne's terms, as the words themselves:

Everyone has felt this benedictory quality in [Billy Budd]. Everyone has felt it to be the work of a man on the last verge of mortal existence who wishes to take his departure with a word of acceptance and reconciliation on his lips. (292)

As the century progresses, however, the trend shifts in the other direction. The various approaches of reader response criticism have placed the significance of interpretation on the reader, rather than on the text, or on the author's intentions: "reader-response critics would argue that a poem cannot be understood apart from its results. Its 'effects,' psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has

no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader” (Tompkins 1980, ix). In subject analysis terms, this approach emphasizes the importance of the text’ s “ meaning” over its aboutness. And it presents this meaning as the result of an operation, rather than as an inert quality waiting to be “ discovered” within the text. Bonati makes a distinction between “ text as a particular set of signs that we recognize as such, and work as the product and the experience of the appropriate decoding of the text” (231).

This emphasis on the reader does not end with a simple shift of emphasis. It eventually undermines the notion of the text itself, to the point where “ aboutness” in the subject analysis sense does not exist at all. The more one looks for stable, unchanging features of the text, the more one finds that even the most stable, formal features of a text are constructed and interpreted by individual readers within the context of specific discourse communities: “ There is no rigorous way to distinguish fact from interpretation, so nothing can be deemed to be definitively in the text prior to interpretive conventions” (Culler 5). Literary theory, then, has failed to produce a distinction between data and interpretation which could be meaningfully aligned with the distinction between aboutness and meaning. Early criticism tends to treat even the most idiosyncratic interpretation as an expression of the text’ s stable content; later criticism has undermined the possibility of any stable content. Can we see any use at all, then, in applying the aboutness/meaning distinction to the treatment of homosexuality in literary works?

5. Subject Analysis and Literary Analysis

One *could* say, on the basis of this preliminary study, that there is no use trying to bridge the gulf between literary and subject analysis: that bibliographic subject analysis is too naïve in its theoretical positions to provide much illumination to debates in literary studies. The disillusioned literary critic could point, for instance, to the failure of the Classification Research Group to combine their subject-specific classifications into a general scheme, or even to achieve

consistency in their indexing. Such a failure could be seen as confirmation that it is impossible to establish stable concepts of content apart from context.

The critic could also argue that subject analysis is a simplistic process that is diametrically opposed to the process of analyzing literature. Arranging documents for purposes of access requires a process that can be replicated, rather than a process that is unique. Arguing for stable content and social consensus is difficult to do in our post-structuralist world, and retrieval strategies that depend on these concepts might seem hopelessly outdated.

But there's another way of looking at things, one which involves injecting some healthy pragmatism into the activities of both subject analysis and literary criticism. To begin with, subject cataloguers have always maintained a pragmatic view towards their own strategic abstractions, a view conditioned by the fact that the necessities of practice are often more pressing than the desire for theoretical consistency. "It is no disparagement of the late 19th-century pioneers—Dewey and Cutter in the USA for example—to say that, in the earliest applications of classification in open access libraries ... classificatory practice forged ahead of theory" (Marcella & Newton 16). "We assume the reality of the universe of knowledge," maintained Francis Miksa, "even though we are at the same time aware that it is only an abstraction" (101). Indeed, Lancaster suggests that theoretical discussions of "aboutness" are of little interest to subject indexers:

But do we really need to understand "aboutness" in order to index effectively? Is it not enough to be able to recognize that a document is of interest to a particular community because it contributes to our understanding of topics x, y, and z? (10)

The term "particular community" is crucial here: while general subject access systems typically rely on the aboutness/meaning distinction to make their systems manageable for diverse communities, Lancaster's comment suggests the distinction is unnecessary within particular communities.

This pragmatic view of community is a potentially useful concept for literary criticism, because it emphasizes the social context of textual use, in addition to

the private, individual, idiosyncratic dimension of such use. “ There is no private symbolism,” maintained Northrop Frye; “ the structure of a poem remains an effort at communication, however utterly it may fail to communicate” (1971, 22). However insistent may be the scholarly emphasis on originality, the impact of both literature and criticism depends on some correspondence between the text and the reader: some shared set of preconceptions or concerns which enable multiple texts and readings to build upon each other and create a discourse community.

In the communities of literary studies, grouping and replication are, in fact, taking place, despite the field’s insistence on originality. Sedgwick’s *Epistemology*, as a seminal work of queer theory, has served as a model for an emerging body of criticism devoted to gay and lesbian themes. As a result, gay and gay-positive readings of *Billy Budd* are coalescing into a tradition, which dates back to Matthieson, and now includes later work by Caleb Crain and Nancy Ruttenberg. Even more suggestive is the fact that Sedgwick achieves this by integrating the text into an articulated scheme of inter-relationships: an act of integration remarkably similar to the act of subject analysis. Far from being a simplistic or secondary procedure, subject analysis places a work within a set of external, socially-determined inter-relationships, and as such exists on a continuum with works of literary theory.

The literary theories of text and text production, particularly within the context of queer theory, also have potentially beneficial consequences for subject analysis theory. First, they serve to remind us that our abstractions are abstractions: strategic constructs which enable us to do practical work. Second, the emergence of multiple critical communities, which interpret various literary works according to their own concerns and methodologies, provides a collective model of coherence based on multiple voices. Hope Olson has argued that the use of alternative cultural myths could create a new concept of order, which “ might take many different forms and might be created in a variety of different ways, [suggesting] the possibility of variant principles for classification” (1999, 121). If

so, the fruitful cacophony of literary criticism could provide some guidance in our efforts to do justice in our subject access systems to multiple and marginalized discourse communities.

Finally, Sedgwick's binary opposition between homosexuality as a visible minority and homosexuality as a cross-cultural force re-enacts the aboutness/meaning distinction in a fresh way. In gay and lesbian culture, the tension between extensional and intensional content—between what is explicit and what is implied—is an urgent and troubling issue. The need for explicit gay and lesbian content sometimes conflicts with the desire to allow gay and lesbian concerns to become “universal” in their application and significance, even at the cost of a distinct identity. Gay and lesbian people will continue to look to cultural paradigms, manifested as literary theories or as classification and subject access systems, to help them negotiate this conflict.

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