

Investigating Gaps in Practice Between Traditional and Digital Research in Literature

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Abstract:

Data collection concisely provides the foundation for nuanced analysis and scholarly inquiry. This paper primarily aims to bridge the gap between theory-based and method-based research in literature, as it attracts researchers' attention to the historical rejection of methods by conservative scholars. Secondly, it explores various methods for gathering data in literary studies; varying from traditional approaches like textual analysis, and literary criticism to contemporary methods involving digital humanities and AI. By examining data collected, researchers can uncover insights into narrative structures, thematic and cultural contexts. Surveys and comparative analyses offer opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives and intertextual dynamics. The integration of digital tools further enhances the ability to analyze large corpora and identify patterns across texts. This paper underscores the importance of employing a multidisciplinary approach to data collection, demonstrating how traditional and modern techniques can be combined to enrich the understanding of literature and its impact. The findings can guide novice researchers in selecting effective methods for their studies in this evolving field of research.

Keywords: Literature analysis; theory and method-based research; traditional methods; modern digital tools; AI powered tools.

1. Introduction:

At early stages of their research, doctorate and master students particularly find it quite confusing when dealing with theories and methods in literary studies. Methods remain indispensable for literary analysis and interpretation of literary texts in a rational, scholarly and systematic way using clearly defined concepts. However, most references on literary analysis focus on theoretical approaches and literary theory. This is the reason for which we consider any course on literary theory for master students as obscuring rather than illuminating issues of methodical research that are important for graduate students seeking to define clearly the analytical procedures guiding the writing of their dissertations. Although research in literature is traditionally interpretive and critical, systematic data collection (critical methods) ensures academic rigor, reproducibility and well-supported analysis. Further it enhances textual interpretation, and it supports contextualization. Whether using traditional (ex: close reading, archival research) or modern (ex: digital tools, linguistic analysis) methods, data serves as the foundation for convincing literary arguments. The purpose of this paper is to bridge the gap between theory-based and method-based research in literary studies, and to explore different data collection methods in the field of literature.

2. The scope of research in literature

The scope of research in literature is quite huge and complex, going around a big range of themes, approaches and methodologies that ensure a deeper understanding of literary texts within their historical, cultural and philosophical contexts. In this field of study, researchers explore literary genres, styles and narrative techniques, examining their impact on readers and societies. Further, researchers delve into critical theories as structuralism, post-colonialism and feminism, offering new insights on both classical and modern works. Additionally, research in literature connects the latter with other fields as history, sociology and psychology. Recently and with the rise of digital humanities, research in literature could extend to computational analysis and archiving. Eventually, the field remains dynamic and in constant evolution to reflect new social changes and academic interests.

3. Historical neglect of methodological approaches in favor of theoretical approaches

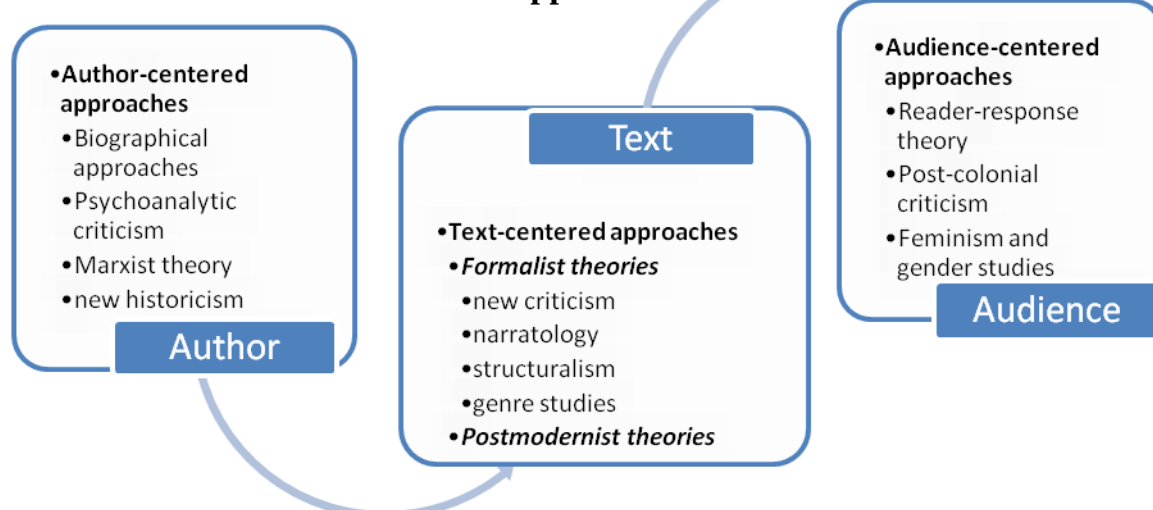
In literary studies, theoretical approaches and critical perspectives are more emphasized than research methods. Scholars prioritize frameworks like feminism or post-colonialism to interpret texts, bringing to the surface how literature shapes the cultural and the ideological discourses. Furthermore, compared to systematically structured research in empirical disciplines, literary research is more interpretive and relies on subjective analysis and application of theories rather than standardized

methods, which were subjected to skepticism and sparsely taught to students. Most debates among scholars emphasize the ways lenses alter textual meanings rather than how research is conducted, and they explain that the reading methods they practice were neither methodically regulated nor they could be explicitly and technically taught to students. Broadly speaking, Since the 1980s the field witnessed a considerable progress in developing new approaches to literary and cultural studies (see e.g. Schneider 2004; Olson/Nünning 2013b mentioned in Nünning et al., 2020, p. 4), but this has not been accompanied by a similar development, discussion, or reflection on the corresponding methods.

3.1. The author, the text and the audience

On the other hand, to explore the broad field of literary theory, research methods and the tools used for data collection; it is important to highlight the primary elements involved in literary communication: the author, the text and the audience. The author is the creator of the text embedded with ideas, emotions, and messages; embellished with imagination. The text works as an intermediate medium between the author and the audience that contributes in shaping the meaning according to its characteristics. Obviously the audience can engage with a text belonging to a different era causing a temporal factor that influences the literary communication, leading to potential shifts in meaning. Postmodern critics led by Derrida, Foucault and Barthes explored extensively the notion of temporal gap and the role of the audience in shaping meaning. Such inquiries illustrate the intricacies of literary analysis and the prerequisite of methodological clarity. Considering the communicative process, where should a researcher's analytical focus lie? Should it be the text? The author? Or the audience? Different literary theories prioritize either one or more of these core components.

Figure 1. Literary communication core components and their centered approaches



Source: Chaudhary, P. (2023). ‘Research Methodology in Literature and Language’

This (Figure 1.) provides a quick overview of the different literary analysis theories, showing how they focus either on the text, the author or the audience as summarized from (Chaudhary, 2023). It acknowledges the interconnectedness of literary studies as well. It is important to mention that many scholars suggest blending multiple approaches for a holistic analysis. For example, a close reading (New Criticism) combined with historical context (New Historicism) and reader interpretation (Reader-Response Theory) can end with a well-rounded analysis.

4. Understanding literary theory: theory vs. Method

Understanding and distinguishing theories and methods is a prerequisite in reading and interpreting literary works for academic and professional purposes, and students must familiarize themselves with them. This equally entails understanding the difference between the notions of theory and method. Generally, it is agreed that every form of scholarly insight and scientific observation is based on theory, with the necessity to reject the ‘theory-free’ approach that was alleged to preserve great works of art from the supposedly mind-forged manacles of theory in interpretation for decades before the 1970’s. Additionally, the need for theorization, categorization and concept formation is highly required in ‘the age of information overload’ as borrowed from Daniel Levitin highly recommended book *Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload* (2015); understanding theories, methods and concepts used in research in literature is crucial for students and researchers to make conscious, good and well-informed choices.

4.1. Defining the concepts: approach, theory, method

In the field of literary study and research, the concepts of approach, theory and method are foundational to critical inquiry and interpretation of literary works. We refer by the concept approach to the broad perspective or the lens through which a text of literature is examined for a specific research purpose like formalism criticism, biographical criticism and historicism, thus shaping the nature of research questions scholars ask. In short it guides **how** literature is analyzed using a theoretical framework. Concerning literary theory which is critical in a broad sense compared to empirical research in the other fields of language study, its function is to provide the conceptual framework that underlines analysis, offering systematic principles and ideas such as structuralism, existentialism, psychoanalysis and feminism (Bohman, 2013). It simply helps researchers find out **why** a literary phenomenon exists by guiding interpretations and meaning-making. Method is that practical technique for conducting the analysis (the **how in practice**); involving certain techniques and procedures used in text analysis such as close reading or comparative analysis. In search of coherence, depth and

academic rigor, researchers need to understand these elements as an interconnected structure.

Before moving to the research tools that a graduate student can use to collect data for a specific goal-oriented research, he needs to decide on the approach to use the corresponding lens as required by his topic. Then to end with an academically acceptable thesis, he should decide on the conceptual framework that will underline analysis of his theme. This means that he has to identify and make clear to examiners and readers of his work the principles and ideas he intends to follow systematically in the interpretation of his work for a specific research purpose; he can choose a theory or a mix of theories. For more academic rigor, the researcher should show his readers how he would practically analyze his literary work; this involves techniques and procedures used in textual analysis. Here again he can choose a specific method as close reading or a mix of methods. Finally, he will be able to decide on the further tools suitable to his research to help him gather data for analysis. The following table (Figure 2.) summarizes the existing approaches, theories and methods:

Table 1 : Categorization of approaches, theories and methods in literary studies.

Categories	Short definition	Types
Approaches	It refers to the broad perspective or lens through which a literary work is examined.	Formalism criticism / Historical criticism Psychological criticism / Biographical criticism
Theories	It provides the conceptual (theoretical) framework that underpins analysis offering systematic principles and ideas.	Formalism and new criticism (<i>Brooks and Ransom</i>) Structuralism and semiotics (<i>de Saussure and Barthes</i>) Post structuralism and deconstruction (<i>Derrida and Foucault</i>) Psychoanalytic criticism (<i>Freud, Jung and Lacan</i>) Marxist literary theory (<i>Marx, Lukács and Eagleton</i>) Feminist and gender theory (<i>Woolf, de Beauvoir</i>) Postcolonial theory (<i>Edward Said and Bhabha</i>) Reader-Response theory

		<i>(Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser)</i> Ecocriticism <i>(Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell)</i> Queer theory <i>(Sedgwick and Butler)</i>
Methods	It involves techniques and procedures used in textual analysis	Close reading (Cleanth Brooks)
		Hermeneutics (Paul Ricoeur)
		Comparative method (René Wellek and Claudio Guillén)
		Historiographic method (Hayden White)
		Cultural textual method (Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall)
		Intertextual analysis (Gerard Genette)
		Narratological methods (Génette and Mieke Bal)

Source: Nünning, A., and Nünning, V. (2020) Introducing Methods in Literary Studies. (generated with AI assistance)

4.2. Role of methods in literary studies

As said before, debates in the twentieth century regarding literary analysis rejected the theory-free or no-theory practice which was believed to kill the appreciation of the art of writing literature. A review of the literature (Eagleton 1983, Barry 1995, Tyson 2006, Nünning 2020, Klarer 2021) shows an emphasis on literary theory for literary criticism; however, references on methods are not directly found; they have often been overlooked or conflated with theories despite their significant importance in academia. Compared to literary theory, (Nünning and Nünning 2020, p. 8-10) justifies this historical reject as linked to skepticism toward methodical rigor in the humanities in broad. He equally insists on the importance of methods in providing a systematic, rational, and professional analysis of literature. Methods are systematic goal-oriented procedures used for an in-depth analysis of a literary text. Their role is to guide scholars through organized actions toward specific aims while avoiding errors or inconsistencies in data collection, thus ensuring reliability and reproducibility of the results. The following table (Figure 3.) shows certain methods widely used in literary studies, highlighted with examples:

Table 2 : Elaborated methods in literary study

Method	Short description	Example
Close reading	A focused detailed analysis of a text's language, structure and meaning without reference to external contexts. (Cleanth Brooks)	Analysis of imagery and symbols in T.S. Eliot's <i>The Waste Land</i> .
Hermeneutics	The study of the interpretation of literary texts, emphasizing understanding meaning within context. (Paul Ricoeur)	-Analyzing existential motifs in Yoko Ogawa's <i>The Memory Police</i> . -Interpreting religious themes in James Joyce's <i>Dubliners</i> .
Comparative method	Exploring similarities and differences between texts, genres, or cultures across time and space. (René Wellek and Claudio Guillén)	Comparing colonial themes in Chinua Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> and Josef Conrad's <i>Heart of Darkness</i> .
Historiographic method	Situates and examines literary texts within their historical and cultural contexts. (Hayden White)	Exploring Apartheid politics in <i>July's People</i> by Nadine Gordimer.
Cultural textual method	Analyzing texts as cultural artifacts that reflect societal values, ideologies, and historical conditions. (Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall)	-Studying consumer culture in F. Scott Fitzgerald's <i>The Great Gatsby</i> . -Investigation racial identity in Toni Morrison's <i>Beloved</i> .
Intertextual analysis	It aims to explore relationships and references between texts. (Gérard Genette)	Analyzing Shakespeare's influence on Alfred Tennyson's poetry.
Narratological methods	Focuses on narrative structures, perspectives, and elements like time and space to show their impact on the reader's view. (Génette and Mieke Bal)	Examining focalization (shift in point of view) in Virginia Woolf's <i>To the Lighthouse</i> .

Source: Nünning, A., and Nünning, V. (2020) *Introducing Methods in Literary Studies*.

Once the practical procedure to be followed in a research is clear in the researcher's mind, he needs to think about the most suitable methods and tools he can use to gather data related to his research topic that will help him analyze it, following the method chosen in the light of the lens of a determined theory, and in respect of the perspectives of a certain approach.

5. Methods and tools of data collection in literary studies

Methods and tools of data collection are important as they enhance a systematic analysis of the literary text and ensure rigor required in academic circles. Their significance lies in their ability to enhance accuracy. There are traditional methods in research in literature as close reading and comparative analysis while others are more technical tools. For example, corpus linguistic software allows researchers to analyze semantic patterns or word frequency in a text. Bibliographic tools as endnote assist in citing references efficiently. Furthermore data about readers' response to a literary work and its interpretation can be gathered with qualitative methods such as surveys and interviews. Finally, stylistic analysis and deep reading can be assisted by AI tools.

5.1. Traditional methods

In research in literature, data collection chiefly involves gathering and analyzing textual materials, historical contexts and critical interpretations. The traditional methods include:

5.1.1. Textual analysis

This is an important method in literary studies; it approaches literary texts for the purpose of analysis, aiming to realize how sense is made of life and life experiences which are exposed in the text, and communicated through the use of symbols and other language devices. It involves one of the three practical methods:

- **Close reading:** as seen above, it is a detailed and careful interpretation of texts to examine language, themes and structure without recurring to the context. Practically, researchers break down the language, imagery, and rhetorical devices used by the author to convey the meaning.
- **Comparative analysis:** this type of analysis requires studying different texts to categorize similarities, differences, and intertextual influences.
- **Stylistic analysis:** this practical method allows researchers to analyze authors's styles to sort the imbedded meaning or themes of given texts that run deeper than just basic plots, focusing on stylistic elements going from the structure,

plot and character development to the choice of words, symbolism and rhythm, etc.

5.1.1.1. Archival research

This is mainly used by more specialized scholars in literary study. In addition to referring to printed books and journals in search for knowledge specific to the field of literature as gathered in classics, critical essays, scholarly articles; researchers use also manuscripts and letters, and historical documents that provide context to literary works. Further they can make a bibliographic research by referring to annotated bibliographies, literary indexes and databases such as JSTOR and google scholar.

5.1.1.2. Literary criticism

After the rapid development the field witnessed in the 1970's, scholars rejected gradually the no-theory framework to analyzing literary works and applied seriously literary theories using perspectives such as Feminism or Psychoanalysis to interpret texts. Literary critics can also directly interview authors to gather insights about their works. Furthermore, historical and biographical approaches are followed to understand the author's perspective and the literary meaning in his text. However content analysis remains cornerstone in research in literature; researchers chose between thematic (themes, motifs and symbols) and discourse analysis, where language and ideologies are carefully examined to understand how they shape literary narratives. The study of interpretation can be heuristic (initial exploratory interpretation) or hermeneutic for an in-depth interpretive analysis of the text aiming to understand layers of meaning.

5.1.2. Comparative analysis

By comparing literary texts and cultures, researchers contribute in understanding cultures from the inside. It can be applied on works written in different languages, belonging to different nations or cultures in which that language is spoken. Techniques used incorporate perspectives from different domains such as digital humanities, cultural studies, linguistics, and philosophy to enrich textual analysis. Intertextuality can bring further insights to textual analysis.

5.1.3. Contextual methods

This requires examining a work by considering the external surrounding conditions determined by historical, cultural or social parameters to depict their impact on understanding the meaning. Basic methods centered on the context are historiography and cultural analysis.

We understand that the importance of methods lays in guiding researchers and students through analysis. It provides structured means to study texts too. They serve as maps (Nünning and Nünning, 2020, p. 17) offering directions for literary interpretation. Examples of application of the different methods as shown in (Figure 3.) demonstrate how different methods can shape textual analysis. Furthermore, they can make of academic writing about literature more systematic and structured, thus teachers can provide students with more practical methodological guidelines when undertaking research in literature.

While the importance of methods in literary study is defended, traditional methods present certain challenges to researchers. Basically, close reading relies on personal interpretation, the reason for which we encounter inconsistent conclusions among scholars. Besides this, manual comparison and textual analysis entail extensive reading which is usually time –consuming.

5.1.4. Reader-centered methods

Text-centered and author-centered theories (1920s-1950s) such as Formalism, New Criticism, and structuralism emphasized the text's intrinsic meaning, rejecting the role of the reader. Later during the 1960s and 1980s, scholars as Roland Barthes and Wolfgang Iser examined how readers' personal, cultural, historical, and ideological positions could impact their interpretations of a literary text. Recent Feminists, Postcolonial, and Psychoanalytic critics incorporated reader-centered perspectives to explore identity, race, gender, and power dynamics in literary interpretation. Tools used to collect insightful data from readers include:

- Book clubs, social media, public forums.
- Interviews and surveys to gather more quantitative and qualitative feedback.

Undoubtedly reader-centered theories succeeded to extend research horizons in literature; however, they remain challenging for researchers as they present several limitations that the latter have to take into account to ensure academic rigor and reliability of their results. Subjectivity is a primary challenge; readers' interpretations vary widely. This method overemphasizes the reader at the expense of the author and the context, and textual structure of the work. Further, the oversimplification followed in this type of research reduces literature to emotional response and neglects deeper philosophical, political, and linguistic dimensions. This shows the importance of integrating other critical methods with reader-centered methods to achieve a more balanced literary analysis. Academically speaking, when the meaning is depending on the reader, distinguishing plausible from implausible readings become challenging for examiners of the research paper. Moreover, a reader's interpretation is influenced by

his background, experience, and biases, which can result in specific readings complicating the generalization of the research results.

5.2. Quantitative methods in literary research

Besides interpretive literary analysis of a text, quantitative research can be used to add further insights and strengthen some advanced arguments. The latter requires the use of computational tools to analyze large texts for linguistic patterns identification, stylistic changes, and following word frequencies. For example, Corpus linguistics enables the study of lexical variations and semantic trends across time and different genres compared. Moreover, statistical techniques such as stylometry, topic modeling and sentiment analysis can help disclosing authorial styles, tracking the evolution of themes and revealing hidden ones, analyzing narrative structures by mapping relationships between characters, settings, or even ideas within the text. At this stage, It is important to explain our stand point regarding the use of ‘tools’ to refer to ICT in higher education; it is not reducible as (Arntzen et al., 2008) believe in their article. The authors emphasize the increasing impact of digital technologies in education and research and life in general; therefore, the latter do not only serve as means to assist educators and researchers, but they contribute in the changing conceptions of learning and research, considering their complexity (computer hardware, software, competencies and skills required, knowledge in computing, moral and ethical awareness). We rather use ‘tools’ in reference to the technical function of digital technologies used in research compared to traditional methods.

On the other hand, while these tools offer objective insights and add more rigour to the research, they present certain limitations. Actually, reducing literature to numbers can neglect meaning brought by symbolism and cultural nuances as exposed in the literary text; word frequency alone cannot fully capture a text’s literary and historical significance. Besides this, using quantitative tools requires expertise in computational tools, statistics, and coding (e.g., Python). Thus, in literary analysis can never replace traditional interpretation of a literary text, but it can complement it.

6. Use of technology in data collection for literary research

Literary research is by no means kept away from technological advancements; data collection and analysis is being transformed at an unprecedented scale by enabling text mining, visualization, and accessing digital archives; enhancing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Collections like Google Books and Project Gutenberg provide researchers with an access to digitized texts; besides academic databases such as

JSTOR and ProQuest house research materials, essays, and literary criticism, facilitating comparative studies.

It is obvious that technology and digital humanities facilitate research in literature; however, they remain challenging. Digitized texts may contain errors, and algorithms struggle with nuanced meaning. In addition, scholars need technical expertise to overcome any difficulties they may face, and copyright issues limit access to contemporary works. Even though, integrating technology in research in literature enhances analysis. Digital tools allow for deeper linguistic analysis, thematic mapping, and historical context exploration without replacing traditional tools.

7. Role of AI in enhancing literary research

The role AI plays nowadays in our life is undeniable. Its role in literary studies is important too; it automates literature reviews, extracts metadata (publication dates, genre classification from digital records), and applies natural language processing (NLP) to analyse literary texts. AI tools are powered to carry out sentiment analysis, recognize named entities, and map intertextual influences.

(Vanathi, 2023) explores several ways AI can assist the process of collecting, organizing, and analyzing data. He highlights how NLP techniques can break down texts into different language patterns for the purpose of analysis (p. 203-207). Further, tone analysis is possible with machine learning models that can detect sentiments, moods, and changing tones in texts showing insights into thematic or stylistic shifts. AI powered Optical Character Recognition (OCR) can convert texts digitized as images into readable text, thus enabling advanced computational analysis. Moreover, mapping relationships between characters, authors, or historical figures is possible with AI by analyzing mentions and co-occurrences within texts. Intertextuality and citation creation is also possible with automated tools. AI-driven web scraping tools facilitate gathering data from several online blogs, digital archives, and repositories in up-dated comprehensive collections. An excellent capacity of AI that can be very helpful in literary research is allowing the researcher to train machine learning models to recognize specific linguistic or stylistic features automatically. Another feature relies in its ability to generate visual representations of data like timeline charts or thematic maps that can reveal trends and incongruities that might be possibly missed by traditional manual analysis of a text.

By integrating AI-driven techniques into teaching and research in literature, one can save time, come across patterns and trends that might not be apparent from an immediate traditional method, and explore recent questions in literary studies. The researcher can simply adapt the suitable technique to fit the needs of his research. Whether conducting thematic study, directing a comparative analysis, or investigating

social networks and relationships with literature; AI-driven tools can assist greatly a researcher in his work. However, like technology, AI tools may miss understanding deeper literary meanings or use incomplete data. Ethical concerns such as data bias and copyright restrictions must be carefully considered. AI has to be used alongside traditional methods to frame a balanced, interpretive approach to literary research.

8. Conclusion

The review of literature revealed that the advancement of data collection in literary studies, going from using traditional methods to digital tools, has greatly broadened the range of texts analysis techniques available to researchers. In this paper, we tried so far to bridge the gap between theory-based and methodological approaches to research in literature. While the first's central role in interpretation is undeniable, the second type of tools can offer concrete, data-driven insights that definitely strengthen literary analysis. The combination of both types of methods allows researchers to identify literary and stylistic models in a literary text, follow linguistic alternations, and explore intertextual relationships on a scale formerly inaccessible. Quantitative tools, digital archives, and computational analysis truly expanded textual analysis, offering empirical support for literary arguments to complement theoretical perspectives with quantified evidence.

Equal importance is given to the integration of technology in research in literary studies and data collection. It is revealed that a balance between traditional and contemporary methodologies is necessary for a thorough approach to literary research. Digital techniques improve research by revealing hidden structures and broader trends; however, close reading and critical interpretation are still central for understanding context, symbolism, and author intentions. Thus, a more inclusive and nuanced comprehension of literature is possible by combining the two methods, ensuring that computational analysis enhances rather than oversimplifies textual interpretation.

Looking forward, considerable advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning will continue to improve data collection and analysis in studies in literature. While growing digital archives provides wider and wider access to historical and global literature, improved (NLP) will improve sentiment analysis, genre categorization, and style attribution. As new technologies advance, researchers must embrace their potential to enhance literary analysis while remaining aware of their technical limitations. In a nutshell, the future of research in literature lies in the combination of tradition and innovation, where methodological rigor ensured by technology enhances interpretive depth.

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