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Article

Harmonizing Literary Criticism: How AI Can Help Resurrect the Author and Unite the Banners of Literary Theory

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Abstract

Over the past century, literary theory has branched out in several directions. Diverse schools of literary thought, such as Semiotics, New Criticism, Intentionalism, Structuralism, and Deconstruction, have passionately plowed new ground within the academy and just as passionately defended that territory against their neighbor's incursions. At times, authors and their intentions have been central to literary criticism, while at others, they are intellectually discarded or severely reduced in importance. Much of the friction caused by the shifting focus of literary criticism is driven by impassioned rhetoric and convictions that leave little room for compromise. The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) has opened the possibility of a dispassionate arbiter, one that, should the literary community have the courage and conviction to embrace and exploit, could offer a new level of harmony between divergent literary theories.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; literary theory; literary criticism

1. Introduction

In 1968, Roland Barthes dramatized a long-running discussion on the value of the search for authorial meaning or intention in an author's work. In "The Death of the Author," Barthes proposed that pursuing either of these elements is irrelevant and counterproductive to understanding the text of a work of literature. It is only the reader's experience that matters in the search for truth within a text, and any influence from knowledge collected on the motivation behind its creation is damaging to that experience. Using the example from Balzac's story, *Sarrasine*, with the characters in dialogue, Barthes considers the question of who is speaking. Is it Balzac as the narrator speaking through his own life experiences? In his essay, Barthes (1967) famously responds, "We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (p. 142). For Barthes (1967), the very act of writing removes the author from the equation, as he or she, ". . .enters into his own death" once the writing begins (p. 142). Barthes (1967) further declared that all literature comprises voices, ". . .to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neutral, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes" (p. 142). Just as a legend retold over many generations loses any connection to its originator, Barthes suggests that all text brought into existence is embodied in the voices it creates, and it is the reader who gives life to the voices. The author's personal circumstances, state of mind, lived history, and social environment are of no import, and efforts to deduce meaning or authorial intent from those voices are frivolous.

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While Barthes was simply another voice in a long line of literary theorists chipping away at the significance of the author's intention, the melodramatic pronouncement that was the title of his essay seemed to codify the author's demise within literary criticism. The New Criticism of Wimsatt and Beardsley, the Hermeneutic circle outlined by Gadamer, and the Semiotics of Saussure all made use of varying approaches to literature that downplayed the significance of authorial intent, while placing the text or language at the forefront of literary interpretation. However, Barthes's essay reads as though it were the author's official obituary. There has, of course, been a serious reaction to the displacement of the author during the many attempts on his or her literary life, and these have explicably spawned counter movements, such as the much-maligned Historicism and its later refashioning into New Historicism. While each of these movements within literary criticism line up defensively behind one of the points on Gadamer's circle, adherents often dig in to declare their viewpoint the only appropriate method with which to initiate an analysis. This scenario unavoidably leads to a type of "otherism" that has at times sparked unnecessary conflict and overheated debate among proponents of one literary school or another. As linguists Chomsky and Barsamian (1994) suggest, literary theory creates "...academic cults that are divorced from any reality and that provide a defense against dealing with the world as it actually is" (p. 163).

While the current literary epistemology has relaxed strict adherence to a text-only philosophy, once liberated from the inconvenient thoughts of the author, for many years, literary theorists were free to speculate and formulate unconstrained. The theories that would emerge in the two decades after Barthes' essay fueled the quest for a scientific approach to the level of near conflagration, at one point going so far as to remove the word "literary" from the term altogether. Driven for recognition or validation, it was believed that the new scientific theory of language being produced could be universally held and might transcend the boundaries erected between disciplines. These new theorists might finally be allowed out of the confines of their literary discipline, free to apply the science of language in a much more interdisciplinary way. The problem with that expectation is that interdisciplinary research works best when other disciplines are invited in, as opposed to a discipline that has decided to move outward on its own. The latter is akin to the awkward moment when a friend shows up at the house uninvited, eager to help with renovations, but there are no plans to undertake. As passionately as that friend might argue for a renovated kitchen, with equal fervor, the homeowner would defend what is already there. Moving uninvited with passion into other disciplines is an exercise sure to rankle those who call said discipline their home. The historian, for example, will not limit inquiry to the words on a page, as the author is a critical part of the story they are working to uncover. If literary theories are to live in concord inside the discipline of literature and allow for a productive back and forth in an interdisciplinary way, a means for doing so dispassionately must be developed. Artificial intelligence (AI) may hold the key to dissipating those passions and safely bring the author back into the interpretation of the work, while aligning the many disparate literary theories into a more harmonious method of inquiry.

2. The Fallacy of the Intentional Fallacy

In their 1946 essay "The Intentional Fallacy," literary critic William K. Wimsatt and philosopher Monroe C. Beardsley took direct aim at the author's intentions for a work of literature. They suggested that basing an interpretation of the work on the intentions of the author was a fallacy, a concept used to support the idea that an author's work takes on the status of an independent object once produced, with the meaning left to be deciphered by the reader. This notion that the author's role in the search for meaning ends with the completion of the literary piece runs as a thread from Gadamer and passes along through

several subsequent literary schools of thought. Though with differing rationales, the Structuralism of Levi-Strauss and the Deconstruction of Derrida carried similar restrictions on the author's role. All had their run, some of just a few years, and others as long as decades. While the preeminence of each school inexorably waned over time, wispy remnants of textual isolation endured long after falling out of fashion. While each school would find reasons to debate vigorously with the other, especially for Levi-Strauss and Derrida, the common bond has always been the uselessness of the author to sound literary criticism. However, internal squabbles notwithstanding, the biggest battles were to be saved for non-believing adherents of literary isolationist schools, such as E.D. Hirsch and his author-centric Historicism, or the cultural context of the New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt. If harmony or synergy within literary theory is a goal worth working toward, the participants over the past one hundred years have mostly failed to take steps in that direction. Instead, verbal bombs have often been thrown over the frontier of the authorial intentionality debate, and as new theories emerged, those shells could be dropped as easily on literary theorists working on the same side of the conflict. Due at times to the caustic level of response to others, one might be tempted to change the appellation of literary criticism entirely to something akin to literary disparagement or literary denunciation.

The reality is that the object of most of the disagreement within the literary community, authorial intention, was never completely wiped from the scholarly landscape, either by Barthes's essay or any of the literary theories that preceded or followed it. On the contrary, even during the most enthusiastic periods of textual isolation, scholarly searches for authorial intent continued to be a part of the process by which a text is examined. The activity was instead driven underground by the literary theories that emerged from the author's corpse. In his book, *The Varieties of Authorial Intention: Literary Theory Beyond the Intentional Fallacy*, author Farrell (2017) claims, "As a result, scholars who pursue author-based practices like biography and textual editing, suffered the loss of status that goes with not being 'theoretical'" (p. 21). Academic criticism has been deployed as a weapon to drive the practice of authorial intentionality into hiding, and the investigative literary scholar is forced to cover authorial findings with the shroud of the dead author. Farrell (2017) also addresses this when he adds, "Instead of abandoning concern with authorial intentions, literary scholars have clung to it as an indefensible peccadillo, not to be employed without disclaimers" (p. 21). If the author's intentions are deduced and pertinent information extracted, the scholar must then go back to the text to find purely textual evidence to disguise what has been discovered.

While during the intervening decades, Barthes's vision of the author's demise has itself been critiqued and vigorously assessed, the postmodern epistemic concept of textual isolation has lingered. Logie (2013) points out the depth of the reverberations when he accurately states, "Barthes's essay has proven especially important for scholars and critics challenging traditional understandings of an implicitly Romantic author as the solitary, originary, and proprietary creator of literary texts" (p. 494). Examining the text in isolation as a practice is a sound method for discerning new insights or observations. There are plenty of reasons to suspend out-of-text literary research and engage in unprejudiced, old-fashioned, close readings of the text. This should always be part of the required epistemological process of literary inquiry for all schools. It is a critical lens through which much of the plain meaning can be cultivated, and without it, nothing significant can truly be divined. However, the same can also be true of a deep historical review of the author and his times, or an examination of emotional or psychological factors that may have impacted literary choices. An exercise of limiting the examination of literature to only "the words on the page" is something that should always be a part of any scholarly inquiry into a piece. Though Barthes figuratively called for the "Death" of the author, it is not the

death of Barthes's theory or the legacy of literary theories that came before or after that is advocated for here. In his book, *The Death and Return of the Author*, literary critic Burke (1998) gets it correct when he writes, "...I would argue, of literary studies in general, is not to replace the 'death' of the author by an 'end' or 'death 'of theory (if indeed any such thing is possible), for it is precisely the idea of 'deaths, 'ends, 'closures', epistemological breaks', 'final ruptures', etc., that have so often barred the way to meaningful and constructive debate in recent critical history" (p. 17). Bringing back the author does not mean the end of textual inquiry or a reshuffling of literary theories. We live in a world that seeks balance, and literary studies should strive for an equilibrium that walks away from defined boundaries or axioms anchored in concrete.

Often, the best lens available for viewing a text comes from outside the discipline of literary studies altogether, and in fact, it might be said that this is frequently the only way to adequately prepare for a robust literary close read. For example, would a purely literary close reading of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" be complete without an understanding of the devastation and chaotic calamity of World War I, in which Eliot was immersed as a direct spectator? For that matter, can it be ignored that Eliot's battle with personal demons caused at least part of his epic poem to be written during a stay in a sanatorium? Finally, can his exceptional collaboration with Ezra Pound on this piece be disregarded? Each of these influences can be found directly in the text of "The Waste Land" and to ignore them is to puzzle over pieces of literature that simply cannot be made complete without scrutiny of the author's identity. When the selection of lenses for a close read is additive rather than constrained, as in actively calling upon other disciplines to join in preparing for and evaluating the results of a literary close read, entirely new vistas of understanding come into view.

Another example of the need to fully examine an author's identity can be found in the time-tested work and mercurial life of Robert Frost. Frost often made decisions about his writing based on circumstances that cannot be found in the text. In Frost's very long and popular "New Hampshire," brought out shortly after Eliot published "The Waste Land," Frost makes use of "Notes and Grace Notes," in what appears to be an effort to help his readers navigate the complexities of the work. While this technique was new to Frost, the same strategy had been controversially deployed by Eliot just the year before in the second edition of "The Waste Land." It might be construed that this was Frost simply adopting what he thought was a good idea from Eliot. However, this hypothesis does not hold up when a more thorough examination of the relationship between Frost and Eliot is undertaken. Frost critic and author, Hart (1976) comments on this when he explains, "When New Hampshire appeared, Frost at forty-eight was a well-known and frequently honored poet. The title poem 'New Hampshire' constitutes a Frostian manifesto and contains an almost explicit attack on Eliot, as one who 'took dejectedly/His seat upon the intellectual throne'" (p. 427). Having been supplanted by Eliot as a protégé of Ezra Pound, Frost carried deep hostility toward both parties, an enmity which resulted in a near life-long, one-sided feud with Eliot. Frost's use of these notes is clearly designed to mock Eliot. Hart (1976) addresses this specifically when he notes, "The title poem contained footnotes referring to the later poems. Frost seems to be implying several things here, playfully but also seriously. That he is a poet, not a pedant" (p. 427). While Eliot added these to the second edition to help readers through the many allusions and difficult connections sprinkled throughout "The Waste Land," this was not a case of Frost adopting a device he found effective. If one is willfully unaware of these circumstances or deliberately removed from the state of Frost's relationship with Eliot, the real reason for this device in Frost's "New Hampshire" simply cannot be discovered through the text alone. Nor should it be, as Frost's emotional state would play a role in several of his most popular poems. Without deep historical research

and perhaps a surface-level psychoanalysis of Frost, the author, an important element of the work, remains undercover. Even worse, it. is misinterpreted.

The point of this Frost exercise is not nuanced. Whether it be through clandestine research while maintaining a cover of textualist covenants or overtly applying evidence gathered from several lenses before a close read activity, the author's identity is inseparable from the work he or she produces. There are pieces and parts of every author's life often wrapped as enigmas within the text, that when brought to the job of close reading, illuminate that activity in ways that simple imagining or supposition never can. These are flawed people who bring their faults to the work regularly, and the text they produce is not some hollowed document that should remain unsoiled by impure outside inquiry. They live in times that are often quite different from those of the literary investigator, and knowing how those differences color the investigative lens is a critical factor in understanding the words scribed by the author. However, the final resurrection of the author may come from inside the discipline itself, as it struggles to fend off what many in the literary community view as an existential threat.

3. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Restoration of the Author

One very large challenge of our day that a purely textualist position presents is that it entirely validates what is viewed by some as the single biggest threat the creative literary community has ever faced. With the introduction in 2022 of artificial intelligence and generative text systems such as ChatGPT and Google's Gemini, the centrality of the author in the creation of literature has emerged as perhaps the single most significant authorial question of our times. Opposition to Large Language Models (LLMs) and AI-generated text has rallied the creative community to the defense of the author, as no issue has before. Initially focused on the financial impact during the early phases of the growing protest, sprinkled within the defense of royalties and just compensation, there is a voice rising to remind us of the humanity that great literature requires. Tucked within a remonstrative article from none other than The Authors Guild (n.d.), echoes of that voice are beginning to appear. "We need to ensure that human creators are compensated, not just for the sake of the creators, but so our books and arts continue to reflect both our real and imagined experiences, open our minds, teach us new ways of thinking, and move us forward as a society, rather than rehash old ideas." This idea of books and art reflecting "our real and imagined experiences" would seem to fly in the face of Barthes's rejection of authorial deliberation outside the text. Which real and imagined experiences need protection? Were the answer to be, as Barthes suggested, that it is the reader's imagination or lived experiences that are reflected in the text, AI-generated text could serve as well for that task as would the living writer.

If the author is indeed dead, the unborn AI machine is similarly lifeless, and as such, it is equally valid for the reader's appreciation of the text. While the defense of the author is now in the early stages, as it matures, there will need to be clear distinctions established between AI-generated text and that of the human author. Those differences will continue to move in the direction of the uniqueness of authorial intent, as there is no intentionality behind what an AI machine creates. It simply responds to a prompt that produces a product. There is no reason or explanation behind the action, as these motivations are uniquely human qualities.

The textualist contention that the author, or rather, as Barthes preferred, the writer, does nothing more than act as a conduit between everything that has ever been written and the work he or she creates, serves perfectly as a description of the process used for the production of AI-generated text. It is conceivable that one day everything ever written may well be uploaded into a not-too-distant supercomputer, and with simple prompts

easily constructed, the reader will be supplied with an endless variety of faux literature produced in the style of a favorite author. New stories, new poems, and even new endings to previous works will all be available for readers to make use of. In this scenario, the author truly is dead. Or, better said, was never born. With AI, textual isolationists have the ultimate tool to create the authorial absence they have so fervently called for. AI is that nameless, faceless, non-historical writer that Gadamer, Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and so many others have demanded, and as such would seem to be the ultimate fulfillment of textualist literary theory.

This, of course, would require the textualists to ignore the impact this new machine-writer would have on the human variety. However, while AI-based text-generating programs may not be capable of feeling the impact they will have on living, breathing authors, they can most definitely define and explain what those repercussions are. The following text was generated, in less than 10 s, by Google's AI machine, Gemini. It makes a great case for the author's preeminence, as well as solidifying the argument to bring the author back to the forefront of literary theory. Perhaps as good an argument as has yet been put forward by real humans.

4. AI Prompt: The Human Touch: Why Human Authorship Will Always Matter

(Begin AI-Generated Text)

One of the fundamental strengths of human authorship lies in the unique perspective it offers. AI, for all its prowess, can analyze data and mimic creative styles, but it lacks the lived experiences, emotions, and cultural nuances that shape human expression. A human author brings their own story, biases, and experiences to the table, infusing their work with a richness and depth that AI may struggle to replicate. This unique perspective allows human authors to create works that resonate with readers on a deeper level, sparking new ideas, challenging assumptions, and fostering empathy.

Furthermore, human authors possess an inherent understanding of the "why" behind communication. AI can follow instructions and churn out content, but it may not grasp the underlying intent or purpose that drives human expression. Human authors can weave themes, messages, and emotions into their work, creating a connection with the audience that transcends mere information transmission. A well-crafted story can evoke laughter, tears, or a sense of wonder, leaving a lasting impression on the reader long after the last page is turned.

The capacity for originality and innovation is another hallmark of human authorship. While AI can be a powerful tool for generating creative text formats, it is inherently dependent on the data sets it has been trained on. Human authors, on the other hand, can bring fresh ideas and perspectives to the table. They can push boundaries, experiment with new forms, and create works that are truly original. This ability to break new ground and surprise audiences is what keeps literature and storytelling vibrant and ever-evolving.

Finally, there is an undeniable value associated with human authorship. Authorship carries a weight, signifying the dedication, creativity, and effort poured into a work. Attributing a work to a human author allows for recognition, appreciation, and fosters a connection between the creator and the consumer. Readers can engage with the author's ideas, appreciate their style, and even form a parasocial bond, creating a richer and more meaningful experience (Google 2024).

(End AI-Generated Text)

What is most astounding about this AI response is how eerily similar the language is to that of being made by the literary community protesting the use of AI. That the human

author and the reader can "...form a parasocial bond, creating a richer and more meaningful experience," is an amazing insight into the value of human contribution to the writing process, and seems a clarion call from the non-human machine-writer to form a literary partnership with the human. The AI machine appears exceptionally clear-eyed about what it does not bring to the table and is quite okay acknowledging what its human counterpart can do that it cannot. For the moment, at least, that unemotional and detached reasoning does not travel in both directions. It is a one-sided feud against an adversary, sentient or not, that seems to understand the living author's view and concedes the argument.

In an article defending human authorship against the perceived assault from AI, linguist and author Baron (2023) writes, "We write to look outward, as with literary works that convey our perspective on the human condition. We write to look inward, including to find out what we're thinking." Looking outward is something that AI can, perhaps, be trained to accomplish. Writing to look inward exists solely within the demesne of the author as a thinking, feeling human being. Baron (2023) goes on to point out the most empowering of the arguments for the rebirth of the author in our times, "All this writing is grounded in human sentience, of which AI has none. AI has no drive to better people's lives, impart what it is thinking, or convey emotion." The more that the argument against AI places the author's human condition and ability to think and feel at the forefront, the greater the centrality the author will be awarded regarding the creation and critical review of the text. One cannot simultaneously kill off the author while at the same time celebrating their contributions as the distinguishing factor between artificial and human-generated text. Once the AI stone is rolled away, like Lazarus, the author will emerge from the lonely catacomb fully restored, and in so doing, the search for authorial intention in literary research will reappear as a legitimate practice.

5. How Would Adherents of Textual Isolation Have Responded to AI?

The use of AI may not have been so readily embraced by Barthes or his colleagues. Despite their insistence on the primacy of the language, Gadamer, Levi-Strauss, Derrida, and Barthes most certainly received royalty checks for their writing endeavors without compunction. After killing off the author, the corpse was apparently still to be paid his due. This point has become a focus for the argument against AI-generated text. Early response to the technology by the writing community positioned it as an existential threat to the very profession. If LLMs can be trained to produce text without the author, this would seem to be a fulfillment of the concept that the author is unimportant. That, of course, is not the argument being made by the writing community.

While those who, for several decades, have called for limitations of authorial intent may have been intrigued by the potential AI offers to push human authors to all-new levels of creativity, the concerns over remuneration are more likely to force further relaxation of restrictions on authorial inclusion. However, there is a much plainer rationale in believing that AI may move textual isolationists to evolve their preferred literary theories. Though setting the author aside does provide the literary critic with a foundational lens with which to view the language, a resurrection of the author's identity is a crucial prerequisite for coexisting alongside the non-authorial output of AI-generated text. As the Google AI machine has suggested, it is the elements that make a human writer a human that will allow for a way forward, one that both embraces the new technology and reinforces the importance of the value a sentient existence brings to any writing produced.

Analysis of a text in isolation is an action of great usefulness, but it is also true that the value of an individual author, with a life full of experiences culled from the observable world, is equally valuable. With the author placed at the point of the defense against the onslaught of AI-generated text, he or she should be recognized and restored as a crucial

element of literary criticism. In principle, this reality should have already put an end to the dead-author theory on its own merits. That it has not speaks more to an institutional resistance within the academy, as it does to the cogency of the approach. Fear of AI may wear down much of that resistance, however, and with patience, even the most ardent textual isolationist might be persuaded of the greater benefit of an integrative approach. It has taken some time to reach this point in the debate, and there is no doubt a significant additional amount will be needed before the author is fully resurrected from the Barthesian graveyard. However, one simply cannot champion the virtues, benefits, and advantages of the sentient existence of the author without returning him or her to a position within the epistemic boundaries of literary criticism. Once the author is back inside those boundaries, literary theories based on textual isolation do not need to be hollowed out or eviscerated. They simply must begin to exist alongside an author with renewed centrality and welcomed with other interdisciplinary arrivals to study the unique authorial identities, even the AI machine admits it will never achieve. In the argument against AI-generated text, we have what is an immediate solution to the lingering ambiguity of a dead author's association with their work. What is left is for the rest of the literary community to unreservedly welcome them back. However, it cannot be ignored that a fully restored author would have a deleterious effect on dozens of otherwise worthwhile isolationist literary theories. Or would it?

6. Artificial Intelligence as a Harmonizer of Disparate Literary Theories

It is the passion by which proponents of literary theories deploy their ideas that makes it difficult for those within the literary academy to coexist peacefully, even when their approaches are much less dissimilar than devotees might argue. A characteristic example of this can be seen in the collision in 1966 at Johns Hopkins University, at an event that was the introduction of what would come to be known as Jacques Derrida's theory of Post-structuralism or Deconstruction. During a conference that was ostensibly designed to introduce an American audience to the French school of Structuralist thought, which included in attendance revered luminaries of the school, Jacques Lacan and Claude Levi-Strauss, on the final day of the conference, Derrida delivered a lecture titled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences." At a gathering Yale professor Fry (2009) describes as intended to be "...an event that was really meant to be a kind of coronation of Claude Levi-Strauss," Derrida's speech had a notably opposite effect. (1:45). Fry (2009) goes on to say that rather than a celebration of Levi-Strauss and Structuralism in general, Derrida's speech had the effect of "...a kind of dethroning" (2:11). Derrida's post-structuralist rebuke of fundamental structuralist tenets created a firestorm of resentment and caustic debate for several years, as those on the same side of the issue of authorial intent would once again squabble amongst themselves.

When Derrida's lecture was published the following year, as literary critic Waugh (2006) notes in her introduction to *Literary Theory and Criticism, an Oxford Guide*, "Two key texts were published that year, which between them, seem to illustrate perfectly the nature of the gap between traditional literary studies and those which came to be referred to as Post-structuralism" (Loc. 491). The second publication Waugh (2006) refers to is Hirsch's (1976) decidedly pro-authorial inclusion, *Validity in Interpretation*. In 1967, literary critics were well positioned to find intellectual targets on both sides of the dead author controversy, recharging an environment where adherence to one school or another required invalidation of all others. It was a period of renewal for Chomsky's "cults," and one in which harmony was an impossible concept to obtain within the community of literary criticism. Though somewhat dissipated today, passionate beliefs and certitude continue to represent a significant hurdle.

Once again, to eliminate the passions created by the differences between literary criticism's schools of thought, it is possible to find a dispassionate partner in AI to conduct a close reading of even the most diverse literary thinkers. Using Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," Microsoft's non-human ChatGPT was asked to apply what it had learned from a close read.

7. AI Prompt: Conduct a Close Reading of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" Using the Primary Literary Theories of Gadamer, Derrida, and Hirsch

(Begin AI-Generated Text)

Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Gadamer's hermeneutics emphasize the fusion of horizons—where the reader's understanding interacts with the text's meaning. In "The Road Not Taken," the speaker's dilemma at the fork in the woods serves as a metaphor for life's choices. The poem invites readers to reflect on their own experiences of decision-making, creating a dialogue between the speaker's moment of choice and the reader's interpretations.

The speaker's uncertainty about which path to take highlights the complexity of choices. The imagery of the "yellow wood" suggests a transitional moment, a metaphor for life stages. Gadamer would argue that the meaning of the poem evolves as readers bring their personal histories to it, thereby creating a shared understanding of the significance of choices. The reflective tone invites readers to consider not only their decisions but also how they narrate their pasts, indicating that the meaning of any choice is shaped by subsequent reflections.

Derrida's Deconstruction

Derrida would approach the poem by examining its underlying binary oppositions—such as "the road less traveled" versus "the road more traveled." He would highlight the tension between the desire for meaning and the ambiguity present in the text. The phrase "I took the one less traveled by" suggests a sense of individuality, yet Derrida might point out that this claim is paradoxical. What does it mean for a road to be "less traveled"? The very concept of "less traveled" relies on the existence of the other road, complicating the speaker's claim of making a unique choice.

Derrida would also note the importance of the future in the poem's final lines, where the speaker reflects on the significance of the choice made. The statement "I shall be telling this with a sigh" introduces a layer of irony; the sigh could imply regret, satisfaction, or ambivalence. This ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations, emphasizing that meaning is not fixed but rather fluid and contingent. Thus, the poem invites readers to question the reliability of memory and the narratives we construct about our choices.

Hirsch's Intentionalism

Hirsch's approach centers on authorial intent, seeking to understand what Frost intended to convey through the poem. From this perspective, Frost's exploration of choices reflects a nuanced understanding of the human experience. The poem's structure, with its careful attention to the speaker's internal conflict, suggests that Frost aimed to capture the weight of decision-making and the inherent uncertainty that accompanies it.

Hirsch would argue that the poem's meaning is anchored in Frost's recognition that every choice carries implications for the future, and how individuals construct meaning from their past decisions. The speaker's reflection on the roads taken and not taken

indicates a profound awareness of how choices shape identity. In this light, the poem can be seen as a meditation on regret and the narratives people create to make sense of their lives.

Synthesis

Bringing together these three perspectives enhances our understanding of "The Road Not Taken." Gadamer's emphasis on the dialogue between reader and text reveals how the poem resonates with universal experiences of choice. Derrida's deconstruction highlights the complexities and ambiguities that challenge straightforward interpretations, while Hirsch's focus on authorial intent grounds the poem in Frost's exploration of human agency and identity.

Ultimately, Frost's poem serves as a rich reflection on the nature of choices, inviting readers to engage in a contemplative dialogue about their own paths. The interplay of meaning generated by these theoretical lenses reveals the depth of the poem, illustrating how the act of reading becomes an act of choice in itself (Open AI 2024).

(End AI-Generated Text)

While the close read performed by ChatGPT above is a bit thin, and its explanations rudimentary, the first paragraph of the "Synthesis" section does offer hope of a harmonizing role the technology might play in the future. Additionally, when prompts are created to ask either ChatGPT or Gemini to clarify parts of their responses or respond to specific criticism, the AI machines will provide additional information, though it becomes less reliable, and they will eventually run out of things to say. The challenge for AI programs at present is the massive size of their LLMs, as each has accumulated anything and everything around as many topics as possible, from whatever source it can. In other words, it offers a breadth of knowledge, but perhaps not the depth of a particular specialization.

To narrow the focus, the good news is that there were pre-AI literary scholars who worked to connect the silos of literary criticism. Canadian literary theorist and critic, Northrup Frye, was one such scholar. Frye (1950) first conceived of a harmonic approach to literary analysis in an essay entitled "The Levels of Meaning in Literature." While Frye (1957) would later expand on his theory with his magnum opus, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, in "Levels" the author suggests a synergistic approach using multiple layers of meaning. Often referred to as "rooms," these included the Literal and Descriptive, the Formal and Allegorical, the Mythical and Archetypal, and the Anagogic levels.

Returning to an AI partner to elucidate on how these might be used in a specific analysis, once again using Frost's most beloved poem, "The Road Not Taken," another prompt of Google's Gemini AI machine returns the following analysis, using Frye's initial theory as the basis.

8. AI Prompt: Apply Northrop Frye's Four Room Theory for an Analysis of Robert Frost's Poem, "The Road Not Taken?"

(Begin AI-Generated Text)

To apply Northrop Frye's "Palace of Art" framework to Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken", we enter the poem through four distinct "rooms." This approach harmonizes the literal details with the universal myths that make the poem so enduring.

ONE: The Literal & Descriptive Room (Formalism)

In this room, we ignore the "hidden meanings" and look only at the word-patterns and structure.

- **The Focus:** The rhyme scheme (ABAAB) and the rhythmic "gallop" of the anapestic meter.

- **The Analysis:** We notice the repetition of the word "way" and the symmetry of the two roads. Frye would argue that the "harmony" here is internal; the poem creates a self-contained world of choices.
- **The Observation:** The speaker admits the roads are actually "worn. . . really about the same." The "difference" mentioned at the end is a structural irony—it's something the speaker says he will say in the future, not necessarily a fact of the present.

TWO: The Formal & Allegorical Room (Historical/Social)

Now we look at the poem as a pointer to external reality—how it functions as a "lesson" or a reflection of the author's life.

- **The Focus:** The poem's origin as a private joke for Frost's friend, Edward Thomas, who was often indecisive about which path to take on walks.
- **The Analysis:** This room treats the poem as a commentary on the burden of decision-making. It becomes an allegory for the human tendency to "re-write" our history, pretending our random choices were actually part of a grand, intentional plan, "I took the one less traveled by".

THREE: The Mythical & Archetypal Room (The Hero's Journey)

Here, we move into the "deeper chambers" of the palace. Frye is most famous for this room, where we connect the poem to the collective imagination of humanity.

- **The Focus:** The archetype of the "Crossroads."
- **The Analysis:** The "yellow wood" is a classic symbol of the autumn of life or a transition period. The choice between two paths is a universal mythic motif (think of Hercules at the crossroads or the "narrow path" in religious texts).
- **The Harmony:** The poem isn't just about a guy in Vermont; it is a manifestation of the Archetype of the Quest. The speaker is the "Traveler" hero, and the wood is the "Labyrinth" of life.

FOUR: The Anagogic Room (The Universal)

In the highest room of the palace, we see literature not as a reflection of life, but as a total map of human desire.

- **The Focus:** The human spirit's relationship with Time and Fate.
- **The Analysis:** For Frye, this level is about the "identity" of the human mind with the universe. The "Road" is no longer a physical thing or even a symbol; it is the flow of time itself, which is irreversible: "knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back".
- **The Harmony:** At this level, the poem captures the ultimate human paradox: we are free to choose, yet we are bound by the consequences of those choices in a way that defines our entire existence.

Summary of the "Harmonious" View

If you only stayed in the Literal Room, the poem is just a walk in the woods. If you only stayed in the Archetypal Room, it's a grand myth about destiny. By using Frye's "Palace" approach, you see that the poem is all of these things at once: a rhythmic exercise, a joke about a friend, a universal myth of the crossroads, and a profound meditation on the nature of time (Google Gemini 2024).

(End AI-Generated Text)

The analysis provided by Gemini using Frye's framework does touch on the main arguments the author expressed in his original essay. However, as with much of AI's output, there are flaws that appear within the response delivered. This is based primarily

on the sheer volume of information an AI machine parses through to bring back a summary, and often it does not recognize the difference between the original text and interpretations. There is a solution to this significant challenge, however, and early forms of it are already available for use. Google has created a research tool called Notebook LM, which is, in essence, a "closed loop" environment of sources. Notebook LM prompts do not search the entire web universe to construct a reply, but rather limit the sources it uses to those that have been uploaded into folders. If, for instance, a user was to upload all of Northrop Frye's published material into an assigned folder, the response received would make use of only those documents provided. While the AI tools generally available to the public will, for the time being, contain a very real possibility of misguided or incorrect responses, those platforms constructed as specific *source-grounded* AI environments have the potential to avoid what is at present a very real criticism. Despite the inherent challenges of AI based tools, computational linguist and former Georgetown University professor, Mani (2016) predicted, "While critics and book reviewers may continue to be an essential part of public cultural life, literary theorists who do not embrace AI will be at risk of becoming an exotic species—like the librarians who once used index cards to search for information."

9. Conclusions: The Opportunity Ahead

Though Professor Mani was an early advocate of AI in literary circles, in an odd twist of irony, textual isolationist critic and Derrida contemporary, Michael Foucault, may have unintentionally predicted the appearance of AI-generated text some fifty years ahead of its debut. Arguing that just as any other aspect of "industrial and bourgeois society" had been profoundly impacted by change, Foucault (1984) concluded that, "It does not seem necessary that the author function remain constant in form, complexity, and even existence. I think that as society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear" (p. 111). With AI promising to be the single most disruptive advance ever created by mankind, we have most certainly reached Foucault's "very moment" of change. However, rather than disappearing, the author has begun to defend his right to exist, as opposed to acquiescence to an inevitable removal from the scene. It is the "function" of the literary critic that would seem more likely to be cast aside by the super analytic silicon brain of the AI machine.

Within the current capabilities of AI are the seeds for a breakthrough to establish less passionate debates around literary criticism and open new vistas for how best to apply divergent literary theories to literature. In the future, the academy should consider an LLM that is focused exclusively on literary theories, criticism, and the application of said theories to actual works from real authors. A place where all the emotional noise from the discourse's myriad literary schools is brought together as a choir instead of a series of solo performances. While AI can become exponentially smarter from the information that it is fed by humans, it can also provide decisively detached feedback to replace entrenched positions from within silos of literary schools of thought. Adding AI into the hermeneutic circle presents an opportunity to harmonize and de-escalate the heated discourse among theories. To realize this brave new world, the literary community will need to gather the courage to resurrect the author, embrace the technology currently being referred to as an existential threat, and lean into a new goal of coexistence. AI has the power to help with this task if humans are willing to partner with the technology in ways that bring the humanity it lacks to the AI machine. At the same time, it is important to recognize that one element of human feelings should be left out. Passion is something that human authors can never have enough of. The absence of that same emotion within the AI-powered literary critic is what could prove to be the great harmonizer, acting as an indifferent voice that moves

all past, present, and future literary schools toward a practice of integrating rather than debating their unique perspectives.

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