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The Algorithm and the Soul: AI's Limits in Interpreting Literary Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT: The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in textual analysis raises fundamental questions about its ability to grasp the subjectivity inherent in literary works. While AI systems, particularly those based on machine learning, are increasingly capable of identifying linguistic patterns, simulating stylistic analyses, and generating automated summaries, they struggle to grasp the sensitive, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions of literary language. This article explores the limitations of these tools when faced with phenomena such as irony, ambiguity, polyphony, and stylistic singularity. Drawing on digital humanities, literary theory, and computer science, the study highlights the tensions between algorithmic objectification and the subjective experience of reading. In particular, it emphasises the lack of interiority in machines (their inability to feel, remember, or imagine) and the tendency of AI models to reduce literary complexity to fixed analytical categories. In light of these findings, the article advocates for a critical and hybrid approach based on the complementarity between artificial intelligence and human interpretation. Rather than rejecting digital tools outright, it defends their responsible and contextual use, recognising their epistemological limitations in capturing literary subjectivity. Ultimately, this work invites broader reflection on the place of technology in the humanities and on the conditions for a fruitful dialogue between computation and interpretation in literary analysis.

KEYWORDS: Artificial intelligence, Literary subjectivity, Textual analysis, Digital humanities, Interpretation

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) now plays an increasingly important role in textual analysis, both in linguistic research and in the digital humanities. Thanks to advances in Natural Language Processing (NLP) and deep learning, models such as BERT, GPT and RoBERTa are capable of identifying syntactic structures, generating automated summaries and detecting stylistic features across vast corpora. These technical achievements have opened the door to new forms of literary exploration, particularly in the context of 'distant reading' (Moretti 45), which favours large-scale pattern recognition over close interpretative engagement.

However, these advances raise a crucial question: can a machine truly interpret a literary text, and more specifically, grasp its subjective dimension? In other words, can it understand what makes literature irreducible to data, such as its ambiguity, its affect, its unique voice and its implicit meanings? It is clear that while human readers draw on memory, imagination and emotional responsiveness when reading, AI, to borrow Searle's distinction (429), operates through syntactic calculation and correlation, lacking the semantic understanding and intentionality of a human reader.

Furthermore, this article examines the epistemological, methodological, and hermeneutic limitations of artificial intelligence in the field of literary analysis. Drawing on digital humanities, literary theory, and computer science, it aims to shed light on the tensions between algorithmic objectification and the subjective experience of reading. The first section provides an overview of the current capabilities of AI in textual analysis; the second explores the concept of literary subjectivity and its resistance to formal modelling; the third examines the main obstacles encountered by automated systems in the interpretation of literary texts; and the fourth reflects on the possibility of a critical coexistence between humans and machines in the act of interpretation.

I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN TEXT ANALYSIS

1. Advances in Natural Language Processing (NLP)

Natural Language Processing (NLP), a branch of artificial intelligence dedicated to the interaction between computers and human language, has seen rapid progress in recent years. Large language models (LLMs) such as BERT, GPT and RoBERTa can now analyse syntactic structures, detect semantic patterns, identify lexical co-occurrences and even generate coherent texts from queries. These systems rely on huge text corpora and deep

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learning algorithms based on artificial neural networks. Modern NLP systems, powered by deep learning, analyse syntax, semantics and discursive structures with unprecedented accuracy. Large language models such as GPT-4 rely on transformer architecture, which allows them to process context across vast corpora, enabling tasks such as sentiment analysis, text summarisation and stylometry (LeCun 62). For example, AI can identify lexical patterns correlated with existential themes in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, but it cannot experience the existential angst that the text evokes (Compagnon 56).

2. AI in digital humanities

In the field of digital humanities, these tools have supported the development of 'distant reading' methods, popularised by Moretti (45), which aim to analyse vast literary corpora using statistical and computational techniques. Far from replacing traditional close reading, such approaches enrich interpretation by revealing formal patterns, narrative structures, or lexical shifts that remain invisible at the individual level. AI has been deployed in projects involving character network mapping, stylistic break detection, author attribution, and diachronic genre exploration. It facilitates 'distant reading' (Moretti 48), mapping macroscopic trends on the scale of literary history. Projects such as the Stanford Literary Lab use algorithms to trace the evolution of genres or author attribution (Underwood 112). On the other hand, these methods often favour quantifiable data at the expense of interpretative depth, risking what Bourdieu (89) calls 'the illusion of transparency', the error of equating statistical regularity with meaning.

3. The promises of algorithmic reading

These advances have fuelled the idea that machines could not only assist in literary analysis, but also simulate certain interpretative gestures. Current models can detect emotions in a text, classify works by stylistic signature, or extract thematic summaries from novels. These tools offer clear advantages: the ability to process large amounts of data, speed of analysis, apparent objectivity, and reproducibility of results. They are particularly valuable in collaborative or comparative research contexts, allowing new hypotheses to be formulated on little-known or largescale corpora. Moreover, the strengths of AI, namely speed, scalability and reproducibility, are offset by its reductive tendencies. For example, sentiment analysis tools can classify emotion in a poem but cannot grasp the ambiguity of a verse such as Baudelaire's 'Nature is a temple' (Eco 34).

This tension between computational efficiency and hermeneutic richness is the central dilemma of
AI-assisted literary analysis.

Consider, for example, the complete stanza of Baudelaire's *Correspondences*:

Nature is a temple where living pillars

Sometimes let out confused words;

Man walks through forests of symbols

That observe him with familiar glances.

Baudelaire's metaphor here is:

a) Lively and sinister: The pillars are "alive", they utter "confused words", and the symbols in the forest "observe" man with "familiar glances". This is not a peaceful temple; it is an active space, slightly threatening and endowed with sensitivity. Nature is not only divine; it is enigmatic and conscious.
b) Synesthetic: The poem deals with correspondences. The theory that all the senses are connected. Scents, colours and sounds respond to each other. The temple is not just a visual image; it is meant to be experienced with all the senses, as suggested by the line: 'Scents, colours and sounds respond to each other'.
c) Profane and complex: It uses a religious 'temple' structure but fills it with a sense of pagan, almost occult mystery. It is divine, but not in a conventional Christian way. It is beautiful, but its beauty is deeply unsettling.

If we were to feed a vast corpus of French poetry from the years 1850-1870 into AI, we would probably find the word 'temple' used by many poets. For most of them, its collocations
(neighbouring words) would be 'antique', 'silence', 'peace', "god" and 'columns'. For Baudelaire, however, its collocations would be exceptions: 'living,' 'pillars,' 'confused,' 'words,' 'forests of symbols.' AI could indeed identify Baudelaire as a statistical exception in his use of the word. It would be able to tell us that his use is different, and even quantify that difference. This is where its undeniable power lies. But, as Eco points out, human interpretation remains essential to understanding why this difference is significant. It takes a reader to grasp that Baudelaire was not merely describing a place; he was constructing an entire symbolic system to express an experience of the world that was modern, urban and deeply complex. An experience where meaning is not given in advance, but hidden, ambiguous, waiting to be deciphered in a temple that is both dark and beautiful.

Thus, while AI excels at formal or quantitative linguistic analysis, it quickly reaches its limits when it comes to accessing the human, emotional and symbolic dimensions of literature. This is precisely the focus of the following section, which examines the nature of literary subjectivity and explores the reasons why it resists algorithmic modelling.

II. LITERARY SUBJECTIVITY: A CONCEPT RESISTANT TO AUTOMATION

1. Subjectivity as a reading experience

Literary subjectivity cannot be reduced to a set of identifiable linguistic features in a text. It is first and foremost a lived reading experience; an experience that engages the reader's emotions, imagination and personal history. Reading a novel, a poem or a story is not just a process of decoding

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signs; it involves entering a world, experiencing emotions and activating intimate, even existential, resonances. This phenomenological dimension of reading, analysed by thinkers such as Jauss (67) and Iser (45), suggests that meaning does not reside solely in the text but emerges from the interaction between the text and its reader. A machine, however, does not "read" in this sense; it calculates. It experiences neither surprise, empathy nor discomfort; it has neither embodied memory nor interiority. This fundamental absence of subjective consciousness makes it incapable of accessing the depth of the human literary experience. A human reader interprets Proust's madeleine through personal memory; AI, devoid of consciousness, treats it as a lexical sequence
(Ricœur 102).

2. Textual markers of subjectivity

Beyond the reader's experience, subjectivity is also embedded in the writing itself through stylistic choices, tonal inflections, silences, dissonances and ambiguity. Literary language is characterised by its opacity, its symbolic density, and its ability to convey meaning indirectly, through irony, metaphor, or suggestion, where referential language fails. It often features multiple voices (polyphony), shifting perspectives, and fractured temporalities. These traits, central to literary subjectivity, largely escape the current capabilities of AI systems. While some algorithms can detect stylistic devices or measure emotional variations, they fail to capture their aesthetic or interpretive effects. Where human analysis takes into account authorial intent, historical context, and critical reception, AI remains confined to a superficial reading, making correlations without understanding.
In contrast, irony, polyphony, and metaphor resist algorithmic reduction. AI can read
Swift's *A Modest Proposal* as a literal plea, missing its satirical dimension (Genette 118). Similarly,
Dostoevsky's polyphonic narratives exceed AI's ability to model conflicting voices (Bakhtin 156).

3. Literature and indeterminacy: a clash of logics

Literature operates according to a logic of indeterminacy. It thrives on ambiguity, polysemy and interpretative openness. Instead of seeking a single, stable truth, it opens up spaces for questioning, hesitation, and conflicting meanings. This logic is fundamentally antagonistic to the functioning of AI, which, by design, tends to formalise, classify, and stabilise data. Where literary subjectivity draws its strength from incompleteness, uncertainty, or divergence, artificial intelligence seeks to reduce, predict, and explain. This cognitive mismatch makes any authentic modelling of subjectivity using algorithmic tools extremely difficult, if not impossible. Literature thrives on ambiguity (Barthes 25), while AI seeks deterministic results. Emily Dickinson's dashes or Kafka's unresolved narratives defy binary classification, exposing the 'hermeneutic gap' between machine reading and human reading (Citton 72).

III. THE LIMITS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE FACE OF LITERARY SUBJECTIVITY

1. Ambiguity, irony and stylistic singularity: areas of opacity

One of the distinctive features of literary subjectivity is its frequent use of ambiguity, ellipsis and dissonance. Irony, for example, is based on a gap between what is said and what is meant; a subtle shift that requires complex interpretative skills rooted in contextual, cultural and historical knowledge. Such inferential reasoning, essential to literary understanding, remains largely inaccessible to artificial intelligence, even in its most advanced forms.
Furthermore, when faced with a text by Voltaire in which denunciation is expressed through apparent approval, an automatic language model risks a literal interpretation. Similarly, the introspective meanderings of Proust, whose sentences are saturated with intersecting sensory images and temporal complexities, resist the rational segmentation performed by AI models. These systems struggle to capture the emotional and temporal density of such prose.

Furthermore, stylistic singularity also poses a challenge: Céline's oral style and Dostoyevsky's narrative polyphony exceed the capabilities of statistical analysis. While AI can detect lexical or syntactic features, it remains blind to their existential or aesthetic significance. AI struggles with texts where meaning is implicit. For example, it can label Orwell's 1984 as 'dystopian' but cannot critique its ideological underpinnings (Burdick et al. 134).
It is clear that AI
struggles with three aspects in particular when interpreting literary subjectivity:
(a) Irony and satire: A literalist algorithm analysing Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* might classify it as a serious political text rather than a scathing satire. Similarly, in Voltaire's *Candide*, the character Pangloss repeats that 'All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.' For a human reader, this is an ironic parody of Leibnizian optimism. For an AI, it could appear to be direct adherence. Irony only exists within a human horizon of expectation.
(b) Ambiguity and polysemy: Literature thrives on uncertainty. From Dickinsonian hesitation to Baudelairean correspondences, meaning often emerges from multiplicity. AI, however, tends to flatten this multiplicity into a single 'dominant' reading.
(c) Stylistic singularity: AI can identify Céline's fragmented syntax or Dostoevsky's dialogical style, but it misses the existential angst or philosophical confrontations that these voices convey.

2. The absence of embodied experience and emotional reading

Literary reading is not just an intellectual exercise; it is an embodied, emotional and imaginative experience. Human readers project their emotions, memories and personal projections into the act of interpretation. A machine, by definition, feels nothing. It has no memory in the phenomenological sense, no subjectivity to be moved by beauty or affected by pain. This lack of interiority prevents any meaningful engagement with literature on an experiential level.

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Consequently, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not a reader, but a processor. It calculates probabilities, establishes correlations, and manipulates data without ever accessing the lived depth of language. Where a human reader may be affected, shaken, or transformed by a text, the machine remains entirely outside such existential investment. The fluid, open, and often contradictory nature of human subjectivity thus eludes any attempt at computational modelling. Human interpretation is embodied; AI lacks the 'mirror neurons' that enable empathy (Gallese and Goldman 497).

3. The algorithmic reduction of literary complexity

One of the greatest risks of automated analysis lies in its tendency to reduce literary complexity to stable, predefined categories. By necessity, AI formalises: it quantifies emotion, classifies genres, segments discourse. But in doing so, it flattens the indeterminacy that lies at the heart of literary meaning. Literature thrives on tension, ambiguity, and silence. It requires a reading that welcomes uncertainty, embraces interpretive multiplicity, and even accepts incomprehension. When AI, on the contrary, assigns a single meaning to a passage, detects a 'dominant tone' or identifies a 'main sentiment', it risks erasing the polyphonic richness of the literary text. Thus, this reduction threatens not only the complexity of the text, but also the freedom of interpretation itself: the reader's autonomy, their ability to agree, resist or reinterpret, comes up against the rigidity of a tool that does not interpret in the human sense, but classifies according to predetermined metrics.

IV. TOWARDS CRITICAL COEXISTENCE: PERSPECTIVES AND CAVEATS

1. AI as a complementary tool, not an interpretative one

Given the limitations outlined above, the aim is not to reject artificial intelligence outright, but to redefine its role in the field of literary analysis. AI can be a valuable tool for researchers, provided it is not confused with an interpretive subject. Used exploratively or as a support for analysis, it can help detect patterns, map large corpora, cross-reference linguistic data, and even stimulate interpretive hypotheses. However, it cannot replace the critical eye or intuitive sensitivity of the human reader. Thus defined, AI does not produce interpretation in the hermeneutic sense: it provides indicators, correlations and patterns that must be reappropriated, contextualised and discussed by human intelligence.

2. The need for human-machine hybridisation in digital humanities

Many initiatives in digital humanities advocate for a thoughtful hybridisation between computational processing and human interpretative skills. The aim is not to automate the act of reading, but to develop forms of augmented reading, where AI assists the researcher without replacing them. Collaborative annotation platforms, interactive visualisations and user-guided semantic explorations illustrate how a critical dialogue between humans and machines can be possible and productive. However, this presupposes that the interface is designed not as a substitute, but as an interpretative mediator, whose results remain subject to the ethical and intellectual scrutiny of the reader. Projects such as *Hermeneutica* (Rockwell and Sinclair) model this human-machine collaboration.

3. Epistemological, pedagogical and ethical implications

This coexistence between humans and machines raises several fundamental questions: How can we teach literary reading in the age of AI? How can we train students and researchers to use these tools critically, without falling into the illusion of algorithmic objectivity or outright rejection of technology?

Furthermore, on an epistemological level, this situation forces us to rethink the conditions of interpretation in the age of big data. Far from erasing subjectivity, this reconfiguration could reinforce the awareness that all reading is situated, partial and mediated. Ethical reflection is essential. AI must not become a means of standardising interpretations or flattening the diversity of critical voices. It must remain at the service of human thought and not the other way around.

Education must emphasise the limitations of AI while exploiting its exploratory potential (Hayles 112).

CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence is transforming the way we read, analyse and teach texts, including literary works. Its ability to process large amounts of data and calculate quickly makes it an unprecedentedly powerful tool in the humanities. However, this technical power reaches its limits when it comes to the core of the literary experience: subjectivity, ambiguity, emotion and unique voices.

Far from being a human reader, AI simulates interpretative operations without ever experiencing meaning. It classifies, correlates and segments, but does not feel or understand. Literature, for its part, resists this formalisation through its polyphonic richness, its semantic indeterminacy, its capacity to provoke doubt, emotional complexity and multiple interpretations. This observation does not call for the rejection of AI, but rather for critical coexistence. AI should be designed as an assistive tool, useful for exploring vast corpora, generating hypotheses, and opening up new avenues of interpretation; but its outputs must be interpreted, contextualised, and critically examined in a fundamentally human hermeneutic process. In short, it is not a question of delegating interpretation to the machine, but of reaffirming the irreplaceable role of the human reader in literary understanding. Technology can enrich the way we read, provided it never replaces it.

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