

***A critical Review of the Historical Method in literature:  
From contextual thinking to systematic application***

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**Abstract:**

For an extended period, Arab literary criticism relied on the historical approach, adopting a classical perspective that emphasized the external context of a text, treating it as a historical document tied to its author. This method often neglected the internal structure and linguistic aspects of texts. Even with the rise of modern critical theories such as structuralism, New Criticism, and postmodernism, Arab criticism continued to separate context from text. This study aims to redefine the historical approach in literary criticism through a more composite lens. It seeks to establish analytical tools that merge context and structure, emphasizing the interplay between linguistic composition and historical methodology in literature. The objective is to revive the significance of the historical approach by incorporating diverse critical methods, offering a unified framework for more nuanced and effective analyses of creative texts.

**Keywords:** Context; Historic; Method; Review; System.

**الملخص:**

تناول النقد الأدبي العربي لفترة طويلة المنهج التاريخي وفق رؤية كلاسيكية عملت على توظيف المصطلح التاريخي في الدراسات النقدية الأدبية من خلال وجهة نظر واحدة تشير إلى السياق الذي نشأ فيه النص، متعاملاً معه بوصفه وثيقة تاريخية مرتبطة بمؤلفها. وقد

أهمل هذا المنهج غالباً البنية الداخلية والجوانب اللغوية للنصوص. وحتى مع ظهور النظريات النقدية الحديثة مثل البنيوية، والنقد الجديد، وما بعد الحداثة، استمر النقد العربي في الفصل بين النص وسياقه.

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إعادة تعريف المنهج التاريخي في النقد الأدبي من خلال عدسة أكثر تركيبية تسعى إلى وضع أدوات تحليلية تدمج بين السياق والبنية، مسلطة الضوء على التفاعل بين التكوين اللغوي والمنهجية التاريخية في الأدب. الهدف هو إعادة إحياء أهمية المنهج التاريخي عبر دمج مناهج نقدية متنوعة، مما يوفر إطاراً موحداً لتحليلات أكثر دقة وفاعلية للنصوص الإبداعية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التاريخ؛ السياق؛ النسق؛ المنهج؛ مراجعة.

### Introduction:

The historical method stands as one of the foundational methodologies in literary criticism, employed to interpret and analyze the evolution of social groups and their creative expressions over time. In its early applications, this method often adopted a teleological lens. One of its most prominent advocates was the French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874), who famously asserted, “The history of France begins with the French language” (Michelet, 1933, p. 01). Through his works, Michelet sought to immerse readers in the national past, offering a vivid reawakening of France’s historical identity. His narrative style has been described by critics as autobiographical, imbued with reflections of his own lived experiences, particularly those of his childhood and youth.

The historical method has had a profound impact on the development of other critical methodologies, particularly as it evolved within Western intellectual traditions. Romanticism, for instance, intricately intertwined historical elements, underscoring humanity’s awareness of time and its evolving understanding of history. Romantic critics regarded literature as a dual expression of both the individual and society,

aspiring to harness it as a transformative tool capable of challenging and reshaping reality. This method emphasized literature's capacity to reflect societal changes and engage with external social forces, thereby positioning it as a mirror of the shifting cultural and historical landscape.

This study aims to scientifically redefine the historical approach in literature by moving it away from conventional perceptions in Arab literary criticism. It seeks to highlight the dynamic interaction between the historical method and auxiliary methodologies—particularly structuralism—and to establish a methodological framework that integrates these perspectives in the analysis, interpretation, and explanation of literary texts.

This study proposes a conceptual shift that redefines the historical method in literature, moving it beyond traditional contextual frameworks toward a structural-historical perspective. Rather than viewing history merely as a chronological or sociopolitical background that "influences" literature, this paper argues for a systemic method in which history is embedded within the very structure of the literary text. From this vantage point, the historical method is no longer reduced to external contextual analysis, but becomes a dynamic, structural force that interacts with language, culture, space, and identity.

The significance of this study lies in its effort to reconstruct the historical approach in literature within the Arab critical context, away from traditional perceptions that often reduce it to a limited and impressionistic temporal or narrative dimension. This study seeks to highlight the productive interactive relationship between the historical approach and auxiliary methodologies—particularly structuralism—as a necessary mechanism for understanding texts in light of both their internal structure and their broader cultural and social history.

Moreover, this paper offers a serious attempt to broaden the horizons of the historical method by proposing an integrated methodological framework that could help move

beyond stereotypical reflective readings toward more dynamic and inclusive approaches. In doing so, the study contributes, even modestly, to shaping new paths within contemporary critical methodologies and aims to modernize literary analysis tools in the Arab academic environment by activating methodological awareness and intersecting epistemological perspectives.

Based on the above, the objectives of this study are as follows:

- Examining how the concepts of the historical method in literature are received and interpreted within critical discourse.
- Engaging with and analyzing the contributions of the key pioneers who have shaped the development of this method.
- Investigating the influence of structuralism on the historical method in literature, while exploring the reciprocal relationship between the two methodologies in their practical application.
- Exploring the role of auxiliary methodologies, which serve as vital components in enhancing and expanding the scope of the historical approach in literature.
- Proposing a comprehensive methodological framework for the historical analysis of creative works, aligning with the evolving paradigms of literary criticism.

Hence, we can examine this productive interaction through the following problem statement:

What is the extent of understanding and interpreting the historical approach in literature? How can structuralism provide a methodological conception (*une conception méthodologique*) within the scope of this approach? And what are the actual procedural tools it relies on in the study?

As for the research methodology, this study adopts a historical perspective to first outline the classical conception of the historical method, and subsequently redefines it within

a framework that integrates foundational auxiliary methodologies.

### **1-The Reception of Historical Method Concepts: Vision and Transformations:**

The classical perspective emphasized that the historical method is one of the most prominent "contextual" methods. It relied on specific features discussed in Arab critical texts, primarily focusing on the mechanical connection between the literary text and its contextual environment, prioritizing the creator and the creative milieu over the creative text itself. This reductionist view stripped the historical method of its analytical depth in examining literary texts through a structural-historical lens, exploring the multifaceted relationships between the text and its socially, historically, economically, intellectually, and psychologically diverse surroundings.

This contrasts sharply with a methodological study that incorporates a historical vision based on aesthetic sensibility, style, and the systematic construction of grammatical observations as highlighted by Gustave Lanson (1857–1934). Lanson advocated for integrating stylistic and linguistic structures (grammatical and rhetorical) within the historical-critical trajectory of literary texts. He argued against exercising unchecked freedom in critical inquiry, where subjective whims dominate, asserting that true freedom lies in the discipline of precise methodologies. As he stated, "We will find our real and complete freedom in the discipline of suitable and meticulous methods" (Lanson, 1925, p. 30). Unregulated freedom, he believed, leads only to imitation or rudimentary scientific activity.

This indicates that methodological evolution thrives within the genuine academic research framework, emphasizing specialized and methodically grounded investigations. The core principles of the historical method in literature can be summarized as follows:

- Differentiating between subjective elements and objective knowledge.

- Focusing on extensive literary corpora with a particular emphasis on texts representative of the studied historical period.
- Balancing attention between the creator and the creative environment while considering the specificity and historical manifestations of the text.
- Treating studied texts as manuscripts requiring documentation.
- Utilizing many texts as reference documents when needed.
- Examining literary phenomena as products defined by time and place.

Thus, our understanding of historical criticism in literature has evolved to view its primary aim as focusing on the structural connection between the internal and external aspects of a text. The text itself serves as the central leader of the critical process, emphasizing the exploration of its meanings within multiple contexts. This approach seeks to uncover and interpret values derived from the interplay between external and internal realities. Additionally, it involves tracking all external and internal elements to establish an active synthesis between them and deriving the necessary interpretations.

This is precisely what some recent studies have called for, especially those that utilize structural tools in textual analysis. For example, the work of Wouter Smets and Geerte Savenije emphasized these dimensions in the context of history education, stating: “Therefore, structural differentiation is needed to discern which elements could be seen as worthwhile teaching depending on the particular aims and context” (Wouter Smets & Geerte Savenije, 2025, p. 05)

In other words, choosing terminology from a structural perspective is essential to accurately define its components, allowing each concept to attain the scientific precision necessary for effective functioning within its critical framework.

Consequently, this paper has examined the evolution of the historical method from a mere focus on facts to the promotion of critical thinking, drawing on the "New History" movement and its impact on reevaluating the role of structural historical knowledge in education. Similarly, "by analyzing the structure of language, linguists gain insights into how language develops and interacts within cultural and social contexts" (Juanda, 2024, p. 231)

This prompts us, on our part, to distinguish between the writing of history through the collection of raw material upon which criticism operates, on the one hand, and historical literary criticism, which relies on specific scientific methodologies, on the other. Here, we can classify the pioneers of the early historical method from those who wrote history, as they were primarily focused on writing history from their intellectual, cultural, and ideological perspectives. This is evident in the work of Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869), who is considered one of the critics who engaged in literary history writing. He highlighted many writers, studying literature from the perspective of the birth of their works in distinct and diverse circumstances. He operated within the classical view of the historical method, writing about the 16th and 17th centuries, contributing to the historical development of literary criticism during that period. He called for a scientific study of writers that revealed their connection to their eras, homelands, the social and cultural environments in which they lived, their personal characteristics, artistic temperaments, and intellectual orientations—psychologically, socially, economically, and even linguistically. Despite all these scholarly efforts to study literature and the writer, they were not subjected to the strict methodological concepts that contemporary structural criticism attempts to apply, aiming to actualize the dimensions of the objective perspective produced by structural criticism as a methodological concept, not as an intellectual movement or philosophical doctrine.

On the other hand, Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893) is considered one of the most influential thinkers in France, and

he worked within a significant overlap between history writing and historical criticism. As a philosopher, historian, and critic, he studied literary texts in light of his famous triad (race, environment, and period) — *la race, le milieu, et le moment*.

Meanwhile, Gustave Lanson (1857-1943) is considered one of the most prominent academic thinkers who sparked considerable debate. He attempted to offer a new perspective on the literary work for scientific and educational reasons, emphasizing the uniqueness of literary critical study from a historical and social standpoint. He regarded reading as the first step in the historical method. Thus, critical reading, as Lanson defines it, «is seen as an issue of intuition, a profound subjective activity, which runs parallel to the creative act» (Laurel, 1999, p. 274)

## 2-Between History Writing and Historical Criticism:

Many contemporary researchers have focused on blending the concepts of history writing and historical criticism. History writing, before the emergence of structuralism methods, was primarily concerned with the historical transformations that literature and the writer undergo, documenting all the stages through which literary and creative criticism passed from a particular, multifaceted, and diverse perspective. With the advent of structuralism concepts and modern linguistics, and thanks to developments in various scientific fields, such as sociological and psychological criticism, formative structuralism, terminology, intertextuality, textuality, reception theory, and others, the scientific view of historical criticism shifted, leading to a distinction between history writing and historical criticism.

Thus, historical criticism, when approached from modern perspectives, emerges as a form of inquiry grounded in structural foundations. It engages in an in-depth exploration of textual structures and contexts, analyzing both their internal compositions and their surrounding contexts.

Accordingly, the historical method should no longer be seen as relying solely on contextual interpretation, but rather

as integrating a structural and systemic vision—even if this conceptual shift is not always explicitly acknowledged in traditional critical sources. In this regard, we argue that context itself can be regarded as a system (*un système*), since its external components form structured networks that interact with the text. This idea is notably reinforced by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who

brought to the fore a reading of the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson (as well as the Russian formalists), which he applied to cultural contexts through his voluminous reading of myth and kinship from around the world. (Manghani, 2022, p. 117)

Nevertheless, studies based on the Saussurian perspective have significantly impacted the outlook particularly in scientific research that addresses linguistic structure (*le langage*) and its interactions with other sciences. This leads to the necessary scientific communication between anthropologists, psychologists, archaeologists, neuroscientists, and geneticists, for example, in their studies of linguistic structure (*le langage*) and the exploration of its origins and functions. Jonathan Culler pointed this out when he stated that Saussure, “together with his two great contemporaries, Emile Durkheim in sociology and Sigmund Freud in psychology, he helped to set the study of human behavior on a new footing” (Culler, 1976, p. 7)

When we question past events, occurrences that are no longer visible or observable, dead languages, abandoned villages and cities, and even old ideas—whether their disappearance or their evolution—research following these methodologies allows us to gradually access those historical periods and intertwined relationships. Through their methodological tools and procedural approaches, we can study dead languages and delve deeper into ancient phenomena indirectly. Therefore, critical comparison is necessary between the phenomena we can observe today, on the one hand, and those we can no longer observe, on the other. This is the goal of the historical method. Critically, we

benefit from the tools and principles of this method and achieve its critical implications in the literary field.

The novel, for example, may be seen as a representation of a social class with its historical levels, referring here to the historical structure of that class. This diverse society—politically, economically, intellectually, ideologically, psychologically, socially, and more—operates through its historical structure to establish and transform political and economic systems. The nature of the state, the characteristics of the population, families, tribes, and social classes, the dominance of the state, religion, politics, or the events of backwardness and immersion in the past—all these aspects are examined through observation, comparison of actual phenomena, studying documents and events, and extrapolating social, geographical, human, religious, and psychological transformations, among other methodological procedures.

### **3-Historical Criticism in Literature and Supporting Methodologies:**

It can be argued that the historical method is a comprehensive method that incorporates supporting methodologies and variety of procedural tools, whether applied in purely historical fields or within the domain of literary historical criticism, which examines both literary and critical texts. Accordingly, several supporting methodologies can be identified, including the following:

#### **Anthropology (L'anthropologie):**

The anthropological structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss relied on linguistic structure (*le langage*), where his studies revealed the importance of the comparative historical dimension of "primitive" societies, focusing on the study of mental structures, which are primarily connected to myths. He particularly focused on the system of paternity, which he considers a linguistic structure (*langage*).

#### **Codicology (La codicologie):**

It is the study of manuscripts related to documents as material objects, meaning everything related to the document

such as its age, type of paper, type of writing, binding method, distinctive signs, illustrations, and lines. In literature, the way of writing and its multiple relationships with the historical, cultural, cognitive, and social context can be studied, along with textual variations and the multiple signs used, such as historical markers written in a specific style, for example, symbols, phrases, or shapes employed by certain literary texts to refer to a particular historical period.

### **Archaeology (L'archéologie):**

Archeology studies human traces through material remnants and remains. In Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, we find that it “treats discourse as an archaeological artifact” (Foucault, 1969, p. 182) focusing on discourse itself. It does not treat discourse as a document, but its goal is to analyze the differences in models of discourse. Therefore, the archaeology of knowledge aims to “define the types and discursive applications that emerge through individual works” (Foucault, 1969, p. 183).

### **Semiology (La sémiologie):**

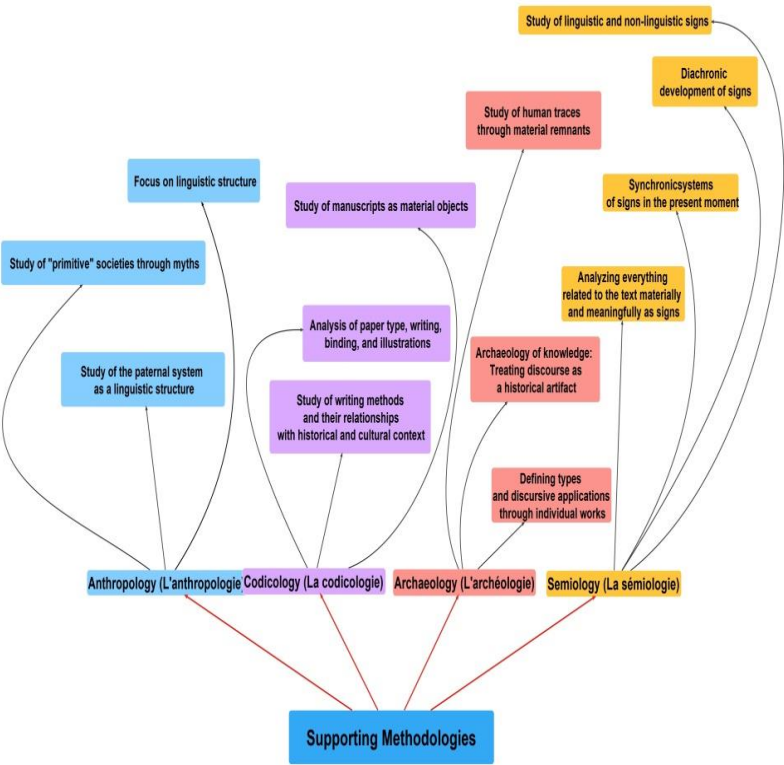
It is one of the most important fundamental methods in historical methodology, as it is relied upon in comparative grammar, linguistic signs, writing styles, and their types. It is also considered the general method for all methodologies, as it is the study of linguistic and non-linguistic signs and their diachronic development and synchronic systems. Everything related to the text, both materially and meaningfully, whether directly or indirectly, in organized, intertwined, random, intentional, or unintentional forms, is considered a sign.

While Ferdinand de Saussure expanded the concept of semiology as the science of signs, we extend it with Georges Mounin's concept of linguistic structure (*le langage*) and consider that all human sciences fall under this general concept, which can penetrate all fields. This concept is linked not only to language (*la langue*) but also to everything around us, including objects, ideas, symbols, meanings, and signification.

From this perspective, all phenomena, whether linguistic or non-linguistic, can be studied as part of a broader system of signs, revealing the complex relationships between culture, thought, and communication. The structural understanding of these signs as a linguistic structure (*langage*) opens new horizons for exploring how knowledge and human experience are represented and communicated across various disciplines. Thus, the concept of structure becomes a unified framework that eliminates the gap between linguistic analysis and other forms of social and cultural research.

**Figure 1: Supporting approaches in historical Methodology.**

**Note.** Author's own elaboration (2025)



**4-The Methodological Framework of Historical Criticism in Literature:**

Through historical analysis of a text, it is possible to uncover implicit meanings that do not clearly or automatically emerge, whether the text is considered within or apart from the circumstances of its production.

Accordingly, we can attempt to define a general, practical, and applied framework for historical criticism in literature:

**Figure 2: A diagram outlining the methodical historical analysis of literary creativity. Note.** Author's own elaboration (2025)



### Historical Contexts of the Text:

Historical contexts of the text include a summary of the author's biography and the reciprocal influences between the author, the environment, characters, and creations. Additionally, the document involves defining and identifying the structure of the text, which encompasses the nature of the text, its cover, image, title, and pages. This can include a text

published in a newspaper in serial form, a text published online, a manuscript, or a published literary genre.

Additionally, the text is placed within its historical context, where at this level, signs indicating the time period in which the text emerged are linked, such as determining the time of its writing and analyzing the prevailing intellectual and literary movements of that time (such as classicism, romanticism, realism, and others...).

### **Anthropology of Place (Geography of the Creative Text):**

The study of spatial settings focuses on the historical transformations of place, the influence of place on characters, and its impact on events and occurrences. These settings can be categorized into enclosed spaces, such as a house, school, mosque, or locations where events take place in confined environments like a ship, airplane, isolated village, or room; and open spaces, which involve multiple locations for events or a variety of places corresponding to different time periods.

### **Social Structure:**

The study of social structure in literary texts focuses on the intricate web of relationships, roles, and hierarchies that define societal dynamics within the narrative. It examines the representation of social classes, their interactions, and the conflicts or harmony arising from these dynamics. Characters' behaviors and identities are often shaped by societal expectations, reflecting themes of privilege, oppression, or resistance. Social roles, including those related to gender, family, and profession, are analyzed to uncover power dynamics and their impact on plot development. The social structure also influences events, often serving as a catalyst for conflict or transformation. Literary techniques like dialogue, setting, and symbolism reveal the nuances of societal norms and hierarchies. This analysis ties the narrative to its historical context, highlighting the ways literature mirrors or critiques the social realities of its time. As Lucien Goldmann states, "There are no separate social facts and other human facts that would be historical" (Goldmann, 1977, p. 17), underscoring the

interconnectedness of social and historical dimensions in literary criticism.

### **Study of Cultural and Historical Changes**

Study of Cultural and Historical Changes focuses on analyzing how shifts in cultural norms, values, and historical events influence the themes, characters, and settings of literary texts. This involves examining how the text reflects or critiques the social, political, and ideological movements of its time, such as revolutions, wars, or cultural renaissances. The portrayal of traditions, rituals, and collective beliefs offers insights into the societal mindset and its evolution. By exploring the impact of historical changes on characters' identities and conflicts, this study reveals the interplay between personal narratives and broader societal transformations. Literary techniques, such as symbolism and allegory, often encode these shifts, allowing for a nuanced interpretation. Ultimately, this analysis bridges the gap between the literary work and its temporal and cultural context, enriching the understanding of its significance within a historical framework.

### **Comparative Anthropology:**

Comparative Anthropology examines the similarities and differences between cultures, traditions, and societal structures as represented in literary texts. This approach involves analyzing how the text portrays cross-cultural interactions, conflicts, or exchanges, shedding light on cultural diversity or universality. By comparing characters, settings, and values across different cultural contexts, it reveals how distinct societies address common human experiences, such as love, conflict, or survival. This study often highlights the influence of one culture on another, emphasizing themes of colonization, globalization, or cultural hybridization. Literary techniques, such as symbolism or metaphor, may encode cultural distinctions or points of convergence. Ultimately, comparative anthropology in literature enriches the understanding of how texts bridge

cultural divides and contribute to the global discourse on human identity and connection.

### **The Study of Linguistic Structure**

The study of linguistic structure in the historical method relies on:

- Preparing methodological lists of grammatical observations by recording everything related to the linguistic space as a roadmap to organize various grammatical topics logically. These lists help enhance understanding, especially when it comes to grasping the finer details of a text across different and distant time periods. Grammatical analysis, thus, plays a crucial role in shedding light on an active reading of character transformations and dialogue in literature.
- Utilizing diagrams, if necessary, to visually and symbolically clarify grammatical sentences.
- Comparing grammatical rules and including errors and new language updates while considering cultural contexts.
- Differences in language, dialects, and speech patterns can reveal significant insights into the motivations of these characters in our study of the psychological structure.

### **Stylistic Structure:**

Stylistics emerged as a term grounded in the psychological framework within the structuralism method, where the founder, Charles Bally, emphasized studying it from this perspective. He highlighted the importance of examining linguistic structure as an expression of emotions and as a tool for action, i.e., the impact of the psychological level on linguistic action, and the effect of linguistic structure on the psychological level. Here lies the practice of the synchronic relationship between the phrase and the psychological subject. As Bally himself stated, “The exposition of these principles also aims to place within its psychological framework the order of research to which I have given the name of stylistics” (Bally, 1926, p. 12) The

stylistic structure provides a precise lens for understanding the creative meanings within texts, allowing historians and critics at this level to access information to examine how literature and its various stylistic techniques are used.

The construction of historical trajectories and transformations through their psychological impact is crucial in understanding the historical dimensions within texts. This is achieved through a psychological structural multiplicity within the active characters. Behavioral deviations and various psychological disorders play a significant role in altering the historical atmospheres in the narrative space, whether in novelistic or storytelling forms, and even at the level of poetic creativity and folk narratives. In this context, we can rely on the procedural tools of the psychological approach in literature, employing its analytical levels in a way that contributes to expanding the scope of historical critical vision.

### **Conclusion:**

Through the historical analysis of literary texts, it is possible to uncover implicit meanings that do not clearly or automatically emerge, whether the text is studied within or apart from its production circumstances. Accordingly, we can outline a general, practical, and applied framework for historical criticism in literature, which includes several levels of analysis. These begin with the historical contexts of the text, including a summary of the author's biography and their reciprocal influences with the environment, characters, and creations. This framework also involves defining the structure of the text, encompassing its nature, cover, image, title, and pages, as well as placing the text within its historical context by analyzing the prevailing intellectual and literary movements of the time it was written.

Furthermore, the analysis includes the study of the anthropology of place, focusing on the historical transformations of place and its impact on characters and events. The social structure within literary texts is also examined by analyzing the relationships and social hierarchies

that emerge from the characters and their conflicts or harmonies.

Additionally, the study of cultural and historical changes looks at how shifts in culture and history influence the themes and characters of a text, while comparative anthropology helps to understand how different cultures are represented within literary works, focusing on cross-cultural interactions or conflicts.

Moreover, historical analysis relies on the study of linguistic and stylistic structures, where grammatical observations are systematically organized, and the psychological impact of language is examined. These tools aid in expanding the historical-critical vision of the text, offering a deeper understanding of its significance within its historical and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the construction of historical trajectories and transformations through their psychological impact is crucial in understanding the historical dimensions within texts. This is achieved through psychological structural multiplicity within the active characters. Behavioral deviations and various psychological disorders play a significant role in altering the historical atmospheres in the narrative space, whether in novels or storytelling, and even at the level of poetic creativity and folk narratives. In this context, we can rely on the procedural tools of the psychological approach in literature, employing its analytical levels in a way that contributes to broadening the scope of historical and critical vision.

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