



NEW THEORETICAL APPROACHES IN LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES: DIGITAL, POSTHUMAN, ECOCRITICAL AND DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. The article examines recent theoretical transformations in literary and cultural studies and argues that contemporary humanities research is moving from a text-centred paradigm toward relational, digital, ecological and intercultural models of interpretation. The aim of the study is to systematize new approaches that have become especially significant in the context of artificial intelligence, digital archives, climate crisis, migration, global cultural asymmetries and posthuman debates. The research is based on conceptual analysis, comparative typology and synthesis of recent scholarship in digital humanities, literary posthumanism, environmental humanities, decolonial studies and cultural semiotics. The article proposes a relational-contextual model that links text, medium, subject, power and environment within a single analytical framework. The scientific novelty of the study lies in presenting these approaches not as mutually exclusive schools, but as complementary research optics that expand the methodological resources of philology and cultural studies. The findings may be used in literary theory, comparative literature, cultural anthropology, media studies and higher education curricula.

Keywords: literary theory; cultural studies; digital humanities; artificial intelligence; posthumanism; ecocriticism; decoloniality; intercultural interpretation; methodology.

1. Introduction

Literary and cultural studies have never been static fields. Their development has always depended on changes in society, language, media and knowledge production. In the twenty-first century these changes have accelerated. Digitized corpora, algorithmic text generation, online archives, planetary ecological risks, migration, hybrid identities and new forms of cultural memory have altered the object of humanities research. A literary text is now rarely understood as an isolated verbal artefact; it is increasingly interpreted as part of a network of media platforms, institutions, bodies, environments and power relations.

The relevance of this topic is determined by a methodological tension. On the one hand, classical hermeneutics, close reading, structural analysis and cultural semiotics remain indispensable for the interpretation of literary and cultural meaning. On the other hand, the contemporary research situation requires additional theoretical instruments. The scholar has to work with large-scale digital archives, transnational cultural flows, non-human agencies, ecological imagination and the ethical consequences of technology. Therefore, the central problem is not whether traditional methods should be abandoned, but how they can be reconfigured in dialogue with new theoretical approaches.

The purpose of this article is to identify and describe the most productive new theoretical approaches in literary and cultural studies. The objectives are: first, to outline the methodological logic of critical digital humanities and AI-oriented literary research; second, to explain the role of posthumanism and new materialism; third, to evaluate the contribution of

environmental humanities and ecocriticism; fourth, to show the importance of decolonial and transcultural perspectives; and fifth, to formulate an integrated model applicable to current academic research.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

The theoretical background of contemporary literary and cultural studies is formed by several overlapping traditions. Cultural semiotics and interpretive anthropology established the idea that cultural meaning is produced through symbolic systems, everyday practices and institutions. Poststructuralism shifted attention from stable meaning to discourse, difference and power. Postcolonial theory, represented by such scholars as Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, demonstrated that literature and culture are deeply connected with imperial histories, translation, hybridity and representation of the Other.

Recent scholarship has added new emphases. Critical digital humanities questions the assumption that computational scale automatically produces better interpretation. Roy and Deshbandhu (2025) note that digital humanities are at the centre of current debates on AI, but they also warn against algorithmic reductionism and the uncritical celebration of massive datasets. This observation is important for literary studies because distant reading, machine reading and corpus analysis can reveal patterns that individual reading may miss, yet they may also simplify ambiguity, irony, genre instability and local cultural contexts.

The AI turn in literary studies is also visible in research on human-machine symbiosis. Gao and Zhang (2025) show that literary criticism in the era of artificial intelligence expands discussion of machine reading, online literary criticism, posthuman theory, virtual bodies and non-human narrative. Their work suggests that AI is not merely a technical tool; it also challenges the categories of author, reader, creativity, originality and interpretation.

Posthumanism has become another significant theoretical frame. Tabbi (2024) presents the posthuman as a field of multiple definitions that reorganize subject positions, bodily configurations and knowledge systems. In literary and cultural studies, posthumanism destabilizes the classical humanist subject and directs attention to technological mediation, animality, material agency, affect and networks of human and non-human actors. Environmental humanities, in turn, develops the ecological dimension of this shift. Buitendijk et al. (2024) argue that environmental humanities help incorporate plural values, local and Indigenous knowledges, relational views of nature and speculative imaginaries into social and ecological analysis.

3. Materials and methods

The article is based on a qualitative conceptual methodology. The material includes theoretical works in literary theory, cultural studies, digital humanities, posthumanism, environmental humanities and decolonial criticism. The method consists of three stages. First, the key concepts of each approach are identified and compared. Second, their methodological functions are classified according to the research object: text, archive, subject, culture, power, medium and environment. Third, the approaches are synthesized into a relational-contextual model that can be used for the analysis of literary and cultural phenomena.

This methodology is appropriate because the purpose of the study is not to measure a quantitative variable but to clarify theoretical instruments. Conceptual comparison makes it possible to reveal how different paradigms complement one another and where they create



methodological risks. The article therefore follows an analytical, problem-oriented and interdisciplinary design characteristic of theoretical research in the humanities.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Critical digital humanities and AI-oriented interpretation. Digital humanities have changed the scale and infrastructure of literary analysis. Electronic corpora, stylometry, topic modelling, network analysis and digital mapping enable scholars to investigate genre evolution, intertextual relations, translation flows and historical reception across large bodies of texts. However, the most productive version of digital humanities is not purely technical. It is critical, reflexive and aware of the social conditions of data. A corpus is never neutral: it reflects archival selection, language hierarchies, copyright regimes, colonial histories and institutional funding.

AI-oriented literary research adds a further dimension. Generative models can assist in summarization, pattern recognition, translation comparison and the exploration of reception data. At the same time, they raise ethical and epistemological questions. If a machine can produce a plausible poem or critical paragraph, the concept of authorship must be reconsidered. If an algorithm classifies tone or sentiment, the scholar must ask which cultural assumptions are encoded in the model. Therefore, AI should not replace interpretation; it should be treated as an object of critique and a limited research instrument. The central principle is methodological accountability: every computational result must be interpreted through philological, historical and cultural knowledge.

4.2. Posthumanism and new materialist perspectives. Posthumanism questions the anthropocentric view that literature is only a mirror of human consciousness. It invites scholars to examine bodies, technologies, animals, objects, infrastructures and environments as active participants in meaning-making. In cultural studies, this approach is especially useful for analysing cyberculture, biotechnology, digital identities, speculative fiction, trauma narratives and media ecologies. The posthuman perspective does not eliminate the human; rather, it situates human agency within broader material and technological assemblages.

New materialism complements posthumanism by emphasizing the agency of matter. A book, a manuscript, an archive, a smartphone interface, a museum object or an urban monument can influence cultural practices not only symbolically but also materially. This shift is useful for literary studies because it reconnects textual interpretation with media history and cultural infrastructure. The meaning of a text changes when it is read as a printed book, a digital file, a social media excerpt or an AI-generated imitation. Thus, the medium is not a secondary container; it is part of the interpretive event.

4.3. Environmental humanities and ecocriticism. Ecocriticism emerged from the study of nature writing and environmental representation, but it now includes climate fiction, Anthropocene studies, energy humanities, blue humanities, animal studies and environmental justice. Its main contribution is the reorientation of literary analysis from the individual human subject to planetary interdependence. Environmental humanities ask how narratives shape perceptions of nature, risk, vulnerability and responsibility. They also show that ecological crisis is not only a scientific or economic problem but a cultural and imaginative problem.

This approach is particularly relevant for cultures in which land, water, agricultural memory, sacred geography and local ecological practices play an important role. Literary texts can preserve environmental knowledge, represent the loss of traditional lifeworlds and criticize destructive models of development. At the same time, ecocriticism must avoid abstract

universalism. Climate and environmental risks are experienced differently across regions, classes and communities. For this reason, environmental humanities should be linked with decolonial, gender-sensitive and local knowledge approaches.

4.4. Decolonial, transcultural and memory-based approaches. Decolonial theory examines how colonial and imperial epistemologies continue to shape literature, language, archives and academic institutions. It asks whose texts are canonized, whose languages are translated, whose memories are preserved and whose cultural knowledge is excluded. In literary and cultural studies, this approach is crucial for analysing world literature, migration narratives, border identities, cultural hybridity and the politics of translation.

Transcultural studies expand this perspective by focusing on contact, circulation and mutual transformation. Cultures do not exist as closed containers; they interact through trade, education, tourism, migration, digital media, religious networks and artistic exchange. A transcultural reading therefore investigates how meaning travels and changes across languages, genres and social contexts. Memory studies add another dimension by showing how societies narrate trauma, heritage, national identity and collective belonging. Together, decolonial, transcultural and memory-based approaches make literary interpretation more sensitive to asymmetry, voice and historical responsibility.

5. A relational-contextual model for current research

On the basis of the discussion above, the article proposes a relational-contextual model for literary and cultural analysis. The model includes five analytical levels. The first level is textual and rhetorical: the scholar analyses genre, narrative structure, imagery, voice, metaphor and intertextuality. The second level is medial and archival: the scholar studies the material form of the text, its digital or printed circulation, archive conditions and technological mediation. The third level is subject-oriented: the scholar examines human, posthuman and non-human agencies, including body, affect, gender, technology and environment. The fourth level is cultural-political: the scholar analyses power, ideology, decolonial asymmetries, translation, class and identity. The fifth level is ecological-ethical: the scholar evaluates the relation between text, community, nature, responsibility and future imaginaries.

The advantage of the model is that it does not reduce literary and cultural analysis to a single theory. It allows the researcher to combine close reading with digital evidence, historical contextualization with ecological imagination, and cultural semiotics with posthuman critique. For example, a contemporary novel about migration can be analysed as a narrative structure, as part of a digital reception network, as a representation of embodied border experience, as a critique of geopolitical inequality and as a text that rethinks home, land and ecological vulnerability. This integrated approach is especially useful for comparative research and for studies of multilingual cultural regions.

6. Scientific novelty and practical significance

The scientific novelty of the article is the systematization of several recent theoretical approaches within a single methodological framework. Instead of presenting digital humanities, posthumanism, ecocriticism and decolonial studies as separate academic fashions, the article shows how they can function as complementary optics. Each approach corrects the limitations of the others. Digital humanities expands scale but needs hermeneutic critique. Posthumanism expands the concept of agency but needs historical and ethical grounding.

Ecocriticism expands the field toward environment but needs attention to social inequality. Decolonial theory exposes power asymmetries but benefits from media and ecological analysis.

The practical significance of the study lies in its applicability to research design, dissertation planning, article writing and curriculum development. The proposed model can be used to formulate research questions, structure literature reviews and select appropriate methods. It may also help students avoid mechanical theory application. A theory becomes productive only when it clarifies the object of study and reveals a new relation between text, culture and society.

7. Conclusion

New theoretical approaches in literary and cultural studies respond to changes in contemporary reality. The digitalization of archives, the rise of AI, ecological crisis, posthuman debates and decolonial critique have transformed the objects and methods of humanities research. However, these approaches do not make classical philological analysis obsolete. Rather, they require a renewed form of close reading that is historically informed, technologically aware, culturally reflexive and ethically responsible.

The article has argued that the most promising direction is a relational-contextual methodology. Such a methodology treats literary and cultural phenomena as dynamic configurations of text, medium, subject, power and environment. It preserves the interpretive depth of the humanities while opening them to interdisciplinary dialogue. In this sense, the future of literary and cultural studies depends not on the replacement of older methods but on their critical reorganization in response to new cultural conditions.

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