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Human Interaction with Artificial Life in the Digital Age: Literary Representations and Contemporary Perspectives

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 08 Apr 2026; Received in revised form: 06 May 2026; Accepted: 11 May 2026; Available online: 14 May 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords – Artificial Life, Artificial Intelligence, Speculative Fiction, Human-Technology Interaction, Posthumanism, Ethics of Technology, Contemporary Literature.	The growing presence of artificial intelligence and advanced technologies has significantly shaped contemporary human life. From digital assistants and automated systems to emerging forms of artificial intelligence, people today interact with technology in ways that were once imagined only in speculative fiction. This paper explores how contemporary literature reflects and responds to these changing relationships between humans and artificial life. It focuses particularly on how speculative fiction portrays both the possibilities and the concerns surrounding technological advancement. Drawing on works such as <i>Never Let Me Go</i>, <i>Klara and the Sun</i>, and <i>Oryx and Crake</i>, this paper examines how artificial beings are represented within human society and how characters respond to their presence. In these narratives, artificial life appears in different forms, including clones, artificial companions, and genetically engineered beings. While some of these representations highlight the potential benefits of artificial life, such as companionship, assistance, and technological progress, others reveal deeper anxieties surrounding ethical responsibility, control, and the possible consequences of scientific experimentation. By connecting literary representations with contemporary experiences of technology, this paper argues that speculative fiction provides an important space for reflecting on society's hopes and fears about artificial life. These texts not only imagine future possibilities but also encourage readers to critically consider how humans interact with technology in the present. In this way, literature becomes a meaningful site for exploring the complex relationship between humanity, ethics, and technological innovation in the digital age.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of artificial life has gained significant relevance in the contemporary digital age, where rapid technological advancements continue to reshape human existence and interaction. Artificial life, understood as the simulation or creation of life-

like processes through computational or biotechnological means, extends beyond mechanical function to engage with questions of consciousness, emotion, and identity. Simultaneously, the digital age represents a period marked by the deep integration of technology into everyday life, transforming how

individuals communicate, think, and relate to one another. Within this evolving landscape, human beings actively adapt to and co-evolve with technological systems.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the emerging gap between the natural development of human cognition and its increasing mediation through digital environments. It explores how these transformations influence perception, relationships, and the formation of meaning in contemporary society. These concerns are further situated within the framework of speculative fiction, a literary mode that offers a critical space for imagining the consequences of technological advancement. As Margaret Atwood suggests, speculative fiction does not deal with the impossible, but rather with scenarios grounded in realities that could plausibly occur in the near future, making it especially relevant to discussions of artificial life.

While technological developments have enhanced global connectivity and access to knowledge, they have also generated significant concerns. The growing dependence on digital technologies, particularly among younger generations, raises questions about the decline of independent thought and the weakening of authentic human relationships. Increasing reliance on mediated communication can limit opportunities for meaningful interpersonal engagement and reshape cognitive processes. Moreover, the emergence of artificial entities capable of simulating emotional interaction challenges traditional understandings of connection, authenticity, and emotional fulfillment.

These developments highlight broader ethical concerns surrounding artificial life, including issues of control, agency, and responsibility. As humans continue to create and interact with increasingly sophisticated artificial systems, it becomes necessary to critically examine the implications of these relationships.

In this context, the present study contributes to ongoing discourse by analyzing selected literary texts that represent artificial beings and their interactions with humans. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to demonstrate how literature not only reflects technological change but also critically

engages with its impact on human identity and social relationships in the digital age.

II. ARTIFICIAL LIFE IN SPECULATIVE FICTION

Artificial life in literature can be understood as the representation of human-made or simulated beings that display biological, cognitive, or emotional qualities. In speculative fiction, these figures are not merely technological inventions but serve as important narrative tools through which writers explore questions of identity, consciousness, and the shifting relationship between humans and technology. As Margaret Atwood suggests, speculative fiction engages with “what if?” scenarios that remain within the realm of possibility, exploring alternative futures and societies that could plausibly emerge from existing conditions. This makes the genre especially relevant for examining artificial life in a near-future context.

Writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro use artificial beings not simply to imagine the future, but to reflect more deeply on human nature itself. These characters often blur the distinction between what is considered “natural” and “artificial,” prompting readers to question what truly defines a human being. In this sense, Judith Butler’s concept of *Performativity* becomes useful, as she argues that identity is not something fixed or innate but something formed through repeated actions and social practices. When artificial beings are taught to love, obey, or respond emotionally, it raises the question of whether human emotions are, to some extent, learned and performed rather than purely natural.

From a deconstructionist perspective, as developed by Jacques Derrida, the boundary between human and non-human becomes unstable. Derrida suggests that such binary oppositions are never fully secure and always depend on one another for meaning. In literary texts, artificial beings often embody both constructedness and emotional depth, thereby unsettling the idea that humanity is something fixed or clearly defined.

At the same time, these characters allow writers to explore human emotions in a more controlled and simplified way. Feelings such as love, loneliness, and devotion often appear more direct or

intensified in artificial beings, which, in turn, highlight the complexity and contradictions within human emotional life. Moreover, artificial life frequently reflects contemporary anxieties about the digital age, including technological dependence, emotional isolation, and weakening human relationships. Interestingly, artificial beings are sometimes portrayed as more consistent or emotionally reliable than humans, which subtly exposes human vulnerability and moral inconsistency.

III. REPRESENTATION OF ARTIFICIAL LIFE IN SELECTED TEXTS

A useful way to understand the representation of artificial life across *Oryx and Crake*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *Klara and the Sun* is to examine the shifting dynamics of creation, conditioning, and companionship. In *Oryx and Crake*, artificial life takes the form of the Crakers, who are fully engineered beings designed to replace what is seen as flawed humanity. Here, the relationship between humans and artificial life is clearly top-down, with Crake occupying a position of near-total authority, almost like a creator figure. Artificial life, in this sense, remains something distant something made and controlled.

In *Never Let Me Go*, however, the situation becomes more complex. The clones are biologically human, yet they are raised and conditioned to accept a fixed and limited existence as organ donors. Unlike the overt control in Atwood's novel, the power structure here feels quieter, almost normalised. Society does not openly justify what it is doing, but it does not resist either. There is a kind of emotional distancing that allows this system to continue. Artificial life here is not entirely "other," but it is also never fully accepted as human. This dynamic shifts again in *Klara and the Sun*, where artificial life becomes much more intimate. Klara, though clearly non-human, develops emotional awareness and forms close bonds with the people around her. What is interesting is that she is not only controlled or used, but also relied upon. Humans begin to depend on her emotionally, which complicates the usual idea of human superiority. The relationship starts to feel less hierarchical and more intertwined, even if the

imbalance of power still exists. Looking across these texts, there seems to be a progression from creating life, to controlling it, and then to emotionally depending on it. This also leads to a deeper question: who actually appears more "human"? In *Oryx and Crake*, human actions are often destructive and manipulative, while the Crakers are presented as relatively innocent. In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones show empathy, love, and loyalty, even though they are denied recognition. Similarly, in *Klara and the Sun*, Klara's quiet devotion often feels more genuine than human emotional responses. In this sense, artificial beings begin to perform "humanity" more convincingly than humans themselves. As Judith Butler suggests, identity can be seen as something performed rather than fixed, and these texts seem to support that idea. At the same time, the line between human and artificial becomes harder to define, which connects to Jacques Derrida's argument that such distinctions are never fully stable.

Finally, these representations raise important ethical concerns. In *Oryx and Crake*, the attempt to fully control and perfect life ends in destruction, suggesting the limits of human authority. *Never Let Me Go* presents a different kind of ethical problem, where injustice is quietly accepted rather than openly challenged. In *Klara and the Sun*, the issue becomes more complicated, as humans rely on artificial beings for emotional support while still maintaining control over them. Taken together, these texts suggest that as artificial life becomes more integrated into human existence, it does not necessarily lead to better ethical understanding; instead, it reveals certain weaknesses and uncertainties in human moral thinking.

IV. HUMAN RESPONSES AND EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS

The representation of artificial life in these texts naturally leads to a more complex question: how do humans actually respond to these beings on an emotional level? The answer is not straightforward. Human reactions tend to move between acceptance and unease, often existing somewhere in between rather than settling into a clear position. While artificial life is, in many cases, integrated into everyday structures, this integration does not necessarily mean that it is fully accepted. Instead,

there remains a quiet tension and awareness that these beings are both familiar and fundamentally different. This ambiguity becomes more visible when considering the emotional attachments that develop between humans and artificial beings. In *Klara and the Sun*, for instance, Klara is not treated merely as a functional object but becomes emotionally significant within the household. The bond that forms is gentle and, at times, deeply affecting, yet it is also marked by an underlying imbalance. Klara's care appears constant and unwavering, while human responses remain more uncertain and conditional. This raises an important question about the nature of such attachment: whether it reflects a genuine emotional connection or is, to some extent, shaped by projection and need. At the same time, these attachments are often closely tied to experiences of loneliness. Artificial companions seem to emerge most meaningfully in spaces where human connection is already fragile or lacking. Rather than replacing loneliness entirely, they tend to reorganize it. The presence of artificial life can make isolation feel less immediate, even more manageable, but it does not fully resolve the deeper absence of reciprocal human relationships. In this sense, artificial beings do not eliminate loneliness; they coexist with it, sometimes even making its presence less visible.

This dynamic gradually extends into a form of dependency. As artificial beings become more integrated into emotional life, humans begin to rely on them not only for assistance but also for stability and comfort. This reliance is not always explicit; it develops slowly, almost unnoticed. The consistency and predictability of artificial companionship can appear reassuring, especially when contrasted with the uncertainty and complexity of human relationships. Over time, this may contribute to a subtle shift in which artificial interactions begin to replace more demanding, and often less controllable, human connections.

What emerges from this is a tension between comfort and illusion. Artificial life offers a kind of emotional safety in interactions that are structured, responsive, and largely free from conflict. However, this sense of comfort may also be constructed, grounded in systems that simulate rather than fully experience emotion. The connection feels real in the moment, yet it remains shaped by design and

limitation. As a result, the distinction between genuine emotional engagement and its imitation becomes increasingly difficult to define. Across these texts, human responses to artificial life are marked by this ongoing instability. Acceptance is never complete, attachment is never entirely secure, and comfort is often accompanied by uncertainty. These emotional dynamics suggest that as artificial life becomes more embedded in human experience, it does not simply transform relationships; it complicates them, revealing both the desire for connection and the difficulty of sustaining it in an increasingly mediated world.

V. CONCLUSION

The exploration of artificial life in these texts ultimately reveals less about technology itself and more about the shifting nature of human experience. Through different forms, whether it is the controlled creation of the Crakers, the quiet suffering of the clones, or the emotional presence of Klara, these narratives bring forward questions that do not settle easily. They show that the relationship between humans and artificial beings is not simply about progress or innovation, but about how people choose to respond, adapt, and sometimes avoid confronting what they have created. Across these works, a pattern becomes visible. Artificial life is first imagined as something to be made and controlled, but gradually it becomes something that humans live with, depend on, and even form emotional connections with. This shift is not entirely comfortable. While there is a sense of advancement, there is also a subtle loss of clarity, of boundaries, and perhaps even of certain forms of human connection that are harder to maintain in increasingly mediated environments. At the same time, these texts do not present artificial life as entirely negative or threatening. In many instances, artificial beings appear more consistent, more attentive, and even more emotionally present than humans themselves. This contrast is not accidental. It reflects a deeper uncertainty about human nature, its limitations, its contradictions, and its tendency to create systems it does not fully understand or take responsibility for. What makes these narratives particularly significant is that they do not offer clear answers. Instead, they leave behind a sense of unease and reflection. The future they suggest does not feel

distant; it feels close, already beginning in small and almost unnoticeable ways. In this sense, speculative fiction becomes less about imagining what is to come and more about paying attention to what is already changing. In the end, the question is not only whether artificial life can become more human, but whether humans can continue to recognise and preserve what it means to be human in the first place. And that is something these texts leave open perhaps deliberately without fully resolving it.

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Gender, Temptation, and Free Will in *Paradise Lost*

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Received: 26 Apr 2026; Received in revised form: 23 May 2026; Accepted: 26 May 2026; Available online: 30 May 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Free Will, Gender Roles, Temptation.	<i>Paradise Lost</i> remains one of the most significant literary explorations of human nature, morality, and divine authority in English literature. This paper examines the interconnected themes of gender, temptation, and free will in Milton's epic, with particular emphasis on the characters of Adam and Eve. The study analyzes how Milton constructs gender roles within the framework of seventeenth-century patriarchal ideology while simultaneously presenting Eve as an intellectually curious and emotionally complex figure. Through the episode of temptation and the Fall, the poem investigates the tension between obedience and individual choice, revealing free will as both a divine gift and a source of human vulnerability. Satan's manipulation of Eve demonstrates the psychological dimensions of temptation, where pride, ambition, and the desire for knowledge become instruments of moral downfall. However, the paper argues that Milton does not portray Eve merely as a symbol of weakness; rather, he presents both Adam and Eve as equally responsible moral agents capable of rational decision-making. Adam's conscious choice to share Eve's fate further highlights the operation of free will and emotional attachment in the human condition. By exploring these themes, the article seeks to demonstrate how <i>Paradise Lost</i> transcends a simple retelling of the Biblical Fall and becomes a profound meditation on gender relations, moral responsibility, and the complexities of human freedom. The continuing relevance of Milton's treatment of these issues reflects the poem's enduring place in literary and cultural discourse.

I. INTRODUCTION

Paradise Lost is one of the greatest epic poems in English literature, celebrated for its profound exploration of human nature, morality, religion, and political thought. Written by John Milton in the seventeenth century, the poem retells the Biblical story of the Fall of Man, focusing on the disobedience of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Beyond its religious framework, the epic presents a deep philosophical inquiry into themes such as gender relations, temptation, obedience,

authority, and free will. These themes continue to attract scholarly attention because they address universal human concerns that remain relevant in modern society.

The background of this study lies in the continuing debate regarding Milton's representation of gender and moral responsibility in the poem. Critics have long discussed whether Milton reinforces patriarchal ideology through the portrayal of Eve as subordinate to Adam or whether he provides Eve with intellectual individuality and emotional complexity. The episode

of temptation becomes central to this debate because Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit initiates the Fall, while Adam's conscious choice to join her demonstrates the operation of free will and emotional attachment. Thus, *Paradise Lost* presents temptation not merely as a religious event but as a psychological and moral struggle involving reason, desire, and personal choice.

Understanding these themes requires attention to the historical context in which Milton wrote. The seventeenth century in England was marked by political instability, religious conflict, and social transformation. The period witnessed the English Civil War, the execution of King Charles I, the rise of Puritanism, and the eventual Restoration of the monarchy. Milton himself was deeply involved in political and religious debates of his time and strongly supported republican ideals and individual liberty. His Puritan beliefs shaped his understanding of obedience, morality, and divine justice, all of which are reflected in *Paradise Lost*. The patriarchal structure of seventeenth-century society also influenced Milton's depiction of gender roles, especially in the relationship between Adam and Eve.

As a Renaissance humanist and a deeply religious writer, John Milton combined classical epic traditions with Christian theology to create a work of immense intellectual and artistic significance. Through the themes of gender, temptation, and free will, *Paradise Lost* examines the complexity of human behavior and the consequences of moral choices. The poem therefore remains an enduring text for literary, theological, and cultural studies.

Importance of Paradise Lost in English Literature

Paradise Lost occupies a central position in English literature because of its artistic excellence, philosophical depth, and enduring influence on literary tradition. Written by John Milton and first published in 1667, the epic is widely regarded as one of the greatest achievements of English poetry. Through its grand style, complex characterization, and exploration of universal themes, the poem has shaped literary criticism, theology, and cultural thought for centuries.

One of the major reasons for the importance of *Paradise Lost* is its successful adaptation of the classical epic tradition into a Christian framework. Inspired by

classical epics such as Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, Milton transformed the epic form by making the Biblical story of the Fall of Man the central subject of his poem. The work combines classical grandeur with Christian theology, creating a unique literary masterpiece that elevates English poetry to the level of ancient epic literature.

The poem is also significant for its profound treatment of universal themes such as free will, temptation, obedience, sin, redemption, and the conflict between good and evil. These themes transcend religious boundaries and continue to remain relevant in modern society. Milton's portrayal of Adam, Eve, and Satan reflects the complexities of human psychology and moral responsibility, encouraging readers to reflect on the nature of choice, authority, and human suffering.

Another important aspect of *Paradise Lost* is Milton's extraordinary poetic style. His use of blank verse, elevated diction, epic similes, and rich imagery influenced generations of poets and writers. The poem expanded the expressive possibilities of the English language and established Milton as one of the greatest masters of poetic expression. Later writers such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley drew inspiration from Milton's themes and style.

Furthermore, *Paradise Lost* remains important because of its intellectual and critical richness. The poem invites multiple interpretations from feminist, political, religious, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial perspectives. Debates surrounding Satan's heroism, Eve's role, and Milton's representation of gender continue to inspire scholarly research and literary discussion.

Thus, *Paradise Lost* is not only a landmark of English literature but also a timeless exploration of human existence, morality, and spiritual struggle. Its artistic brilliance and philosophical depth ensure its lasting relevance in literary studies across the world.

Overview of the Themes of Gender, Temptation, and Free Will

Paradise Lost presents a profound exploration of the interconnected themes of gender, temptation, and free will, which together shape the moral and philosophical structure of the epic. Through the story of Adam and Eve and their disobedience in the

Garden of Eden, John Milton examines the complexities of human relationships, moral choice, and the consequences of disobedience. These themes are central to the poem's enduring relevance and critical significance in English literature.

The theme of gender is primarily explored through the relationship between Adam and Eve. Milton portrays Adam as rational, authoritative, and spiritually superior, while Eve is often associated with beauty, emotion, and curiosity. This portrayal reflects the patriarchal social structure of seventeenth-century England, where men occupied positions of authority within both family and society. However, Eve is not presented merely as weak or passive; she is intelligent, independent, and eager for knowledge. Her intellectual curiosity and desire for self-awareness make her one of the most complex female characters in English literature. As a result, critics continue to debate whether Milton reinforces traditional gender hierarchy or subtly questions it through Eve's characterization.

Temptation forms the dramatic center of the poem and becomes the immediate cause of the Fall of Man. Satan, driven by pride and rebellion against God, uses deception and persuasive rhetoric to tempt Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. The temptation appeals not only to Eve's desire for knowledge but also to her wish for equality and self-improvement. Milton portrays temptation as a psychological and moral struggle in which human beings become vulnerable to pride, ambition, and desire. Adam's later decision to join Eve in disobedience further emphasizes the emotional and moral dimensions of temptation.

Closely connected to temptation is the theme of free will. Milton strongly believed that human beings possess the freedom to choose between obedience and disobedience. God grants Adam and Eve free will so that their obedience may be voluntary rather than forced. Their fall therefore results not from destiny but from conscious personal choice. Eve freely chooses to eat the fruit, and Adam knowingly chooses to share her fate out of love and companionship. Through this emphasis on moral responsibility, Milton presents free will as both a divine gift and a source of human suffering.

Together, the themes of gender, temptation, and free will reveal Milton's deep concern with human nature,

morality, and spiritual responsibility. They transform *Paradise Lost* from a simple Biblical retelling into a timeless philosophical and literary masterpiece.

Research Problem

One of the most debated issues in *Paradise Lost* is John Milton's portrayal of Eve and the question of gender hierarchy. Critics have long argued over whether Milton presents Eve as naturally inferior to Adam or whether he gives her intellectual depth and individual agency. The poem reflects the patriarchal values of seventeenth-century English society, where men were traditionally regarded as rational leaders and women as subordinate companions. Adam is portrayed as authoritative, rational, and spiritually superior, while Eve is associated with beauty, emotion, and curiosity. This representation has led many feminist critics to view the poem as reinforcing patriarchal ideology and holding Eve primarily responsible for humanity's fall.

However, other scholars argue that Milton's portrayal of Eve is far more complex than a simple symbol of weakness or disobedience. Eve demonstrates intelligence, independence, self-awareness, and a strong desire for knowledge. Her conversations with Adam and her reflections on identity reveal her intellectual capacity and emotional sensitivity. The research problem therefore lies in determining whether Milton merely reproduces traditional gender hierarchy or subtly questions it by presenting Eve as a thoughtful and morally responsible human being. This ambiguity has made Eve one of the most controversial and critically examined female figures in English literature.

Another major issue addressed in this study is the question of moral responsibility and human freedom in the poem. *Paradise Lost* is deeply concerned with the idea of free will and the ability of human beings to choose between obedience and disobedience. Although Satan tempts Eve, Milton emphasizes that neither Eve nor Adam is forced to commit sin. Eve consciously decides to eat the forbidden fruit, while Adam knowingly chooses to share her fate out of love and emotional attachment. The poem therefore raises important philosophical questions regarding accountability, temptation, and the nature of human choice.

The central research problem of this study is to examine how the themes of gender, temptation, and

free will interact within the poem and how Milton uses these themes to explore moral responsibility and human identity. The study seeks to investigate whether the Fall is presented as the result of female weakness, shared human vulnerability, or the misuse of free will by both Adam and Eve.

Objectives of the Study

The present study on *Paradise Lost* aims to examine the interconnected themes of gender, temptation, and free will that shape the moral and philosophical structure of the epic. The study seeks to explore how John Milton presents human relationships, moral choice, and spiritual responsibility through the characters of Adam and Eve. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To Analyze Gender Representation in the Epic

One of the primary objectives of this study is to analyze the representation of gender roles in *Paradise Lost*. The study seeks to examine how Milton portrays Adam and Eve within the framework of seventeenth-century patriarchal society. It aims to investigate whether Eve is depicted merely as subordinate and responsible for the Fall or whether Milton presents her as an intelligent, independent, and morally conscious individual. The study also intends to explore the power relationship between Adam and Eve and evaluate feminist interpretations of the poem.

2. To Examine the Role of Temptation in the Fall

Another important objective is to examine the role of temptation in causing the Fall of Man. The study focuses on Satan's persuasive strategies and psychological manipulation in tempting Eve to disobey God's command. It seeks to analyze how pride, ambition, curiosity, and the desire for knowledge contribute to the process of temptation. The study also explores Adam's decision to join Eve in disobedience and the emotional and moral dimensions associated with temptation in the poem.

3. To Explore the Concept of Free Will in Adam and Eve

The study further aims to explore Milton's concept of free will through the actions of Adam and Eve. It examines how God grants human beings the freedom to choose between obedience and disobedience and how this freedom becomes central to moral responsibility. The study seeks to understand whether

the Fall is the result of external influence or conscious human choice. By analyzing the decisions made by Adam and Eve, the research highlights Milton's belief in individual accountability, divine justice, and the consequences of human freedom.

Research Questions

The present study on *Paradise Lost* is guided by a set of important research questions that aim to explore the themes of gender, temptation, and free will in the epic. These questions help in understanding how John Milton examines human nature, moral responsibility, and spiritual conflict through the experiences of Adam and Eve.

1. How does Milton Construct Gender Roles?

This question seeks to examine the representation of gender relations in *Paradise Lost*. The study investigates how Milton portrays Adam and Eve within the social and religious framework of seventeenth-century England. It explores whether Adam is presented as naturally superior and authoritative while Eve is shown as subordinate and emotionally vulnerable. At the same time, the question also considers whether Milton gives Eve intellectual individuality, self-awareness, and moral agency. The research aims to analyze how gender hierarchy operates in the poem and how modern feminist critics interpret Eve's role in the Fall.

2. In what ways does Temptation Influence Human Action?

This question focuses on the role of temptation in shaping the actions and decisions of the characters. The study examines Satan's persuasive language and psychological manipulation in tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. It explores how ambition, curiosity, pride, and the desire for knowledge influence human behavior. The question also investigates Adam's response to Eve's disobedience and the emotional motivations behind his decision to share her fate. Through this analysis, the study seeks to understand temptation as both a moral and psychological force in the poem.

3. How is Free Will presented in the Poem?

This question aims to explore Milton's treatment of free will and moral responsibility in *Paradise Lost*. The study examines how God grants Adam and Eve the freedom to choose between obedience and

disobedience. It investigates whether the Fall results from external influence, human weakness, or deliberate personal choice. The question also analyzes how Milton connects free will with divine justice, accountability, and the consequences of human action. Through the experiences of Adam and Eve, the study seeks to understand Milton's broader philosophical view of human freedom and responsibility.

Methodology

The present study on *Paradise Lost* adopts a qualitative and interpretative methodology based primarily on textual and thematic analysis. The research closely examines selected passages, dialogues, and narrative descriptions from the epic in order to understand how John Milton develops the themes of gender, temptation, and free will. Through careful reading of the text, the study analyzes the characterization of Adam, Eve, and Satan and explores the moral, psychological, and philosophical dimensions of their actions.

The textual analysis focuses on Milton's language, imagery, symbolism, and narrative techniques to identify how the poem constructs gender relationships and moral conflict. Particular attention is given to important episodes such as Eve's temptation, Adam's decision to join Eve, and the consequences of the Fall. The study also examines Milton's use of epic conventions, Biblical references, and theological arguments to understand the deeper meanings embedded in the poem.

In addition to textual analysis, the research employs thematic analysis to investigate the interrelationship between gender, temptation, and free will. The study explores how these themes function together to shape the overall moral and philosophical framework of the epic. By tracing recurring ideas and patterns within the text, the research aims to reveal Milton's views on human nature, authority, obedience, and moral responsibility.

The study further incorporates feminist and theological perspectives as critical approaches for interpretation. The feminist perspective is used to analyze the representation of Eve, the construction of gender hierarchy, and the power dynamics between Adam and Eve. It also examines how modern feminist critics challenge or reinterpret Milton's portrayal of

women in the poem. The theological perspective helps in understanding Milton's religious ideas regarding sin, divine justice, obedience, redemption, and the concept of free will. Since *Paradise Lost* is deeply rooted in Christian theology, this approach is essential for interpreting the spiritual and moral dimensions of the epic.

Thus, by combining textual and thematic analysis with feminist and theological perspectives, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the themes of gender, temptation, and free will in *Paradise Lost*.

II. HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

Seventeenth-Century Religious and Social Context

Understanding *Paradise Lost* requires a close examination of the religious, political, and social conditions of seventeenth-century England. John Milton lived during a period marked by political instability, religious conflict, and significant social transformation. The century witnessed the English Civil War, the rise of Puritanism, the execution of King Charles I, the Commonwealth government under Oliver Cromwell, and the eventual Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. These historical developments deeply influenced Milton's political beliefs, religious ideas, and literary works.

The seventeenth century was characterized by intense religious debates between different Christian groups, especially between the Anglicans and the Puritans. Puritanism emerged as a reform movement within the Church of England that sought to purify religious practices and promote a stricter moral and spiritual life. The Puritans emphasized personal faith, obedience to God, moral discipline, simplicity, and the authority of the Bible. They believed that human beings possessed free will and moral responsibility and that true religious devotion required self-control and spiritual awareness. Milton strongly sympathized with Puritan ideals, and these beliefs are clearly reflected in *Paradise Lost*. The poem emphasizes obedience to divine authority, the consequences of sin, and the importance of individual moral choice. Adam and Eve's disobedience represents not merely a religious failure but also a violation of divine order and moral responsibility.

Puritan ideology also shaped Milton's understanding of liberty and authority. Although the Puritans valued obedience to God, they also believed in intellectual freedom and individual conscience. Milton himself defended freedom of speech, religious tolerance, and republican political ideals in his prose writings. In *Paradise Lost*, the theme of free will becomes central because God grants Adam and Eve the freedom to choose obedience or disobedience. Their fall results from the misuse of this freedom rather than from predestination or divine compulsion. Thus, Milton's religious and political beliefs significantly contribute to the philosophical structure of the epic.

The patriarchal social structure of seventeenth-century England also influenced Milton's portrayal of gender relations in the poem. Society during this period was strongly male-dominated, and women were generally expected to remain obedient to men within both family and social life. Men were considered rational, authoritative, and intellectually superior, while women were often associated with emotion, beauty, and domestic responsibilities. These patriarchal values are reflected in the relationship between Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Adam is portrayed as the leader and spiritual guide, whereas Eve is represented as beautiful, curious, and emotionally sensitive.

However, Milton's depiction of Eve is more complex than a simple representation of female inferiority. Although Eve occupies a subordinate position within the hierarchy of creation, she also displays intelligence, self-awareness, and a desire for knowledge and independence. Her temptation and fall raise important questions about gender, authority, and moral responsibility. Consequently, modern feminist critics continue to debate whether Milton reinforces patriarchal ideology or subtly critiques it through Eve's characterization.

Thus, the religious beliefs and patriarchal social values of seventeenth-century England provide an essential historical and literary context for understanding the themes of gender, temptation, and free will in *Paradise Lost*.

Milton's Epic Tradition

Paradise Lost stands as one of the greatest examples of epic poetry in English literature because John Milton successfully combines the traditions of

classical epic with Christian theology and Biblical narrative. Milton inherited the rich literary legacy of ancient Greek and Roman epics and transformed it into a uniquely English and Christian epic that addresses universal themes of sin, disobedience, temptation, and redemption.

Influence of Classical Epics

Milton was deeply influenced by the classical epic tradition represented by poets such as Homer and Virgil. Their famous works, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*, provided important models for the structure, style, and themes of *Paradise Lost*. Like classical epics, Milton's poem begins with an invocation to a higher power, introduces a grand and universal subject, and employs elevated language and epic similes. However, instead of invoking the classical Muses, Milton invokes the "Heavenly Muse," emphasizing the Christian and spiritual nature of his poem.

Milton also adopts several conventional features of epic poetry, including heroic battles, supernatural beings, long speeches, catalogues, and journeys across vast settings such as Heaven, Hell, and Earth. Satan's rebellion against God and the war in Heaven resemble the heroic conflicts found in classical epics. At the same time, Milton redefines the idea of heroism. Unlike classical epic heroes who achieve glory through warfare and conquest, Milton presents spiritual obedience, moral strength, and faith in God as the highest forms of heroism. Adam and Eve's moral struggles become more significant than physical battles.

Another important influence of classical epics can be seen in Milton's use of blank verse and elevated poetic style. His long and complex sentences, rich imagery, and grand descriptions reflect the dignity and seriousness traditionally associated with epic poetry. Through these techniques, Milton demonstrates that the English language is capable of producing an epic equal to the masterpieces of ancient Greece and Rome.

Biblical Foundation of the Poem

While Milton draws heavily from classical epic tradition, the foundation of *Paradise Lost* is deeply Biblical. The central narrative of the poem is based on the story of the Fall of Man from the Book of Genesis in the Bible. Milton expands the brief Biblical account of Adam and Eve's disobedience into a vast epic that

explores the origins of sin, suffering, and human mortality. The poem seeks to “justify the ways of God to men” by explaining why evil exists and how human beings misuse their God-given freedom.

The Biblical foundation of the poem is evident in its treatment of Christian themes such as creation, temptation, free will, divine justice, repentance, and redemption. Characters such as God, Satan, Adam, Eve, and the angels are drawn directly from Christian theology. Milton also incorporates references from both the Old and New Testaments to strengthen the spiritual and moral dimensions of the epic.

III. GENDER REPRESENTATION IN PARADISE LOST

Adam and Eve as Gendered Figures

One of the most significant aspects of *Paradise Lost* is John Milton’s representation of gender through the characters of Adam and Eve. Milton constructs Adam and Eve as gendered figures whose personalities, roles, and responsibilities reflect the social and religious values of seventeenth-century England. Their relationship reveals a hierarchical structure in which Adam is associated with rational authority and spiritual leadership, while Eve is connected with beauty, emotional sensitivity, and intellectual curiosity. Through these portrayals, Milton explores questions of gender identity, power, obedience, and moral responsibility.

Adam as Rational Authority

Adam is portrayed as the embodiment of reason, wisdom, and authority in the poem. Milton presents him as physically strong, intellectually superior, and spiritually closer to God. As the first man and the head of humanity, Adam is entrusted with the responsibility of guiding and protecting Eve. His rational nature is emphasized throughout the poem, especially in his conversations with Eve and the angel Raphael. Adam demonstrates the ability to think logically, understand divine laws, and exercise moral judgment. He is aware of the dangers of disobedience and repeatedly advises Eve to remain cautious and obedient to God’s command.

Milton’s portrayal of Adam reflects the patriarchal ideology of seventeenth-century society, where men were considered natural leaders within both family

and social structures. Adam occupies a dominant position in the hierarchy of creation, and Eve is expected to remain obedient to him. This hierarchy is reinforced by Milton’s descriptions of Adam as created for “contemplation and valor,” suggesting that men are associated with intellect and authority.

However, Adam is not presented as entirely free from emotional weakness. Although he understands the consequences of sin, he chooses to eat the forbidden fruit after Eve’s fall because of his deep love and emotional attachment to her. His decision demonstrates that reason alone cannot always overcome human affection and desire. Thus, while Adam symbolizes rational authority, Milton also portrays him as a complex human figure capable of emotional vulnerability.

Eve as Beauty and Emotional Sensitivity

In contrast to Adam, Eve is primarily associated with beauty, grace, emotion, and sensitivity. Milton describes her physical appearance in highly poetic and idealized terms, presenting her as the embodiment of feminine beauty and charm. Eve’s beauty becomes one of the defining aspects of her identity, influencing both Adam’s admiration and Satan’s desire to tempt her. Her connection with nature, harmony, and aesthetic beauty further reinforces traditional feminine qualities.

At the same time, Eve is portrayed as emotionally sensitive and intellectually curious. Unlike Adam, who is guided mainly by reason, Eve is more influenced by feelings, imagination, and personal desire. Her curiosity about knowledge and self-improvement makes her vulnerable to Satan’s temptation. Satan appeals to Eve’s ambition and desire for wisdom by convincing her that eating the forbidden fruit will make her equal to the gods. This psychological manipulation succeeds because Eve’s emotional and intellectual desires overcome her sense of obedience.

Nevertheless, Eve is not merely a passive or weak character. Milton gives her individuality, self-awareness, and the ability to think independently. She questions her position within the hierarchy of creation and expresses a desire for equality and autonomy. Her decision to eat the fruit is a conscious act of choice rather than simple ignorance. Because of this complexity, Eve remains one of the most debated

female characters in English literature. Some critics view her as a victim of patriarchal ideology, while others see her as a symbol of human aspiration and intellectual independence.

Through Adam and Eve, John Milton presents a detailed exploration of gender roles and human relationships. Adam represents rational authority and leadership, whereas Eve embodies beauty, emotional sensitivity, and curiosity. Together, they reflect the tensions between reason and emotion, authority and individuality, obedience and desire. Their relationship forms the foundation of the poem's broader exploration of temptation, free will, and moral responsibility.

The figure of Satan plays a particularly important role in connecting the Biblical narrative with epic tradition. Although he is portrayed as rebellious, ambitious, and destructive, Satan also possesses qualities of determination and rhetorical power that resemble classical tragic heroes. This complex portrayal has generated extensive critical debate regarding Milton's moral and artistic intentions.

Furthermore, Milton's Puritan beliefs strongly influence the Biblical structure of the poem. He emphasizes the importance of obedience to divine authority and presents free will as the basis of moral responsibility. Adam and Eve are not forced into sin; rather, they consciously choose disobedience, which results in the Fall. Yet the poem also offers hope through the promise of redemption and salvation, reflecting central Christian beliefs about divine mercy and human spiritual renewal.

Thus, *Paradise Lost* represents a remarkable fusion of classical epic tradition and Biblical theology. By combining the grandeur of ancient epic with Christian spiritual concerns, Milton created a timeless literary masterpiece that continues to influence literature, religion, and philosophical thought.

Eve's Intellectual Curiosity

One of the most important dimensions of gender representation in *Paradise Lost* is the portrayal of Eve's intellectual curiosity. John Milton does not present Eve merely as a passive or submissive figure; instead, he gives her emotional depth, self-awareness, and a strong desire for knowledge and individuality. Eve's curiosity becomes a central element in the poem because it directly contributes to the temptation and

the Fall of Man. Through Eve's character, Milton explores the relationship between knowledge, ambition, identity, and moral responsibility.

Desire for Knowledge

Eve's desire for knowledge is one of her defining characteristics in the poem. Unlike a purely obedient and passive figure, Eve demonstrates intellectual interest and curiosity about the world around her. She seeks understanding, self-awareness, and personal growth. This desire becomes especially significant during Satan's temptation, where the forbidden fruit is presented as a source of wisdom and enlightenment. Satan persuades Eve by suggesting that eating the fruit will increase her knowledge and elevate her status, making her "more equal" and godlike.

Eve's attraction to knowledge reflects a deeply human quality. Her decision is not driven only by greed or disobedience but also by the aspiration to gain wisdom and improve herself intellectually. In this sense, Eve symbolizes humanity's natural desire to explore the unknown and transcend limitations. Milton portrays curiosity as both admirable and dangerous because it can lead either to intellectual growth or to moral downfall when separated from obedience and self-control.

The desire for knowledge also distinguishes Eve from the traditional stereotype of women as intellectually inferior. Although Milton reflects the patriarchal attitudes of his age, he nevertheless grants Eve the ability to reason, question, and make independent decisions. Her conversations with Adam reveal her intelligence and capacity for thoughtful reflection. Thus, Eve's curiosity becomes an important challenge to simplistic interpretations of her character as merely weak or foolish.

Individual Identity and Autonomy

Another important aspect of Eve's character is her sense of individual identity and autonomy. Eve desires not only companionship with Adam but also recognition of her own individuality. From the moment of her creation, she demonstrates self-awareness and an independent sense of self. Her famous reflection upon seeing her own image in the water symbolizes her consciousness of personal identity and beauty. This scene suggests that Eve

possesses an inner life and personal desires that go beyond simple obedience.

Eve's request to work separately from Adam in the Garden of Eden further highlights her desire for independence and autonomy. She wishes to demonstrate her own capability and strength rather than remain constantly dependent on Adam's protection. Although Adam warns her about possible danger, Eve insists on exercising her freedom of choice. This decision ultimately creates the opportunity for Satan to tempt her. However, Milton presents her choice as an act of independent judgment rather than blind disobedience.

Eve's search for identity and autonomy also raises important questions about gender and authority. She exists within a patriarchal hierarchy in which Adam is presented as superior, yet she continually seeks a more equal and self-determined role. Her temptation can therefore be interpreted not only as a moral failure but also as an attempt to assert intellectual independence and personal freedom.

Through Eve's intellectual curiosity, John Milton creates a complex female character who embodies both human aspiration and vulnerability. Her desire for knowledge and autonomy makes her one of the most psychologically rich and critically debated figures in English literature. Eve's character reveals the tensions between obedience and freedom, dependence and individuality, and knowledge and moral responsibility that lie at the heart of *Paradise Lost*.

Feminist Interpretations

The representation of Eve in *Paradise Lost* has generated extensive feminist debate and critical interpretation. Scholars have long questioned whether John Milton portrays Eve as a weak and subordinate figure responsible for humanity's fall or as an intelligent and independent thinker struggling against patriarchal limitations. Feminist criticism of the poem focuses particularly on the themes of gender hierarchy, female agency, autonomy, and moral responsibility. Because of Eve's complexity, she remains one of the most controversial female characters in English literature.

Eve as Victim or Independent Thinker

One major feminist interpretation views Eve as a victim of patriarchal ideology. According to this

perspective, Milton reflects the male-dominated values of seventeenth-century society by presenting Adam as rational, authoritative, and spiritually superior, while Eve is portrayed as emotionally vulnerable and intellectually weaker. Eve's subordinate position within the hierarchy of creation suggests that women are expected to remain obedient to male authority. Her temptation and eventual fall appear to reinforce the traditional Biblical belief that woman is responsible for the origin of sin and suffering in human history.

Critics who support this interpretation argue that Eve becomes an easy target for Satan because she is separated from Adam and lacks the rational stability associated with masculine authority. Satan manipulates her vanity, ambition, and desire for knowledge, leading her toward disobedience. In this reading, Eve's punishment and her dependence on Adam after the Fall further reflect patriarchal assumptions regarding women's inferiority and subordination.

However, many modern critics reject the idea that Eve is simply a passive victim. They argue that Milton presents Eve as an intelligent, self-aware, and independent thinker capable of rational judgment and moral choice. Eve demonstrates curiosity, emotional depth, and a desire for intellectual growth. Her decision to eat the forbidden fruit is not forced upon her but results from conscious reasoning and personal ambition. She actively questions authority and seeks knowledge, individuality, and autonomy. From this perspective, Eve represents human aspiration and the desire for self-development rather than mere weakness or disobedience.

Eve's wish to work separately from Adam in the Garden of Eden is often interpreted as an expression of independence and personal freedom. She desires to prove her own capability rather than remain constantly protected by Adam. Her actions therefore reveal an attempt to establish her identity within a patriarchal system. Some feminist critics even view Eve as a proto-feminist figure who challenges traditional gender expectations through her assertion of individuality and intellectual curiosity.

Modern Feminist Criticism of Milton

Modern feminist criticism of *Paradise Lost* emerged strongly during the twentieth century as scholars

began reevaluating the representation of women in canonical literary texts. Feminist critics analyze how Milton's language, imagery, and narrative structure contribute to the construction of gender hierarchy. They investigate whether the poem reinforces patriarchal values or subtly exposes their limitations and contradictions.

Some feminist scholars criticize Milton for idealizing female obedience and presenting Eve primarily through her relationship to Adam. They argue that the poem associates masculinity with reason and authority while linking femininity with beauty, emotion, and temptation. According to this interpretation, Eve's intellectual curiosity is portrayed negatively because it leads to disobedience and destruction. Such critics believe that Milton reflects the gender inequalities of his historical context and perpetuates the marginalization of women.

At the same time, other feminist critics offer a more balanced interpretation of Milton's treatment of Eve. They point out that Eve is given psychological depth, emotional complexity, and the ability to think independently. Unlike many female figures in earlier literature, Eve possesses a distinct voice and participates actively in philosophical and moral discussions. Her reflections on identity, beauty, love, and knowledge demonstrate intellectual sophistication and human complexity.

Modern feminist readings therefore reveal the ambiguity of Milton's portrayal of gender. Eve can be interpreted both as a product of patriarchal ideology and as a figure who challenges traditional female roles through her individuality and autonomy. This complexity has made *Paradise Lost* an important text for feminist literary criticism and gender studies.

Through feminist interpretations, the poem continues to generate discussions about women's identity, freedom, power, and moral responsibility. Milton's portrayal of Eve remains significant because it reflects broader tensions between obedience and independence, authority and equality, and tradition and individual freedom.

IV. TEMPTATION AND THE FALL

Satan as the Tempter

One of the central episodes in *Paradise Lost* is the temptation of Eve and the subsequent Fall of Man. John Milton presents Satan as the primary tempter whose rebellion against God drives the tragic events of the poem. After being cast out of Heaven because of his pride and ambition, Satan seeks revenge against God by corrupting His newly created human beings. Unable to defeat divine power directly, Satan decides to attack humanity by tempting Adam and Eve into disobedience. His role as the tempter makes him one of the most powerful and psychologically complex characters in the epic.

Satan's temptation of Eve is not based on force or physical violence but on persuasion, deception, and manipulation. Milton portrays temptation as a subtle psychological process that appeals to human desires, curiosity, and ambition. Satan carefully chooses Eve as his target because he believes she is more emotionally sensitive and easier to influence than Adam. By approaching Eve in the form of a serpent, Satan disguises his evil intentions and gradually gains her attention and trust. His temptation becomes successful because he understands human weakness and knows how to exploit Eve's desire for knowledge and self-improvement.

Satan's Persuasive Rhetoric

One of Satan's greatest strengths in the poem is his extraordinary rhetorical skill. Milton presents Satan as a master of persuasive language who uses logic, flattery, and emotional appeal to influence Eve's thinking. His speeches are carefully designed to confuse moral judgment and make disobedience appear reasonable and desirable.

Satan first gains Eve's confidence by praising her beauty, intelligence, and superiority. Through flattery, he appeals to her pride and self-esteem, making her feel special and worthy of greater knowledge and power. He then argues that the forbidden fruit cannot truly be dangerous because he himself has eaten it and gained the power of speech and wisdom. By presenting himself as evidence of the fruit's benefits, Satan attempts to weaken Eve's trust in God's command.

Another important aspect of Satan's rhetoric is his ability to manipulate ideas about freedom and equality. He suggests that God's prohibition is meant to keep Adam and Eve ignorant and subordinate. He

encourages Eve to believe that eating the fruit will elevate her status and make her godlike. Through these arguments, Satan transforms disobedience into an act of liberation and self-improvement. His persuasive rhetoric therefore appeals not only to Eve's curiosity but also to her ambition and desire for independence.

Milton's portrayal of Satan's speeches demonstrates the dangerous power of language when used for deception. Satan twists truth, distorts logic, and disguises evil intentions behind attractive promises. His rhetoric reflects the broader theme of temptation in the poem, showing how persuasive words can influence human thought and moral choice.

Psychological Manipulation

In addition to rhetorical persuasion, Satan employs deep psychological manipulation to tempt Eve. He carefully studies her personality and identifies her emotional vulnerabilities. Eve's curiosity, desire for knowledge, admiration of beauty, and wish for autonomy become the weaknesses through which Satan gains control over her thoughts.

Satan manipulates Eve by creating doubt about God's intentions and by encouraging dissatisfaction with her current condition. He subtly suggests that obedience limits human potential and that true fulfillment can only be achieved through independent action. By appealing to Eve's imagination and ambition, Satan causes her to question divine authority and consider the possibility of becoming wiser and more powerful.

The psychological dimension of temptation becomes especially important because Eve is not forced into sin. Instead, her mind gradually moves from innocence to doubt, desire, and finally disobedience. Milton carefully depicts the internal conflict within Eve as she debates the consequences of her actions. This process highlights the complexity of human psychology and the struggle between reason, desire, and moral responsibility.

Satan's manipulation also extends beyond Eve to Adam. After Eve eats the forbidden fruit, Adam experiences emotional conflict between obedience to God and love for Eve. His decision to share her fate demonstrates how emotional attachment and human affection can influence moral judgment. Thus, temptation in the poem operates not only through

external persuasion but also through internal psychological struggle.

Through the character of Satan, John Milton presents temptation as a powerful combination of persuasive rhetoric and psychological manipulation. Satan's ability to exploit human weakness reveals the vulnerability of human beings when desire, ambition, and curiosity overpower reason and obedience. The episode of the Fall therefore becomes both a theological and psychological exploration of human nature, free will, and moral responsibility in Paradise Lost.

The Temptation of Eve

The temptation of Eve is one of the most significant and dramatic moments in Paradise Lost. Through this episode, John Milton explores the psychological and moral complexities of human desire, ambition, and free will. Eve's temptation is not presented merely as an act of simple disobedience; rather, it is a deeply human struggle involving pride, intellectual curiosity, emotional vulnerability, and the desire for self-improvement. Milton portrays Eve as a complex character whose fall results from both external manipulation by Satan and internal conflict within herself.

Pride and Ambition

One of the primary forces behind Eve's temptation is pride. Satan skillfully appeals to Eve's sense of self-worth and encourages her to think of herself as deserving greater power and knowledge. Through flattery, he praises her beauty, intelligence, and uniqueness, gradually awakening feelings of pride and ambition within her mind. Eve begins to imagine the possibility of becoming more than she currently is, and this ambition weakens her obedience to divine authority.

Satan convinces Eve that eating the forbidden fruit will elevate her position and free her from limitation. He subtly suggests that God's command is intended to keep human beings ignorant and subordinate. By presenting disobedience as a path toward greatness, Satan transforms Eve's curiosity into ambition. Eve starts to believe that acquiring forbidden knowledge will make her superior and more independent.

Milton portrays pride as a dangerous psychological weakness because it encourages individuals to place personal desire above moral obedience. Eve's

ambition does not arise from evil intentions alone; rather, it reflects a deeply human aspiration for growth, advancement, and self-realization. However, her inability to control this ambition ultimately leads to the Fall. Through Eve's experience, Milton demonstrates how pride can distort judgment and make human beings vulnerable to temptation.

At the same time, Eve's ambition also reflects her desire to escape limitations imposed by hierarchical authority. Her wish for greater knowledge and power can be interpreted as an attempt to assert individuality and independence within a patriarchal structure. Thus, Milton presents pride not only as moral weakness but also as part of the human desire for self-definition and autonomy.

Desire for Wisdom and Equality

Closely connected to Eve's pride is her strong desire for wisdom and equality. Eve is naturally curious and intellectually active, qualities that make her susceptible to Satan's persuasive arguments. Satan tempts her by claiming that the forbidden fruit has the power to grant wisdom and elevate human beings to a godlike state. He argues that if the fruit can transform a serpent into a rational creature capable of speech, it can certainly increase human intelligence and understanding.

Eve becomes attracted to the idea of gaining higher wisdom and expanding her knowledge beyond the limits imposed by God. Her desire for wisdom reflects humanity's universal longing for truth, understanding, and intellectual growth. Milton does not portray this desire as entirely negative; rather, it is shown as a natural aspect of human nature. However, the problem arises when the pursuit of knowledge becomes separated from moral obedience and humility.

The temptation also involves Eve's desire for equality. Satan subtly suggests that eating the fruit will make Eve equal not only to Adam but also to divine beings. Within the hierarchical structure of the poem, Eve occupies a subordinate position under Adam's authority. The promise of wisdom and power therefore appeals to her longing for independence and equal status. Her decision to eat the fruit can be interpreted as an attempt to overcome limitation and achieve self-empowerment.

Milton's portrayal of Eve's desire for equality has generated extensive feminist interpretation. Some critics argue that Eve's ambition for equality challenges patriarchal authority and reflects an early expression of female independence. Others believe that Milton ultimately presents such ambition as dangerous because it leads to disorder and disobedience. This ambiguity contributes to the complexity of Eve's character and makes her one of the most debated figures in literary history.

Through the temptation of Eve, John Milton presents the Fall as a psychological and moral drama rooted in human pride, ambition, and the desire for wisdom and equality. Eve's actions reveal the tension between obedience and freedom, humility and self-assertion, reason and desire. The episode therefore becomes a profound exploration of human nature and the consequences of moral choice in *Paradise Lost*.

Adam's Choice

The Fall in *Paradise Lost* is not solely the result of Eve's disobedience; it is equally shaped by Adam's conscious decision to join her in sin. John Milton presents Adam's choice as a deeply emotional and moral conflict involving love, companionship, free will, and personal responsibility. Unlike Eve, who is deceived by Satan's persuasive rhetoric, Adam fully understands the consequences of disobedience before eating the forbidden fruit. His decision therefore becomes one of the most significant expressions of human freedom and emotional vulnerability in the poem.

Love and Companionship

One of the primary reasons behind Adam's fall is his profound love and emotional attachment to Eve. Milton portrays the relationship between Adam and Eve as one based not only on hierarchy and obedience but also on affection, companionship, and mutual dependence. Eve is Adam's closest companion, and he views life without her as unbearable. When Eve offers him the forbidden fruit after her fall, Adam immediately realizes that she has disobeyed God's command and brought sin into the human world. At this moment, Adam faces a difficult moral choice between obedience to God and loyalty to Eve.

Adam's love for Eve becomes stronger than his commitment to divine law. He fears separation from her and cannot imagine remaining pure while Eve

suffers alone. His emotional attachment overcomes his rational judgment, leading him to choose companionship over obedience. Milton thus presents love as both noble and dangerous. Adam's affection for Eve reflects genuine human emotion and marital devotion, yet it also becomes the cause of his downfall because it weakens his moral resistance.

The theme of companionship is central to understanding Adam's decision. Human beings in the poem are created for social and emotional connection, and Adam's identity is deeply linked with Eve's presence. His willingness to share her fate reveals the strength of human bonds and the emotional complexity of moral choice. Rather than abandoning Eve, Adam chooses solidarity with her even at the cost of divine punishment. This act gives Adam's fall a tragic dimension because it emerges from love rather than ignorance or selfish ambition.

Conscious Participation in the Fall

Unlike Eve, whose fall results partly from deception, Adam participates in the Fall consciously and knowingly. He fully understands God's command and recognizes the consequences of eating the forbidden fruit. Milton emphasizes that Adam is not tricked or manipulated by Satan; instead, he deliberately chooses disobedience after careful reflection. This conscious participation makes Adam morally responsible for the Fall and highlights the poem's emphasis on free will.

Adam's decision demonstrates the conflict between reason and emotion. As the figure associated with rational authority, Adam is expected to exercise wisdom and self-control. He understands that disobedience will lead to suffering, death, and separation from God. However, his emotional dependence on Eve ultimately overpowers his rational understanding. Milton thereby shows that even the most rational human beings are vulnerable to emotional weakness and personal desire.

Adam's conscious choice also reinforces Milton's theological belief that human beings possess genuine moral freedom. God does not force Adam into sin; instead, Adam freely chooses his actions and must therefore accept responsibility for their consequences. The Fall is presented not as an unavoidable destiny but as the result of deliberate human decisions. Through Adam's participation, Milton emphasizes

that sin arises from the misuse of free will rather than from divine injustice.

At the same time, Adam's choice reveals a tragic aspect of human nature. His willingness to share Eve's fate reflects compassion, loyalty, and emotional commitment, qualities that are deeply human and admirable. Yet these same qualities lead him toward destruction when separated from moral discipline and obedience to divine authority. Milton thus presents Adam as a complex and tragic figure whose fall results from the conflict between love and duty.

Through Adam's choice, John Milton deepens the moral and psychological complexity of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*. Adam's love for Eve and his conscious participation in sin highlight the themes of free will, emotional vulnerability, and moral responsibility. The episode demonstrates that human beings are shaped not only by reason but also by powerful emotional bonds that influence their choices and determine their fate.

V. FREE WILL AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Milton's Concept of Free Will

One of the central philosophical concerns in *Paradise Lost* is the concept of free will. John Milton presents human beings as rational creatures who possess the freedom to choose between obedience and disobedience. The poem explores the relationship between divine authority and human freedom, emphasizing that moral responsibility can exist only when individuals are free to make their own choices. Through the actions of Satan, Adam, and Eve, Milton examines how the misuse of free will leads to sin, suffering, and separation from God.

Obedience versus Choice

The conflict between obedience and choice lies at the heart of the poem. God creates Adam and Eve as free beings capable of reason and moral judgment. Although He commands them not to eat the forbidden fruit, He does not force them to obey. Milton makes it clear that obedience has value only when it is voluntary. If Adam and Eve were incapable of choosing otherwise, their obedience would lose its moral significance. Therefore, free will becomes

essential to Milton's understanding of human dignity and spiritual responsibility.

The Garden of Eden symbolizes a world of harmony where human beings possess both innocence and freedom. Adam and Eve are given everything necessary for happiness, yet they are also tested through the prohibition against the Tree of Knowledge. This command creates a moral choice between submission to divine authority and the desire for self-directed action. Satan exploits this freedom by encouraging Eve to question God's command and seek independence through disobedience.

Milton portrays free will as both a gift and a danger. Human beings are granted the ability to reason and choose, but this freedom also makes them vulnerable to temptation and error. Eve's decision to eat the fruit demonstrates how personal desire, ambition, and curiosity can overpower obedience. Similarly, Adam consciously chooses to join Eve despite understanding the consequences of his actions. Both characters exercise free will, and their choices lead directly to the Fall.

The poem therefore emphasizes that sin arises not from external compulsion but from deliberate human choice. Satan may tempt Eve, but he cannot force her to disobey. Likewise, Adam willingly participates in the Fall out of love and emotional attachment. Milton thus rejects the idea that human beings are victims of fate or divine predestination. Instead, he presents moral choice as the foundation of human existence and responsibility.

Divine Justice and Human Freedom

Milton's concept of free will is closely connected to the idea of divine justice. One of the major aims of *Paradise Lost* is to "justify the ways of God to men." Milton attempts to explain how a just and benevolent God can allow evil and suffering to exist in the world. His answer lies in the principle of human freedom. God grants His creatures the liberty to choose because genuine love and obedience cannot exist without freedom.

According to Milton, divine justice operates fairly because God does not force human beings into sin. Adam and Eve are warned about the consequences of disobedience and possess the rational ability to resist temptation. Their punishment is therefore justified because it results from their own misuse of freedom.

The Fall becomes a moral consequence of voluntary action rather than an act of divine cruelty.

At the same time, Milton presents God as merciful and compassionate. Although Adam and Eve are punished, they are not abandoned entirely. After the Fall, they experience repentance, self-awareness, and the hope of eventual redemption. Through this balance between justice and mercy, Milton demonstrates that divine authority is not tyrannical but morally ordered and compassionate.

Human freedom in the poem is therefore both empowering and burdensome. It allows individuals to exercise reason, pursue moral goodness, and develop spiritual identity. However, it also creates the possibility of sin, suffering, and moral failure. Milton suggests that true freedom does not mean unrestricted independence but the wise use of reason in harmony with divine order. Disobedience may appear to offer liberation, but it ultimately results in bondage to sin and suffering.

Through the themes of obedience, choice, divine justice, and human freedom, John Milton presents a profound philosophical exploration of moral responsibility in *Paradise Lost*. The poem portrays free will as the defining feature of humanity and emphasizes that individuals must bear responsibility for the consequences of their choices.

Responsibility for the Fall

The question of responsibility for the Fall is one of the most important moral and theological concerns in *Paradise Lost*. John Milton presents the Fall not as the result of destiny or divine compulsion but as the outcome of deliberate human choice. Through the actions of Adam and Eve, Milton explores the relationship between free will, temptation, and moral accountability. The poem emphasizes that both Adam and Eve share responsibility for humanity's fall because both exercise free will and knowingly participate in disobedience.

Shared Responsibility of Adam and Eve

Although Eve is the first to eat the forbidden fruit, Milton does not place the entire blame for the Fall upon her alone. Instead, the poem presents the Fall as a shared act of disobedience involving both Adam and Eve. Eve becomes vulnerable to temptation because of her curiosity, ambition, and desire for wisdom, but Adam also knowingly chooses to join her after

understanding the consequences of sin. In this way, both characters contribute to the tragic outcome.

Eve's responsibility lies in her willingness to listen to Satan and question divine authority. Satan manipulates her desire for knowledge and equality, leading her to believe that eating the fruit will bring wisdom and self-improvement. Her decision reflects the misuse of free will because she consciously disobeys God's command despite being aware of the prohibition.

However, Adam's responsibility is equally significant because his participation in the Fall is entirely conscious. Unlike Eve, Adam is not deceived by Satan. He immediately recognizes that Eve has sinned and understands that eating the fruit will bring suffering and death. Nevertheless, he deliberately chooses to share Eve's fate out of love and emotional attachment. His decision demonstrates that emotional desire and human affection can overpower reason and moral judgment.

Milton therefore rejects the idea that the Fall results solely from female weakness. Instead, he presents Adam and Eve as morally responsible individuals whose actions arise from personal choice. Their shared responsibility reflects Milton's belief that sin is a universal human condition rather than the fault of one gender alone. The Fall becomes a tragedy of human weakness, emotional vulnerability, and misuse of freedom.

Free Will as both Gift and Burden

Milton presents free will as one of God's greatest gifts to humanity. Adam and Eve are created with the ability to reason, make choices, and distinguish between right and wrong. This freedom gives human beings dignity and moral significance because true obedience can exist only when it is voluntary. Without free will, love, faith, and virtue would lose their meaning.

At the same time, Milton portrays free will as a burden because it makes human beings responsible for the consequences of their actions. Adam and Eve are free to obey or disobey God, but they must accept the suffering that results from their choices. Their fall demonstrates that freedom can lead not only to moral growth but also to sin, pain, and destruction when guided by pride, ambition, or desire.

The burden of free will becomes evident after the Fall when Adam and Eve experience guilt, shame, fear, and alienation. They become aware of their moral failure and the loss of innocence caused by their disobedience. Milton shows that freedom involves responsibility and that human beings cannot escape the consequences of their decisions.

Yet Milton does not present free will entirely negatively. Even after the Fall, Adam and Eve retain the ability to repent, seek forgiveness, and hope for redemption. Their suffering leads to greater self-awareness and spiritual understanding. In this sense, free will also becomes the foundation for moral growth and eventual salvation.

Through the themes of shared responsibility and free will, John Milton presents a profound exploration of human nature in *Paradise Lost*. The poem suggests that freedom is both empowering and dangerous because it allows human beings to shape their destiny while making them accountable for their moral choices. Adam and Eve's Fall therefore becomes a timeless representation of the human struggle between desire, reason, obedience, and responsibility.

Redemption and Hope

Although *Paradise Lost* centers on the Fall of Man and the consequences of disobedience, John Milton does not end the poem in despair. Instead, the epic ultimately moves toward the themes of redemption, repentance, and hope. Milton presents human beings as morally imperfect yet capable of spiritual renewal through repentance and divine mercy. The poem emphasizes that although Adam and Eve misuse their free will and bring suffering into the world, they are not abandoned by God. Through repentance and faith, the possibility of salvation remains open to humanity.

Repentance after the Fall

After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve immediately experience the painful consequences of their disobedience. Their innocence disappears, and they become conscious of guilt, shame, fear, and alienation. At first, they react with confusion and mutual accusation, blaming one another for the Fall. This emotional conflict reflects the breakdown of harmony not only between humanity and God but also within human relationships themselves.

However, as the poem progresses, Adam and Eve gradually recognize their moral failure and begin to accept responsibility for their actions. This recognition marks the beginning of repentance. Instead of remaining trapped in pride and despair, they acknowledge their sin and seek forgiveness from God. Milton portrays repentance as an essential step toward moral and spiritual recovery. Through self-awareness and humility, Adam and Eve regain a sense of inner dignity and spiritual understanding.

Eve, in particular, expresses deep sorrow for her actions and even offers to bear the punishment alone in order to save Adam and future humanity. Her remorse reveals emotional maturity and moral growth after the Fall. Adam too moves from anger and hopelessness toward acceptance and prayer. Their shared repentance restores emotional unity between them and strengthens their relationship through mutual forgiveness and compassion.

Milton thus suggests that moral failure does not permanently destroy human worth. Although Adam and Eve lose Paradise, they gain greater knowledge of suffering, responsibility, and the need for divine grace. Their repentance demonstrates that free will, though capable of causing sin, also enables individuals to seek forgiveness and moral transformation.

Promise of Salvation

One of the most important messages of *Paradise Lost* is the promise of salvation and future redemption for humanity. Even before the Fall occurs, God foresees human disobedience and prepares a plan for salvation through divine mercy. The Son of God willingly offers Himself as a redeemer who will eventually restore humanity's relationship with God. This promise transforms the poem from a tragedy of loss into a narrative of hope and spiritual renewal.

The angel Michael later reveals to Adam a vision of future human history, including suffering, sin, sacrifice, and eventual redemption through Christ. These prophetic visions reassure Adam that humanity will not remain permanently condemned. Although death and suffering enter the world because of sin, divine grace offers the possibility of spiritual salvation and eternal life.

Milton's concept of salvation is closely connected to free will and moral responsibility. Human beings

cannot avoid the consequences of sin, but they retain the freedom to repent, exercise faith, and seek moral goodness. Salvation therefore depends not on blind obedience alone but also on spiritual awareness, humility, and trust in divine mercy.

The conclusion of the poem reflects both sorrow and hope. Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden, but they leave with renewed faith, mutual support, and hope for the future. Milton suggests that true Paradise is not merely a physical place but a spiritual condition that can be regained through obedience, repentance, and divine grace.

Through the themes of repentance and salvation, John Milton presents a hopeful vision of humanity in *Paradise Lost*. The poem acknowledges human weakness and moral failure, yet it also affirms the possibility of redemption and spiritual renewal. In this way, Milton transforms the story of the Fall into a profound meditation on free will, divine mercy, and the enduring hope of salvation.

VI. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Interconnection of Gender, Temptation, and Free Will

One of the greatest strengths of *Paradise Lost* lies in the intricate interconnection between the themes of gender, temptation, and free will. John Milton does not treat these themes separately; rather, he combines them to create a complex exploration of human nature, moral responsibility, and spiritual conflict. Through the experiences of Adam and Eve, Milton demonstrates how gender roles influence temptation and how free will determines the moral consequences of human actions. The interaction among these themes forms the philosophical and emotional foundation of the poem.

Relationship among the Three Themes

The relationship between gender, temptation, and free will becomes most visible in the episode of the Fall. Milton's portrayal of Adam and Eve reflects the patriarchal structure of seventeenth-century society, where Adam represents rational authority and Eve symbolizes beauty, emotional sensitivity, and curiosity. These gendered characteristics shape the way temptation operates within the poem.

Satan deliberately chooses Eve as the target of temptation because he believes her emotional and intellectual qualities make her more vulnerable to persuasion. Eve's curiosity, desire for knowledge, and longing for greater independence become the means through which Satan manipulates her. Thus, gender representation directly influences the process of temptation. Eve's role as a woman within a hierarchical structure affects both her psychological vulnerability and her aspiration for self-improvement and equality.

At the same time, Milton avoids presenting Eve as merely weak or passive. Her decision to eat the forbidden fruit results from the exercise of free will. She listens to Satan's arguments, reflects upon them, and consciously chooses disobedience. Her temptation therefore becomes a moral and intellectual struggle rather than a simple act of deception. Similarly, Adam's participation in the Fall arises from his own free choice. Although he understands the consequences of sin, he chooses companionship with Eve over obedience to God. In this way, free will connects both gender and temptation to moral responsibility.

The three themes are therefore inseparable within the structure of the poem. Gender shapes the nature of temptation, temptation tests human freedom, and free will determines moral accountability. Milton uses this relationship to show that human beings are responsible for their choices regardless of external influence or social position. The Fall becomes not only a theological event but also a deeply human drama involving desire, ambition, love, authority, and individual decision-making.

Human Vulnerability and Moral Conflict

The interconnection of these themes also reveals Milton's understanding of human vulnerability and moral conflict. Adam and Eve are not portrayed as purely sinful or evil characters; rather, they are human beings whose weaknesses arise from natural emotions and desires. Eve's vulnerability emerges from her curiosity, ambition, and desire for wisdom and equality, while Adam's weakness lies in his emotional attachment and love for Eve. These qualities are not entirely negative, yet they become dangerous when they overpower reason and obedience.

Milton presents temptation as an internal psychological struggle rather than simply an external attack by Satan. Satan succeeds because he appeals to existing human desires and insecurities. Eve begins to question her position within the hierarchy of creation and becomes attracted to the possibility of gaining greater knowledge and independence. Adam, on the other hand, experiences conflict between rational duty and emotional loyalty. Both characters struggle between moral obligation and personal desire, demonstrating the complexity of human decision-making.

The poem therefore portrays moral conflict as an essential part of human existence. Free will gives individuals the ability to choose, but it also exposes them to uncertainty, temptation, and suffering. Human beings possess reason and moral awareness, yet they remain vulnerable to pride, ambition, emotional attachment, and persuasive influence. Milton suggests that true moral strength depends upon the proper balance between freedom, reason, and obedience.

Furthermore, the moral conflict experienced by Adam and Eve reflects universal aspects of human life. Their struggles with desire, ambition, love, and responsibility continue to resonate with readers because they represent timeless human experiences. The poem shows that human beings often face difficult choices in which emotional, intellectual, and moral values come into conflict.

Through the interconnection of gender, temptation, and free will, John Milton creates a profound exploration of human vulnerability and moral responsibility in *Paradise Lost*. The poem reveals that human beings are shaped by both external influences and internal desires, and that moral freedom brings with it the burden of choice and accountability.

Contemporary Relevance

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* continues to remain relevant in contemporary society because of its profound exploration of gender relations, ethical responsibility, and individual freedom. Although written in the seventeenth century, the poem addresses questions that still shape modern debates about identity, equality, morality, and human choice. Milton presents human beings as morally responsible

agents whose actions arise from free will, and this idea continues to resonate in the modern world.

Gender Debates in Modern Society

One of the most debated aspects of *Paradise Lost* in contemporary criticism is Milton's representation of gender. The relationship between Adam and Eve reflects the patriarchal structure of seventeenth-century society, where male authority was considered natural and divinely ordained. Adam is portrayed as rational, authoritative, and intellectually superior, while Eve is associated with beauty, emotion, and dependence. This hierarchy has led many modern feminist critics to argue that the poem reinforces traditional gender stereotypes.

Eve's role in the Fall has particularly attracted critical attention. Since she is tempted first and then persuades Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, she appears to bear greater responsibility for humanity's downfall. Some readers interpret this as a reflection of historical attitudes that associated women with weakness, temptation, and moral instability. In modern discussions about gender equality, such portrayals are often criticized for perpetuating patriarchal assumptions.

However, contemporary interpretations also reveal a more complex understanding of Eve's character. Eve is not merely passive or submissive; she demonstrates intelligence, curiosity, independence, and emotional depth. Her desire for knowledge reflects a deeply human aspiration for self-awareness and growth. Modern scholars often argue that Milton gives Eve psychological complexity, making her one of the most dynamic characters in the epic. Her experiences of temptation, guilt, repentance, and reconciliation reflect universal human struggles rather than simple moral weakness.

The poem therefore remains relevant in contemporary gender debates because it invites readers to question traditional power structures and reconsider the representation of women in literature and society. Discussions surrounding equality, autonomy, and shared responsibility continue to echo Milton's treatment of Adam and Eve.

Ethical Choices and Individual Freedom

Another major reason for the contemporary relevance of *Paradise Lost* is its emphasis on ethical choice and human freedom. Milton argues that God created

human beings with free will, allowing them the freedom to choose between obedience and disobedience. Adam and Eve are not forced into sin; rather, they consciously decide to act against divine command. This focus on personal responsibility reflects enduring philosophical and ethical concerns about the nature of freedom.

In the modern world, individuals constantly face moral dilemmas involving personal desires, social obligations, and ethical principles. The choices made by Adam, Eve, and even Satan mirror contemporary struggles between ambition and morality, freedom and responsibility, or temptation and self-control. Milton suggests that freedom without wisdom can lead to destruction, while ethical responsibility is essential for human dignity.

Satan's rebellion is also highly relevant to modern discussions of individual freedom. His refusal to submit to divine authority can be interpreted both as heroic resistance and destructive pride. This ambiguity makes Satan one of the most debated figures in literature. Contemporary readers often recognize in Satan the modern spirit of rebellion against authority, political oppression, or social conformity. At the same time, Milton demonstrates how excessive pride and selfish ambition can corrupt noble ideals.

The poem also raises important questions about the consequences of human actions. Adam and Eve's disobedience brings suffering not only to themselves but to all humanity. In contemporary society, this idea reflects ethical concerns about collective responsibility in areas such as politics, environmental issues, technology, and social justice. Human actions continue to have far-reaching consequences beyond individual lives.

Continuing Relevance of the Epic

Paradise Lost remains significant because it addresses timeless human concerns: the desire for freedom, the struggle between reason and passion, the conflict between authority and rebellion, and the search for redemption after failure. Modern readers continue to find meaning in Milton's exploration of moral conflict and human vulnerability.

The poem's enduring power lies in its ability to provoke debate rather than provide simple answers. Its portrayal of gender relations encourages critical

reflection on equality and identity, while its emphasis on ethical decision-making highlights the importance of responsibility in human life. In this way, Milton's epic transcends its historical context and continues to engage contemporary readers intellectually, morally, and emotionally.

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* explores the interconnected themes of gender, temptation, and free will through the story of Adam and Eve and their Fall from Eden. These themes are central to the epic and reveal Milton's understanding of human nature, morality, and responsibility.

Milton presents gender roles according to the social and religious beliefs of the seventeenth century. Adam is portrayed as rational, authoritative, and spiritually strong, while Eve is associated with beauty, emotion, and sensitivity. Although Eve is shown as subordinate to Adam, Milton also gives her intelligence, independence, and curiosity. Her complex personality makes her an important and dynamic character in the poem.

Temptation enters Paradise through Satan, who exploits Eve's desire for knowledge and self-improvement. Disguised as a serpent, Satan persuades Eve to eat the forbidden fruit by appealing to her ambition and curiosity. Eve then convinces Adam to share in her act of disobedience. Milton shows that temptation works by influencing human desires and weaknesses rather than forcing individuals to sin.

The concept of free will is one of the poem's most important ideas. God gives Adam and Eve the freedom to choose between obedience and disobedience. Their Fall occurs not because of destiny or divine compulsion, but because they freely decide to act against God's command. Milton therefore emphasizes moral responsibility and the consequences of human choice.

The relationship among gender, temptation, and free will highlights the complexity of human behavior. Eve's temptation reflects both her vulnerability and her desire for wisdom, while Adam's decision to join Eve shows the power of love and emotional

attachment. Through these characters, Milton illustrates how human beings struggle between reason and passion, obedience and desire.

Ultimately, *Paradise Lost* presents the Fall as a tragic but meaningful event that demonstrates the value of free will and the possibility of repentance and redemption. The poem continues to remain relevant because it addresses universal questions about human freedom, moral responsibility, gender relations, and ethical conflict.

Conclusion

A critical analysis of *Paradise Lost* demonstrates that the poem remains deeply relevant in contemporary society. Through its exploration of gender roles, ethical choices, and individual freedom, Milton's epic speaks to ongoing debates about equality, autonomy, morality, and responsibility. While some aspects of the poem reflect the patriarchal values of its age, its complexity allows modern readers to reinterpret and challenge those ideas. Ultimately, *Paradise Lost* endures as a timeless work because it captures the universal struggles of humanity and the continuing quest for freedom, knowledge, and moral understanding.

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Demystifying Gender Roles through Children's Literature: An Analysis of Indian English Picture books

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 25 Apr 2026; Received in revised form: 21 May 2026; Accepted: 26 May 2026; Available online: 30 May 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Gender-sensitive language, Children's literature, sexism, heteronormativity, and gender binary/ stereotypes.	'Language development plays a very important role in the development of perceptual and practical concepts. Language enables us to check our experiences with others and ensure a shared meaning emerges from them. Thus, making sure that we grasp the socially accepted use of the practical concept or the socially accepted vocabulary that represents the perceptual concept' (NCF 2020, pg.45). This paper tries to uncover the perceptual concepts and their influence on children through language. Sunderland says that both technologies and children's books can unconsciously influence the receptor as agents of socialisation. It is important to create awareness among children about the insensitivity towards gender (including language use). Florent & Walter (1988) opine that sexism is an unconscious cultural bias that is reinforced by the language that people use from childhood onwards. This study is an attempt to explore how gender has been reintroduced as a psychosocial reality to the heteronormative culture established on the grounds of the gender binary through Children's Literature. A qualitative content analysis approach is employed to critically examine the text and illustrations for verbal and visual narration. This paper aims to analyse picture books set in Indian settings as the primary texts. It leverages the idea of gender identity and expression to trace changes in children's literature that foster realisation and change among children. This paper seeks to address the tendency to confine society within a binary framework through children's literature and to explore how children's literature subverts stereotypical norms and calls for a change in society's perspective, especially through the use of gender-sensitive language.

I. INTRODUCTION

Young children become the core pillars of society by being responsible citizens. It is important to consider children's socialisation when designing stories for them. Peterson & Lach (1990) say one of the most crucial and early learning experiences for a young

child is gender development (cited by Narahara, May M). From early childhood, children learn about gender roles. It is typical for elders to appreciate male children for being confident, taking leadership roles, and being brave, and female children for being so soft-spoken, caring, and doing chores. We see nothing

wrong with these observations, but subtle conversations and appreciations matter and can have a significant impact on children. This reinforces that gender roles and gender inequalities are woven into the fabric of our society, with or without our consciousness.

Children are forced to conform to societal expectations about gender identities, and that phenomenon is known as gendering. The term 'gendering' might seem alien to the common people, but the process is not, because it is reinforced by society. According to American sociologist Michael Kimmel (2000), 'Gendering' is the process by which social norms and cultural expectations are shaped and reinforce gender stereotypes and inequalities. Though these gender differences are not innate, people maintain them through various sociocultural mechanisms. Thus, through socialisation and learning, children develop gender schemata that guide their behaviour.

As Pandey's paper points out, what Kane (2012) et al. said is that sociologists observe that societal norms significantly support gender-normative behaviour and discourage gender counter-normative displays, meaning that one's gendered behaviour does not originate in a social vacuum (Pandey, 2022). As cited in Politis (2022), gender is a prime example of how nurture may influence nature, as its influence is so strong and ingrained that people mistake it for the way things always are. Subsequently, our true identities lead to difficulties of marginalisation and identity problems. People are constrained by their roles, constantly aware that they do not fit into the ideal society, which leads to discomfort and the demise of the individual (Copenhaver, 2002; Butler, 2004, 2006; Ferearelli, 2001). Therefore, we must not force any individual to follow the rules that are abided by society, and we must consciously remind ourselves that sex is a biological factor and gender is a social construct.

Children's Literature and Language

Sunderland (1992: 86) says, "TV, films, videos, computer games, newspapers, and children's books can have an unconscious influence on audiences as agents of socialisation, so presumably, can EFL materials". So any text can have a significant impact on readers, whether adults or children; it can have an

immense influence and bring about change. As Peter Hunt claims, children's literature has a long and rich history, dating back to the mid-18th century (Hunt, 2009), and studies have already shown that children's books play an important role in social learning and identity development (Paterson, 1999). It is not just an entertainer; it is no longer a mere discipline but has evolved into a discourse that elicits multidimensional debate on developing perspectives, building identities, etc. The stories, colourful illustrations, and lively animations are an indispensable part of a child's formative years. More than being an entertainer, it also plays a pivotal role in identity formation, developing perspectives and understanding of inclusivity and diversity, and becomes a powerful agent of socialisation, transmitting cultural values, ethical lessons, and fundamental human experiences. The enduring relevance of children's literature lies in its ability to cultivate critical thinkers, compassionate individuals, and global citizens. The illustrations, the language used, everything grabs the children's attention, especially at a very young age.

Teaching from early education will reduce the effort made in the future. The need to publish books like the Supreme Court's Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes to assist elder judges and lawyers in using gender-sensitive language is one example. Even now, parents and teachers find it difficult to choose stories for children that discuss political and social issues. The books that think outside the box and that do not conform to the norms are still sidelined. Children who transgresses gender norms are marginalised and become the target of all the 'jokes'. The necessity to challenge gender roles and identities and to break stereotypes is necessary through children's literature with the healthy portrayal of all genders.

Earlier children's literature helped in maintaining the phenomenon of 'gendering' by establishing the heteronormative culture on the grounds of a binary level. The taboo was well maintained in most of the children's literature. Researchers show that the majority of children's books feature male figures; it is always a princess who is helped by a charming prince or a king. Indian English picturebooks published by NGO organisations like *Tulika*, *Gayisi Media*, *Anveshi*, *Pratham Books*, *Karadi Tales*, etc., aim to break the 'tendency' to narrate stories through a binary lens. Instead of marginalising and sidelining women

authors and characters, these stories try to put them at the centre, with a vision and a mission. *Tataki Wins Again* (2008), *Kali Wants to Dance*, *Rainbow Girls and Rainbow Boys*, *Tine and the Faraway Mountain*, *The Weightlifting Princess*, *Sadiq Wants to Stitch*, and *The Boy Who Wore Bangles* are some of the stories that provide examples of stories that defy gender norms, which children feel connected to and help them think critically at the same time. Florent & Walter (1988) opine that sexism is an unconscious cultural bias that is reinforced by the language that people use from childhood onwards. It is so insidious that it goes unnoticed and reinforces gender stereotypes, conditioning children to accept the way they see their surroundings. With the help of children's literature, we can help children reexamine the gender beliefs and assumptions that develop through the process of 'gendering' through subtle changes in language use.

In *The Lenses of Gender Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*, Sandra Bem (1993) drew attention to the understanding of gender at the time and revealed the idea that the strict adherence to either masculine or feminine gender roles cannot be psychologically healthy for the individual. The idea of androgyny was proposed as a healthy alternative. She also challenged the idea of gender as an essential identity by claiming that gender is something learned from the demonstrations around people and pointed out how children internalise these social gender roles. This concept of androgyny and the idea that rigidly adhering the binary roles as psychologically unhealthy, can be employed in reading the gender non-conforming experiences for better understanding of the child protagonists.

Looking through Children's Books

In the story *Tataki Wins Again*, written by Gogu Shyamala, the central character is a girl, Balamma (Tataki), who is called a 'tomboy' by a labourer for her boldness. This story explores gender and shows how brave a girl is in helping her father water their bund, and her vibrant character takes risks and remains active throughout. It breaks the stereotypical portrayals of boys as always active and girls as passive. Here, Balamma takes the lead and fights back, saving herself from the landowner. Moreover, it shows a family's affection through simple acts and subtle word choices, making it feel relatable. Along with the theme of gender violence, this also discusses

the caste hierarchy. The illustrations add beauty to the story, keeping the children's attention throughout. The dialogue, "*Tataki! You bloody witch! You are a small girl, are you? What makes you come here like a man and water the groundnut fields? In our houses, girls like you don't step into the field. You malas and madigas don't even know that girls have to be kept at home! You are a small girl, are you?*" shows how girls were treated and what they had to fight through for being so brave. Even when she was dragged and beaten, she fought to teach our children how to fight in these situations, and Tataki became a role model for children. "*She aimed and kicked him as hard as she could on the groin with both her legs*". Rather than presenting Tataki as a girl with superpowers, like any other person, Tataki (Balamma) was beaten. Then she stood and fought for herself without losing herself, neither waiting for someone to help.

So many organisers and publishers bring enlightening stories that discuss gender identities and defy gender norms. *Rainbow Girls and Rainbow Boys* are two such stories published by Pratham Books, which represent the different ways a girl and a boy would like to live and present themselves. "*Ma, if Didi can wear it, why can't I?*" The question asked by a boy in *Rainbow Boys* depicts a child's curiosity about why they are being restrained under certain conditions, yet the child still chooses to follow his own way. The same way *Sadiq Wants to Stitch* is a story published by Karadi Tales in which the boy is determined to follow his passion even after his mother reminds him that the boys in their community do not stitch. *The Boy Who Wore Bangles* shows the love for bangles for a boy while he wears them and dances. Through verbal and visual texts, these stories defy gender norms and teach children to break the notions that were followed earlier.

The stories, based on real-life situations, such as *Kali Wants to Dance*, in which a boy from a Dalit community with an immense passion for classical dance learns and becomes a professional dancer, even though no boys used to learn at that time. Another story is about a woman, Tine, in *Tine and the Faraway Mountain*, who climbed Mount Everest at the age of 25 while disguised as a male porter to achieve her goal. Each book portrays gender-diverse children engaged in cultural reflections on gender roles and expressions.

Children believe that they are categorised into particular genders and associate themselves with specific roles attributed to them by the patriarchal, conventional society. Children learn from their surroundings to internalise masculine and feminine schemas, and that's where we understand the significance of children's literature. Through lexicogrammatical and visual patterns, gender roles and identities are reinforced in children. Sandra Bem (1981) says schemas are mental shortcuts or frameworks that help pay attention to and learn new information that is directly relevant to them. Information that is pertinent to a schema is more likely to fit in people's minds than unrelated information. Moreover, people often recall details mistakenly to keep them consistent with their schemas, which modifies how they perceive the world (Bem, 1981). This proves that gender is a psycho-social reality, the behaviour is developed and maintained by the influence of our surroundings. The self-monitoring society proposed by Foucault in Panopticon describes how people in society become intensely aware of the critical scrutiny on them, that they will limit themselves to be acceptable to others, and how we subtly teach our children to follow the same through children's picture books. The fear of punishment, ridicule, and disapproval faced by gender non-conforming children in asserting themselves can be read along the same lines. To fit in and as per society passively forces us to act in a particular way, we perform our gender by imitating, as Butler said, 'gender is performative'.

II. CONCLUSION

Children learn gender roles through their interactions with others and through socialisation in childhood. They imitate others, learn from interacting with them, and gain insights from the stories they listen to. It is important to include stories that discuss gender and defy gender norms. The narratives serve as a basic tool for fostering children's perceptions of themselves and others, and help them think critically about the complexities of human interactions. Along with discussing gender roles and breaking traditional representations, introducing characters with different relationships and representing different genders in the stories helps introduce diverse genders and foster empathy towards others. With the rich tapestry of

stories within the pages, children will learn to honour their individuality, interact with respect, develop critical thinking skills, and empower themselves.

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The figure in the margins: A case of the Gypsies in Emma

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 27 Apr 2026; Received in revised form: 23 May 2026; Accepted: 27 May 2026; Available online: 31 May 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Jane Austen, Emma, Gypsies, Nineteenth Century England	<i>In this article I intend to explore the phenomenon of what has often been called the "Gypsy Problem" in nineteenth-century Britain. Although the Gypsies have been in Great Britain at least since 1505, interest in the Gypsies exploded in the nineteenth century, and mainstream British Legislators, scholars and writers all found themselves fascinated by this mysterious people whose origins, language and customs were unknown to people outside of the tribe. Jane Austen's novel Emma clearly portrays the world of the gypsies. The contemporary literature in English is flourishing as a result of the development of cultural pluralism and globalization. In such multicultural context, it is necessary and significant for scholars to make a study of the representations of the Gypsies in the margins and the need for the integration of these people to the mainstream of the society. The developing world of Austen with the industrial advancement, was in need to utilize all social resources, including their population effectively and strategically. Though the community of Highbury is not industrialized yet the growth of trade class and the yeomanry reflects the changing time of the nineteenth century. In my paper, I am interested to explore that Harriet Smith's encounter with a group of gypsies reveals a great deal about perceptions of gypsies in the early part of the nineteenth century, and it will shed light on Austen's preoccupation with a social system, understood as England undergoing change.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

"Once upon a time there was a king named Bahram V Gor, of Sasanian a Persian country. Towards the end of his reign he learned that the poor could not afford to enjoy music. So he asked the king of India to send ten thousand lute playing experts, men and women for his country. When they arrived the king gave each one an ox, a donkey and a donkey load of wheat so that they could live on agriculture and play music for the poor. But they ate up the oxen and the wheat and came back a year later. The king

got angry with them and their action of wasting what he had given them. He ordered them to pack up their bags on their asses and go wandering around the world". (Shahnameh: The Epic of Kings)

This is a legend reported in 'Shahnameh' national epic of Iran, written by a Persian Poet Ferdowsi. This very story reveals the history behind the migration of that group of people known as Gypsies. This is not a single story there are lots of stories relating to the history of the Gypsies. Just like some historians argue that the Gypsies are actually a

group of soldiers who moved to west with their families after being defeated in the raids by Mahmud of Ghazni. Even the process of their naming is indicative of the lack of information. Charles G. Leland in his book *The Gypsies* (1882) also showed that they were initially known as "Egyptians" from which the term "Gypsies" is derived because their place of origin was unknown or misconstrued and a myth was projected upon them.

Although early Legislation (the 'Egyptian Act' of 1530, passed by Henry VIII, banned the Romanies from England entirely; 'the Vagabonds Act 1547' was a statute passed under Edward VI entitled 'an acte for Punishment of Vagabondes and for the relief of the poor and impotent Parsons'; and 'the Vagrancy Act 1824' that makes it an offence to sleep rough or beg.) reflects concerns about their act of thievery and vagrancy, little factual historical information exist about them. Most hypothesis about Gypsies are based on modern linguistic theories and genetic studies. And we find a number of stories regarding their origin. Their identity is constructed in British discourse in large part by their functions in literature. In much of the art, music and literature of the 19th Century we find the description of Gypsies.

English literature best reflects a real picture of the gypsies. In Shakespeare's plays we find diverse description of gypsies. Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* and Jane Austen's novel *Emma* clearly portray the world of the gypsies.

II. HARRIET AND THE GYPSIES

Austen's use of the alien dark-skinned gypsies in Chapter III of volume III gave rise to an unexpected event. Harriet was taking a walk along the Richmond Road in the company of a friend, Miss Bickerton, when a gipsy woman and her children "half a dozen children, headed by a stout woman and a great boy, all clamorous and impertinent(229)" came in front of them. The novelist reports that by being approached by a small Romani child, Harriet's companion Miss Bickerton became excessively frightened and ran away from the scene. But Harriet was left absolutely powerless and exceedingly terrified and was unable to follow her friend because

she suffered very much from cramps after dancing at the crown Inn Ball.

The gypsies have done very little but their presence has severely alarmed these young woman. Harriet gives these people a token gift but we find that 'her terror and her purse were too tempting, and she was followed, or rather surrounded by the whole gang demanding more'. Harriet is soon rescued by Frank Churchill and Mr. Knightley takes the charges to save the area from the gypsies. The novelist next points out that 'the gypsies did not wait for the operation of justice; they took themselves off in a hurry'. And Highbury quickly recovers its calm and the gypsies soon migrate to another location.

This brief moment in the novel dramatizes the threat posed by the black nomades to the young, fair skinned, blue eyed female. Gypsies were seen as a major problem in England in Austen's time. Even conversing with gypsies was considered as a hanging offence. Sarah Emsley in her essay "The Gypsies in Emma" presents an incident of 1782, when a fourteen-year old girl was found in the company of gypsies was hanged though she was desperately protesting for her innocence. Austen's novel shows the lack of settlement of gypsies. The gypsies are presented not far from the civilization but they are also not allowed inside the parameters of the village. Austen presents them 'about half a mile beyond Highbury on a broad patch of greens ward deeply shaded by elms on each side', nearer to nature. They lived without fixed abode or employment. The gypsies maintain wandering existence with dirty and uncultured life style rejecting the normal life style of Highbury. Their transitory movement is not accepted by the English people as it differs from their tradition and disrupts their contribution to the growth of national economy and culture.

We find a clear and alive but slight different picture of the gypsies in fielding's novel *Tom Jones*. In Book XII, chapter XII we see, the encounter of a group of Egyptians by Tom and Patridge, by approaching the suburbs of a large city, in a rainy night. Tom and Patridge hear voices singing in the distance and Patridge is greatly worried that these voices could belong to witches.

'Merry - making, sir!' Cries Patridge;
'Who could be merry making at this

time of night and in such a place, and such weather? They can be nothing but ghosts or witches or some evil spirits or other, that's certain'.

Jones smiles at the fear of Patridge and advances towards the light, the sound of human voices. The assemblage is a group of gypsies, celebrating a wedding. The king of Gypsies is present. Tom treats him with great respect. The king explains about the well governed people of his group. He says that they have abandoned the system of lords and made everyone equal. He explains that their society does not use capital punishment, but use 'Shame' as a weapon for punishment. Such type of description shows the reforming, changing nature of the gypsies who can be incorporated in society.

But the next moment we find that Patridge becomes tempted by the solicitations of a gypsy woman. And her husband who notices that now wants him to be punished. The king wisely reveals that the whole affair was just a trap to get money from Patridge. The king then punishes the husband to wear horns on his head for a month and his wife is labeled a whore. The king then explains how gypsies and non-gypsies operate- 'my people rob your people, and your people rob one another'. Fielding makes some social criticism through the gypsies, the world of gypsies is admired and respected here unlike Emma.

In Emma the gypsies are imagined as both biologically and culturally black. This dark appearance makes them anti-Christian and relates them to evil and the lowest of social outcasts in the eye of the people. The gypsies are also not at all interested to improve themselves or to co-operate in the political, economic or cultural growth of the country. The gypsies are not educated; they don't know the manners of English society and uses thievery as the only means of income. The world of Austen's text is strongly influenced by the earlier negative opinions of the nomadic people. Here Highbury wants to reform Harriet and to educate in proper English tradition but the village seems to have no interest in integrating the Gypsies.

In the novel *Tom Jones* we also find a clear picture of the reformation of the hero Tom. The

parentage of Tom Jones is unknown like the origin of the gypsies is unknown. Tom Jones is presented as an extremely handsome, well formed, brave, generous and kind man. The goodness of heart is his main quality. Gradually he also controls his animal passions, loves Sophia and marries her. His parentage is also revealed towards the end of the novel. We see the transformation of Tom Jones, who himself is willing to be a part of the progress of the society.

Like Jones, Harriet is also included in the society of Highbury. Austen's first presentation of Harriet shows her unknown origins. She is introduced as 'the natural daughter of somebody'. The novelist describes her as a very pretty girl "short, plump and fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, regular features and a look of great sweetness". Harriet appears as the anonymous and archetypal Anglo-saxon female, complete with the traditional physical qualities.

Through this initial sketch of Harriet, Jane Austen points out the differences between the dark skinned gypsies and the white Harriet and also exposes an important similarity between them. Both are 'natural'. Neither Harriet nor the gypsies have a definite origin or social position. She is unable to escape from the gypsies origin. But the whiteness of Harriet visually differentiates her from the gypsies. Though the gypsies try to cover the natural daughter in their nature, she is saved only for her Englishness and good manners.

We also find a good comparison of the gypsies and Will Ladislaw in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*. Will Ladislaw has been portrayed (1,9) as a tall, slim and agile youngster. He has studied at Rugby and lived abroad as much as in England. He likes painting and poetry but does not wish to take up a fixed job. He is quite indifferent to class distinctions and mixes freely with the poor children everywhere. He does not follow the conventional manners and restrictions. Will reveals in his status as an outsider: "he was a sort of gypsies, rather enjoying the sense of belonging to no class"(5,46). And the conservative townspeople of Middlemarch question about his family history.

This novel like *Emma* takes place just some years after the end of the French Revolution. And

revolutionary ideas were still spreading across Europe. Many English people were afraid of such bloody revolution and revolutionary ideas. This is why it was important to know well about everyone, the neighbours also about their origin and homeland, so that they will no more be dangerous. A single change from conventional manners of a person threatens the people.

Ladislaw is not fully known of his family history. He only knows that his grandmother ran away from her family to marry the man she loved and lost her fortune. And his mother ran away from the family fortune finding that as dirty money.

People of Middlemarch judge him unfairly by his heritage instead of his true character. Just like Harriet is judged by Mr. Elton. Mr. Hawley a prominent townsperson comment about Will just like a conservative English man of that time "Any cursed alien blood, Jew, Corsican or Gypsy" (7,71,719).

But Dorothea acknowledges his true character. And his love and respect for Dorothea directs him to move towards improvement, reformation. He plans to study law to prepare himself for public service. He becomes a member of parliament at the end.

Like wise in Jane Austen's novel *Emma* both Mr. Knightley and Emma understands Harriet's charm. Emma who often gets amused by 'English - Verdure, English culture, English comfort' is now attracted by the Englishness of Harriet. Emma feels that Harriet deserves encouragement and her soft blue eyes, all natural graces should not be wasted.

The developing world of Austen with the industrial advancement, was in need to utilize all social resources, including their population effectively and strategically. Though the community of Highbury is not industrialized yet the growth of trade class and the yeomanry reflects the changing time of the 19th century. And Harriet now with her Englishness joins to the main stream of national growth with the help of Emma and Mr. Knightley.

The ball at the Crown Inn is one of the significant gatherings in the last part of the novel. The novelist shows us a picture that is like this:

the two last dances before supper were begun, and Harriet had no partner; the only young lady sitting

down; - and so equal had been hitherto the number of dancers, that how there could be anyone disengaged was the wonder(3,11)

Like the gypsies she is disconnected from the activities of Highbury. However, the very next moment the appearance of Mr. Knightley leads to a happy ending. As Mr. Knightley stepped forward and requested Harriet for a dance. Mr. Knightley gallantry towards Harriet suggests her active involvement in the society through the help of Emma also.

III. CONCLUSION

Through Emma and Knightley we see the changing attitude of English people towards the outsiders, non-english people. They spread the message that if properly trained and assigned a specific cultural function, even orphaned young woman and uncivilized aliens could become valuable social resources. The idea is not forced upon the reader but it is clearly suggested. And the marriage of Harriet and Mr. Robert Martin shows the necessity of the unity of the two class traders and farmers for a prosperous future of individual and the country.

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Beyond Victimhood: Denial as Narrative Agency in *My Dark Vanessa*

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Received: 28 Apr 2026; Received in revised form: 25 May 2026; Accepted: 29 May 2026; Available online: 02 Jun 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— <i>trauma theory, victimhood, denial, agency, narrative identity, literary trauma studies.</i>	<i>This paper examines the refusal of victimhood in My Dark Vanessa by Kate Elizabeth Russell, focusing on the protagonist Vanessa Wye's resistance to identifying as a victim of abuse. While dominant trauma theories emphasize recognition and acknowledgment as essential for recovery, this study addresses a critical gap by exploring whether denial can function as an adaptive response rather than a pathological one. Drawing on trauma theory and literary analysis, the paper analyzes Vanessa's narrative voice, her interpretation of consent, and her rejection of externally imposed survivor identities. Through close textual reading, it argues that Vanessa's refusal of victimhood is not merely repression but a strategy to preserve agency and maintain control over her self-definition. This challenges conventional models that equate healing with acceptance of victimhood. The findings suggest that trauma responses are more complex and varied than traditionally assumed, and that denial, in certain contexts, may serve as a mechanism of survival rather than failure. By rethinking denial within trauma discourse, the paper calls for more flexible frameworks that account for diverse survivor experiences.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

Trauma narratives within literary and psychological discourse have long been shaped by the assumption that acknowledgment of suffering is essential for recovery. Foundational theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman argue that trauma acquires meaning only when it is recognized, articulated, and validated within interpersonal or therapeutic frameworks. In this model, the acceptance of victimhood becomes central to the process of healing, enabling survivors to reconstruct disrupted identities and integrate traumatic experiences into coherent narratives. However, this dominant paradigm has been increasingly questioned for its limited capacity to account for the diversity of trauma responses.

Critics such as Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub have drawn attention to the complexities of trauma representation, emphasizing that memory, testimony, and recovery do not always follow linear or universally shared patterns. Their work suggests that trauma may resist articulation, remain fragmented, or be mediated through forms of silence, deferral, or narrative instability. These perspectives open space for reconsidering whether acknowledgment is always necessary or even possible in the aftermath of trauma.

This paper builds on these critical interventions by focusing on a relatively underexplored dimension of trauma studies: the refusal of victimhood. While

denial is often interpreted as repression or psychological avoidance, such readings risk oversimplifying the ways individuals negotiate identity in the wake of traumatic experience. The persistent framing of denial as pathological limits the possibility of understanding it as a strategy of self-preservation, especially in situations where embracing a victim identity may undermine an individual's sense of agency or disrupt the coherence of the self. The present study examines this tension through *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell, a novel that offers a complex portrayal of trauma, memory, and self-narration. The protagonist, Vanessa Wye, resists identifying herself as a victim despite clear indications of grooming and abuse. Her narrative is marked by a deliberate reinterpretation of her relationship with her abuser, framed in terms of consent, desire, and emotional significance. This refusal creates a conflict between personal narrative and dominant social and theoretical frameworks that seek to define her experience as abuse.

This paper asks: Can refusal of victimhood function as an adaptive psychological and narrative strategy rather than a pathological denial?

To address this question, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines trauma theory with close literary analysis. It examines how Vanessa's narrative voice, her understanding of agency, and her resistance to externally imposed labels complicate conventional assumptions about trauma and recovery. Rather than treating denial as a failure to process trauma, this paper argues that it may operate as a form of narrative control that enables the subject to negotiate meaning on their own terms.

By situating Vanessa's narrative within broader debates in trauma studies, this paper seeks to expand existing frameworks that privilege recognition and testimony as the primary routes to healing. It proposes that trauma must be understood not only through what is spoken and acknowledged, but also through what is resisted, reframed, or refused. In doing so, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of survivor subjectivity, one that recognizes the multiplicity of ways individuals engage with, reinterpret, and survive traumatic experiences.

II. RETHINKING RECOGNITION: TRAUMA BEYOND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Dominant trauma theory has historically privileged recognition as the central mechanism through which trauma acquires meaning. For Cathy Caruth, trauma is defined by its belatedness—an event not fully experienced in the moment but understood retrospectively through its return in memory. As Caruth argues, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature... returns to haunt the survivor later on” (11). This formulation underscores that trauma demands a delayed recognition; its meaning emerges only through belated comprehension. The model thus assumes that the trajectory of trauma inevitably moves toward eventual recognition, where the subject comes to comprehend and articulate the experience. Similarly, Judith Herman frames recovery as a structured process in which acknowledgment, narration, and validation are essential stages. Herman emphasizes that “the first task of consciousness-raising is simply calling rape by its true name” (41). This insistence on naming reveals how, within her framework, the articulation of victimhood becomes both a psychological necessity and an ethical imperative.

While these models have been foundational, they also impose a teleological structure on trauma—one that presumes recognition as the endpoint of recovery. Such an assumption risks excluding forms of subjectivity that do not conform to this trajectory. In particular, it leaves little room for individuals who resist, defer, or refuse the recognition of their own victimization. By treating acknowledgment as both inevitable and desirable, traditional trauma theory tends to interpret non-recognition as failure: a symptom of repression, denial, or incomplete processing. Vanessa's refusal to recognize herself as a victim directly disrupts this model. In *My Dark Vanessa*, she asserts, “I don't consider myself to have been abused... I'm not a victim because I've never wanted to be” (Russell 272). This declaration challenges the assumption that recognition is an inevitable endpoint of trauma. Rather than moving toward acknowledgment, Vanessa actively rejects it, positioning non-recognition as a deliberate assertion of narrative control rather than a failure of

comprehension. This paper challenges that assumption by arguing that trauma does not always culminate in recognition. Instead, it proposes that non-recognition can be intentional, strategic, and even necessary for the preservation of selfhood. In this sense, refusal is not simply the absence of awareness but a mode of engagement with trauma that operates outside dominant therapeutic and narrative expectations. Vanessa's resistance is not merely passive but linguistically self-aware. She observes that "Even if I sometimes use the word abuse... in someone else's mouth the word turns ugly and absolute. It swallows up everything that happened" (52).

This metalinguistic awareness reveals that her refusal is directed not at the experience itself but at the interpretive framework imposed upon it. By resisting the term 'abuse', Vanessa preserves the complexity of her experience and asserts control over its meaning.

III. CRITIQUING THE LINEAR MODEL OF RECOVERY

Herman's influential model of recovery—structured around safety, remembrance, and reconnection—implicitly relies on a linear progression toward narrative coherence. However, as Dominick LaCapra argues, trauma does not always resolve through such structured processes. LaCapra notes that "acting out and working through are not mutually exclusive but exist in a tension that is constitutive of responses to trauma" (143). This distinction between 'acting out' and 'working through' highlights the repetitive and unresolved nature of traumatic experience, suggesting that subjects may remain caught in cycles that resist closure rather than progressing neatly toward resolution. Vanessa's narrative exemplifies this resistance to coherence through its internal contradictions. She insists, "He and I were two dark people who craved the same things; our relationship was terrible but never abusive" (272). This paradox—simultaneously acknowledging harm while rejecting the label of abuse—demonstrates how trauma can persist in unresolved and contradictory forms. Rather than progressing toward clarity, her narrative sustains ambiguity, aligning with LaCapra's notion of trauma as an ongoing negotiation rather than a completed process.

Similarly, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub emphasize that trauma is not always fully accessible to consciousness or language. As they explain, "massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out" (36). This insight foregrounds the limits of cognition and representation, demonstrating that testimony is marked as much by silence and fragmentation as by articulation. The act of narrating trauma, therefore, does not guarantee mastery over it; rather, it often reveals the limits of understanding itself.

These interventions complicate the assumption that recovery must involve coherent narration and explicit acknowledgment. They open the possibility that trauma may persist in forms that are partial, contradictory, or resistant to integration. Building on this, the present study extends the critique further by suggesting that, in some cases, the subject may actively refuse integration—not because it is impossible, but because it is undesirable or destabilizing. The stakes of such refusal are not merely interpretive but existential. Vanessa admits, "I just really need it to be a love story... Because if it isn't a love story, then what is it?... It's my life" (277). This insistence reveals that denial is not simply defensive but constitutive: recognizing victimhood would dismantle the very narrative through which she understands her identity.

IV. DENIAL RECONSIDERED: FROM PATHOLOGY TO STRATEGY

Within classical psychoanalytic frameworks, denial has typically been understood as a defense mechanism that obstructs the processing of trauma. Associated with repression and avoidance, it is often interpreted as evidence of psychological dysfunction. As Sigmund Freud explains, "such ideas cannot become conscious because a certain force is opposed to them" (5). This formulation positions denial as a form of resistance that prevents traumatic knowledge from entering consciousness, reinforcing the view that it is fundamentally pathological. However, such a perspective risks collapsing complex modes of self-narration into mere symptoms of dysfunction.

Contemporary approaches to trauma encourage a more nuanced understanding. Rather than viewing

denial solely as an impediment, it can be reconsidered as a regulatory strategy that enables the subject to manage overwhelming affect. As Cathy Caruth suggests, “this truth... cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (11). This insight complicates the assumption that full conscious recognition is either possible or necessary, suggesting instead that the unknown and unarticulated are constitutive of traumatic experience itself. In this context, denial does not simply erase or suppress trauma; it reorganizes its meaning in ways that make continued existence possible.

This shift is crucial for understanding forms of subjectivity that do not align with dominant models of victimhood. If recognition entails a reconfiguration of identity around injury and vulnerability, then refusal may function as a means of resisting that redefinition. Vanessa’s narrative in *My Dark Vanessa* illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. She insists, “I don’t consider myself to have been abused... I’m not a victim because I’ve never wanted to be” (272). This statement reframes denial not as ignorance but as an assertion of agency: by rejecting the label of victimhood, she maintains authority over how her experience is defined. Denial, in such cases, becomes less about ignorance and more about control over narrative, identity, and interpretation.

V. INTENTIONAL NON-RECOGNITION AS NARRATIVE AGENCY

The central intervention of this paper lies in reframing non-recognition as intentional rather than merely symptomatic. While Cathy Caruth’s model suggests that trauma returns to demand recognition, she also acknowledges that “the story of trauma... as the narrative of a belated experience... attests to its endless impact on a life” (14). This formulation implies that trauma does not resolve neatly into comprehension but continues to exert pressure on subjectivity over time. Building on this, the present study argues that such recognition can be actively resisted rather than inevitably achieved. The subject may choose not to reinterpret past experiences as trauma, even when alternative frameworks—social, legal, or therapeutic—insist upon it.

Vanessa’s narrative in *My Dark Vanessa* exemplifies this refusal with striking clarity. She states, “The difference between rape and sex is state of mind. You can’t rape the willing, right?” (236). This rationalization demonstrates how she actively reframes the meaning of her experience, resisting externally imposed definitions of violation. Her refusal is not simply a failure to recognize trauma but a deliberate reinterpretation that allows her to retain a sense of agency and coherence.

This refusal is not without consequence; it often generates tension between personal narrative and external discourse. As Judith Herman observes, “after every atrocity one can expect to hear... the victim lies; the victim exaggerates” (18). While Herman identifies such denial as a mechanism that undermines victims, Vanessa’s case complicates this framework: she internalizes and redeploys these strategies herself, not to erase the event, but to maintain control over its interpretation. This tension reveals the friction between dominant trauma discourse and individual self-narration.

However, this resistance also allows the subject to maintain continuity of self in the face of experiences that might otherwise necessitate radical redefinition. As Dominick LaCapra argues, “trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence” (41). If trauma threatens to fragment identity in this way, then non-recognition can be understood as an attempt to repair or stabilize that disruption. In this sense, non-recognition operates as a form of narrative agency, enabling individuals to assert authority over the meaning of their own experiences.

Such a perspective challenges the normative assumption that healing requires the acceptance of victimhood. Instead, it suggests that survival may depend on the ability to resist imposed identities, even when those identities are framed as emancipatory or therapeutic. Vanessa articulates the existential stakes of this resistance when she insists, “I just really need it to be a love story... Because if it isn’t a love story, then what is it?... It’s my life” (277). This declaration reveals that the rejection of victimhood is not merely interpretive but foundational to her sense of self. By foregrounding this possibility, the paper expands trauma theory to include modes of engagement that

are resistant, ambivalent, and strategically non-compliant.

VI. TOWARD A NON-TELEOLOGICAL MODEL OF TRAUMA

Taken together, these critiques point toward the need for a more flexible, non-teleological model of trauma — one that does not prescribe recognition as its inevitable endpoint. Trauma, in this framework, is not a problem to be resolved through narrative closure but an experience that may be continuously negotiated, deferred, or reinterpreted. As Dominick LaCapra argues, “trauma raises the question of how the past may be represented without being reduced to a simple narrative of recovery” (78). This insight challenges teleological assumptions by emphasizing that trauma resists reduction to linear models of resolution and instead demands more complex forms of representation.

This approach allows for a broader understanding of survivor subjectivity, recognizing that individuals may engage with trauma in ways that do not conform to established theoretical or therapeutic expectations. It also foregrounds the ethical importance of respecting these differences, rather than subsuming them under universalizing models of recovery. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub emphasize, “testimony is... a discursive practice... a speech act... rather than to simply formulate a statement” (10). This understanding underscores that meaning is not fixed but produced within specific contexts of narration and reception, allowing for multiple, even conflicting, engagements with trauma.

By repositioning denial as a potential site of agency rather than failure, this paper lays the groundwork for analyzing Vanessa’s narrative in *My Dark Vanessa* not as a deviation from trauma theory, but as a critical lens through which its limitations can be exposed. Vanessa’s insistence that “girls in those stories are always victims, and I am not” (236) exemplifies this refusal of dominant narrative frameworks. Her rejection of victimhood is not merely oppositional but generative, opening up alternative modes of self-definition that challenge the universality of recognition-based models.

VII. VANESSA’S NARRATIVE AND THE REFUSAL OF VICTIMHOOD

Vanessa’s narration in *My Dark Vanessa* operates as a sustained reinterpretation of her past, in which the language of abuse is systematically replaced by the language of desire, intimacy, and consent. This reframing can be understood through Cathy Caruth’s notion of belated trauma, where experience is not immediately recognized but emerges through delayed understanding. As Caruth argues, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event... but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature... returns to haunt the survivor later on” (11). This model presumes that trauma eventually presses toward recognition through its belated return. However, Vanessa’s case complicates this trajectory: rather than moving toward eventual recognition, her narrative actively resists such movement.

For instance, her insistence, “I don’t think of myself as a victim... I knew what I was getting into. I wanted it” (272) — is not merely a moment of confusion but a consistent narrative position. The repetition of this stance across temporal moments suggests not a failure to recognize trauma, but a refusal to reinterpret the past within the framework of victimhood. In contrast to Caruth’s assumption that trauma returns to demand acknowledgment, Vanessa’s narrative demonstrates that recognition can be consciously deferred or resisted.

This resistance aligns more closely with Dominick LaCapra’s concept of ‘acting out,’ where the subject remains within a repetitive structure that does not resolve into critical distance. As LaCapra explains, “in acting out, the past is not recognized as past but is relived as if it were fully present” (70). Vanessa’s narrative reflects this temporal collapse, as her past continues to structure her present identity without being critically re-evaluated. Yet even LaCapra’s formulation presumes a lack of control, whereas Vanessa’s narrative suggests a degree of agency in sustaining this interpretive frame. Her storytelling thus challenges the assumption that trauma inevitably seeks articulation, instead presenting non-recognition as a stabilized narrative position.

VIII. INTERNALIZED DISCOURSE AND THE PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

Vanessa's understanding of her relationship is deeply shaped by the internalization of Strane's discourse, which reframes abuse as mutual desire and constructs victimhood as weakness. This process can be examined through a psychoanalytic lens, particularly in relation to Sigmund Freud's concept of defense mechanisms. Denial, in Freud's formulation, allows the subject to reject a reality that is too threatening to integrate into consciousness. As Freud explains, "the ego... defends itself from the painful perception... by an act of repression" (34). This suggests that denial operates not merely as ignorance but as an active restructuring of psychic reality, enabling the subject to preserve a coherent sense of self in the face of destabilizing knowledge. However, in Vanessa's case, denial exceeds simple repression and becomes a form of narrative production.

She describes her own manipulation of events by stating that "it didn't even really feel like lying, more like shaping the truth... an act of contortion I learned from Strane" (191). This admission reveals that denial is not a passive failure to recognize reality but a learned discursive practice—one that actively reorganizes experience into a more tolerable form. Her claim that she is 'shaping the truth' underscores a shift from repression to narration, where meaning is not erased but strategically reconfigured.

This reconfiguration reflects what Jacques Lacan describes as the subject's formation within language and desire. Lacan contends that "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other" (10), emphasizing that subjectivity is constituted through external symbolic structures. Vanessa's narrative demonstrates this precisely: her understanding of the relationship is mediated through Strane's language, which she internalizes and reproduces as her own. Her 'truth' is thus not autonomous but shaped within a discursive system that precedes and exceeds her. By adopting this framework, she sustains an identity that avoids the passivity associated with victimhood, even as it remains dependent on the very discourse that produced it.

At the same time, this internalization complicates the notion of agency itself. Vanessa's insistence on her own complicity does not necessarily indicate

empowerment; rather, it reveals how deeply the perpetrator's discourse has structured her self-perception. Her narrative does not simply deny abuse but reframes it through a logic she has inherited, demonstrating how agency can emerge within constraint rather than outside it. As Lacan further suggests, "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (689), indicating that what appears as individual will is often shaped by external desires and symbolic authority.

In this sense, her refusal of victimhood emerges not only as a personal choice but as the effect of an already structured narrative imposed upon her. This duality—agency as both assertion and internalization—demonstrates the need to move beyond simplistic binaries of empowerment and victimization. Vanessa's denial thus operates simultaneously as a strategy of self-preservation and as evidence of the discursive forces that continue to shape her subjectivity.

IX. NARRATIVE AGENCY AND THE REFUSAL OF IMPOSED IDENTITIES

Vanessa's resistance extends beyond personal memory to a broader rejection of social and therapeutic frameworks that seek to define her as a victim or survivor. When confronted with such labels, she responds with hostility and discomfort, indicating that these categories threaten her sense of self. This resistance is explicit when she insists, "I don't think of myself as a victim... I knew what I was getting into. I wanted it" (272). This declaration demonstrates that her refusal is not passive but actively articulated, positioning identity as something she claims authority over rather than accepts from external frameworks.

This tension reflects Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's argument that testimony is not merely the articulation of truth but a site of struggle over meaning. As they argue, "testimony is... a discursive practice... a speech act... rather than to simply formulate a statement" (10). This understanding reframes testimony as performative and contested, rather than transparent or stable. Vanessa's narrative can thus be read as a refusal of testimony in its conventional sense. Rather than bearing witness to trauma in a way that aligns with collective

expectations, she constructs an alternative account that resists assimilation into dominant discourse.

Her rejection of imposed categories further reveals the violence embedded in normative frameworks of recognition. She notes that “even if I sometimes use the word abuse... in someone else's mouth the word turns ugly and absolute. It swallows up everything that happened” (52). This metalinguistic awareness underscores the extent to which externally imposed identities can be experienced as reductive, collapsing complex experiences into fixed categories that erase ambiguity and agency.

This resistance also engages with Judith Herman's emphasis on recognition as a prerequisite for recovery. Herman asserts that “to hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim” (24), positioning recognition as both relational and necessary. Vanessa's narrative disrupts this model by demonstrating that such recognition may be experienced not as liberating, but as destabilizing. Accepting the label of victimhood would require a fundamental reorganization of her identity, one that she is unwilling or unable to undertake.

In this context, refusal becomes a form of narrative agency. By asserting control over how her experience is interpreted, Vanessa maintains authority over her own story, even when that story contradicts widely accepted definitions of abuse. This assertion of agency is further evident when she declares, “girls in those stories are always victims, and I am not” (236), positioning herself outside dominant narrative templates. This does not resolve the tensions within her narrative, but it allows her to inhabit a position that resists external categorization.

X. COUNTER-ARGUMENT: THE LIMITS AND RISKS OF DENIAL

While this paper emphasizes the adaptive dimensions of denial, it is necessary to acknowledge its potential limitations. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Sigmund Freud associates denial with the repression of traumatic material that may later return in symptomatic forms. As Freud explains, “we have come upon something in the ego itself which is also unconscious... which produces powerful effects without itself being conscious” (7). This suggests that

what is denied does not disappear but continues to exert influence from the unconscious, often in indirect and destabilizing ways.

Similarly, trauma theorists such as Judith Herman argue that the failure to acknowledge trauma can impede recovery by preventing the integration of experience into conscious narrative. Herman emphasizes that “traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (44), implying that recovery requires the restoration of these systems through acknowledgment and articulation. Without such integration, trauma risks remaining unprocessed and disruptive.

Vanessa's narrative in *My Dark Vanessa* provides evidence for this critique. Despite her insistence on control, her narrative reveals moments of instability and contradiction. She admits, “all of this is impossible to talk about... one minute calling it rape and the next clarifying... it wasn't rape” (300). This oscillation demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining a coherent narrative in the absence of acknowledgment, suggesting that denial does not fully resolve the tensions of traumatic experience but instead displaces them into ambiguity and fragmentation.

Her continued attachment to Strane further complicates her claim to agency. Even in retrospect, she reflects that “maybe Strane... meant it, too” (205), reinterpreting his abusive behavior as genuine care. This persistence of attachment indicates that denial may carry significant psychological costs, binding her to a past that she cannot fully re-evaluate. Rather than resolving trauma, her refusal of victimhood may perpetuate its effects by preventing critical distance from the past.

Moreover, from a Lacanian perspective, Vanessa's narrative can be understood as structured by a misrecognition of desire. As Jacques Lacan argues, “this jubilant assumption of his specular image... illustrates the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated” (76). This concept of misrecognition suggests that identity is formed through an idealized but distorted image of the self. Vanessa's belief in the authenticity of her relationship can thus be read as a similar misrecognition, one that obscures the power dynamics that shaped it and binds her to a sustaining

yet limiting fantasy. In this sense, denial functions not only as protection but also as entrapment.

This counter-argument complicates any straightforward valorization of denial. It suggests that while refusal of victimhood may provide short-term stability or a sense of agency, it may also limit the possibility of transformation or healing. As Dominick LaCapra cautions, “the problem of representing trauma involves the risk either of denying its specificity or of becoming fixated on it” (42). Denial, therefore, occupies an ambivalent position: it can both shield the subject and constrain them within unresolved structures of experience. The challenge, therefore, is not to categorize denial as either wholly adaptive or wholly pathological, but to recognize its complex and contradictory role within the broader dynamics of trauma.

XI. TOWARD A NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF REFUSAL

Vanessa’s narrative ultimately reveals that refusal of victimhood cannot be reduced to a single function or meaning. It operates simultaneously as a strategy of self-preservation, a product of internalized discourse, and a potential barrier to transformation. By maintaining her interpretive framework, Vanessa preserves a sense of continuity and control; yet this same framework constrains her ability to re-imagine her past. As she reflects, “I just really need it to be a love story... Because if it isn't a love story, then what is it?... It's my life” (277). This admission reveals that her refusal is not merely defensive but constitutive: the narrative she sustains is inseparable from her sense of identity, making its revision profoundly destabilizing.

This complexity reinforces the need for a more flexible approach to trauma theory – one that does not impose recognition as a universal goal, but instead attends to the varied ways in which individuals negotiate meaning. As Dominick LaCapra argues, “working through does not mean the elimination of trauma but involves coming to terms with it in a manner that allows one to distinguish between past and present” (66). This perspective opens space for alternative modes of engagement that do not necessarily culminate in full recognition or resolution. Vanessa’s narrative, however, complicates even this model by

suggesting that such differentiation may be resisted in order to preserve continuity of self.

At the same time, her narrative reflects the limits of articulation emphasized by Cathy Caruth, who observes that “this truth... cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (11). This insight underscores that trauma exceeds complete representation, existing partially outside conscious knowledge and linguistic capture. Vanessa’s refusal can thus be understood not simply as denial but as an engagement with this limit—an insistence on retaining forms of meaning that resist stabilization within dominant frameworks.

Vanessa’s narrative demonstrates that trauma is not only something that is remembered or articulated, but also something that may be actively resisted, reinterpreted, or refused. In this sense, refusal emerges as a complex and ambivalent mode of engagement—one that both sustains and constrains the subject, preserving identity while simultaneously limiting the possibility of transformation.

XII. CONCLUSION

This study has examined Vanessa Wye’s refusal of victimhood in *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell as a critical challenge to dominant trauma paradigms that privilege recognition, narration, and validation as necessary conditions for recovery. By situating Vanessa’s narrative within the frameworks of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and their critics, the paper has demonstrated that trauma does not always culminate in acknowledgment. Instead, it may be actively resisted, deferred, or reinterpreted in ways that preserve a sense of identity and agency.

Rather than reducing denial to a purely pathological defense, this analysis has shown that it can function as a complex strategy of self-preservation and narrative control. At the same time, the paper has acknowledged the limitations of such refusal, particularly its potential to sustain psychological entrapment and inhibit transformation. This ambivalence underscores the need to move beyond binary frameworks that either valorize acknowledgment or pathologize denial, and instead to recognize the fluid and contested nature of trauma responses.

By foregrounding intentional non-recognition as a meaningful mode of engagement with trauma, this study contributes to an expanded understanding of survivor subjectivity, one that accommodates resistance, contradiction, and narrative autonomy. Such a perspective has important implications not only for literary trauma studies but also for interdisciplinary approaches to trauma that seek to respect the diversity of survivor experiences.

Future research may build on this work by examining refusal of victimhood across different literary texts, cultural contexts, and gendered experiences of trauma. Comparative studies could further explore how narrative resistance operates in relation to social power structures, while interdisciplinary approaches integrating psychology, sociology, and literary studies may deepen our understanding of denial as both a protective and limiting mechanism. By extending the inquiry beyond individual case studies, future scholarship can continue to refine more flexible and inclusive models of trauma and recovery.

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The Racial Distribution of Guilt: Blacks' Betrayal of Blackness in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) and Edward Paul Jones' *The Known World* (2003)

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 30 Apr 2026; Received in revised form: 26 May 2026; Accepted: 30 May 2026; Available online: 03 Jun 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Blackness, enslavement, betrayal, responsibility	This paper examines the system of enslavement and exploitation of man by man based on skin color in Charles Johnson's <i>Middle Passage</i> and Edward Paul Jones' <i>The Known World</i>. It lingers on the intra-racial and inter-racial relationships of oppression. The study proceeds with an "against the grain" reading of <i>Middle Passage</i> and a "with the grain" reading of <i>The Known World</i> in order to bring to light blacks' responsibilities in the wretchedness of their race. Drawing on a deconstructive framework and socio-criticism, the study posits that the black man is a wolf to his fellow black man, objecting thus the assumption that the white man is the main oppressor. Deconstruction, viewed from Michael Payne's standpoint paraphrasing Derrida, is nothing, not a method, not a technique, not even an act. It is a reading process aiming at spotlighting "a deconstructive process already existing in the text" (Payne qtd in Rolfe, 2004, p. 274). This study analyzes the authors' attempt to unsettle the traditional views of the black-white relationships and draw people's attention on blacks' responsibilities in their own predicament. The article specifically discusses blacks' betrayal of blackness during the era of slavery and also in contemporary international relationships.

I. INTRODUCTION

A common saying holds that 'Life is a tough race'. If that aphorism embodies a stamp of truth, it is unmistakable that other races are far gone while the black man is still lagging behind. Metaphorically and humorously, some races have even traversed Athens a long time ago while the black man is still in a marathon, the battlefield amongst wrecks, just struggling to find a foothold. This prolonged wretchedness of the black being created a network of insulting identification around blackness, leading other races to glance contemptuously at this race.

Blackness is much lampooned and vilified in different ways and different fields. Some religious conceptions, probably distorted ones, deliberately associate blackness with sinfulness. In the fields of social sciences, blacks are frequently seen as savages. They are even considered as closed in nature to apes than human beings. Compared to other races in terms of virtues and skillfulness, the black man is said to be less dependable, naïve, lacking charisma and creativity. In short, there seems to be a direct correlation between blackness and negativity. Accordingly, the association of blackness to the armada of pejorative identifications

makes his skin color a handicap to the Negro among other races.

Admittedly, blackness is vilipended everywhere by other races. Therefore, the black being is mishandled, subjugated and submitted to inhuman treatment by other races. Disapprovingly, what arouses great shock and bitterness is the betrayal of blackness by other blacks. Blackness has a specific definition in this paper. In fact, beyond its traditional meaning, which is simply the state or quality of having a dark complexion, in this article, blackness refers to a color-coded brotherhood or sorority that seeks to unite people of African descent and valorize their identity. Hence, the betrayal is the performance of any action by a member of the community that is detrimental to other members or any action that demotes and discredits the race. This article calls on black people to support themselves and value their culture, which is the first step to make others accept and respect them in the world.

In the novels of Johnson and Jones, the betrayal is conspicuous. It is perceivable through a glaring fact; that is the exploitation of blacks by blacks. Some powerful blacks pursue profit at the expense of the life of their fellow blacks. To clarify, in the fictions of Johnson and Jones, some black characters possess black slaves. Others operate in slavery; that is to say, they buy and sell black slaves while they are blacks themselves. Along with this glaring case in point of high treason, other treasonable acts against the community are passing, mismanagement of state institutions after the departure of the colonizer, the open reluctance to adhere to organizations intended to promote Pan-Africanism. Another alarming aspect of the betrayal today is Africans' *en masse* illegal migration towards other continents, leaving their ancestors behind and neglecting the development of their motherland.

Drawing on a deconstructive framework and socio-criticism, the study posits that the black man is a wolf to his fellow black man, objecting thus the assumption that the white man is the main oppressor. Paraphrasing Jacques Derrida, Michael Payne (2004) explains that deconstruction is nothing, not a method, not a technique, not even an act. It is a reading process aiming at spotlighting "a deconstructive process already existing in the text" (Payne qtd in Rolfe, 2004, p. 274). Relying on this assumption, the study explores

the underlying messages in Johnson's and Jones' texts regarding the issue of the dehumanization of black people by their fellows. Concerning the socio-critical approach, it helps discuss the historical and social contexts in which blacks are exploited and mishandled by both Western people and their fellow blacks as fictionalized in the corpus. In line with this purpose, E. Cros (2011, p. 32) upholds that "socio-criticism aims to bring out the relations between the structures of literary (or cultural) work and the structures of the society in which this work is deeply rooted." In essence, this paper does not solely linger on nervous inter-racial relationships between blacks and other races. It also analyzes treacherous and unfraternal relationships between black characters and their fellow blacks. Actually, though there is no more human traffic as such, Africa is still mimed by a number of vices that hinder the advancement of the continent. Accordingly, the study seeks to know in what way the black man operates as a wolf to his fellow black man. Starting with the hypothesis that the avowed and natural enemies of Africa are Africans; the study will consecutively analyze blacks' part of responsibility in the enslavement of the race and how their objectionable behaviors delay the development of Africa nowadays. Then, it suggests some positive attitudes that black people should adopt in order to develop Africa, which is their homeland.

II. PARADIGM SHIFT: RECONSIDERING THE ENSLAVING CIRCUMSTANCES OF BLACK AFRICANS

1- Africans' Part of Responsibility in the Process of Enslavement

Slavery is, in general, a forced labor regardless of legality. In the context of this investigation, slavery is an institution or social practice that consists in owning human beings as property in a condition of servitude and subjugation. Notably, the enslaved person works for no payment. Doubtlessly, slavery does exist almost everywhere in the world. Seen anywhere, the term 'slavery' is reminiscent of the trafficking of black African slaves from Africa to America through a series of interactions between Europeans, Arabs, Asians and deplorably Africans themselves. In fact, in debates about the slave trade, people generally point at Europeans and Arabs as main actors. Although this may be true, it is also worth

mentioning that the slave trade was quickened and made easier by some black Africans.

On that account, a number of testimonies highly prove that blacks were directly implicated in the scandal. By way of illustration, M. P. Daniel and C. Malcolm (1962) mention that “98% des captifs ont été à des courtiers africains, les 2% restants ayant été enlevés par les Portugais lors de leur premier contact avec l’Afrique”, ‘98% of the captives have been bought from African brokers, the other 2% have been kidnaped by Portuguese during their first contact with Africa’ (my trans...). On this matter, Thomas Bailey and David Kennedy (1984) also reveal edifying information. In their book entitled *The American Spirit* (1984), they unveil the words of an active participant. The English Captain provides a detailed description of the slave trade chain, underlining Africans’ role in the process of enslavement. He explains that “The present king often, when ships are in great strait for slaves, and cannot be supply’d otherwise, will sell 3 or 400 of his wives to complete their number, but we always pay dearer for his slaves than those bought of the cappasheirs” (B. Thomas & K. David, 1984, p. 61).

The evidence presented thus supports the idea that blacks did effectively participate in the enslavement of their own fellow creatures. This disappointing aspect generally goes unnoticed, as it is unknown in the known world. The known world, in this specific context, is the popular opinion that slavery was a business of westerners. The fictional works of Johnson and Jones then derogate the traditional view of slavery and draw attentions on a background information that remained long recessive. Their literary works fit into the scheme of Peter Vaclav Zima’s deconstructive criticism. He suggests that “detecting contradictions and aporias is a crucial element of deconstructive criticism whose main function is to refute the claims of the concept and the rationality of the logos” (Z. V. Peter, 2002, p. 4). They excavate the historiography of the slave trade to detect and situate the responsibilities of each race. Along the same lines, they correspond to the category of fiction writers that Michel Foucault sees as historians whose job consists in excavating a given epoch to expose what he calls the “other history,

which runs beneath history” (F. Michel, 1972, p. 121). Johnson’s novel excavates and exposes a case in point of a black slaver. The novel shows that Calhoun the black protagonist, facing Papa’s implication in slave trade, is so upset and indignant that he interrogates, “Papa is he sayin’ you was dealin’ in slaves?” (*Middle Passage*¹, p. 201). In fact, being obsessed with the burning desire for making property, Papa Zeringue, a ‘black tycoon,’ blindly invests in the economics of slavery that consists in raiding, capturing, buying and shipping his kinsfolk to America. And worse, his initials (PZ) are branded on the bodies of those who could have been considered as siblings. Calhoun highlights it thus, “All, like livestock, bore the initials of the Republic’s financiers burned into their right buttock by a twisted wire – ZS, PZ, EG, a cabal of Louisiana speculators whose names I would learn soon enough” (MP, pp. 120-121). Tidiane N’Diaye confirms the complicity of Africans in the facilitation of black people’s trafficking that he considers as a genocide. He insists, «Ainsi, la triste réalité est que des Noirs ont livré d’autres Noirs. [...] Quand les chasseurs d’hommes arabes ne faisaient pas le travail eux-mêmes, la plupart des rabatteurs qui livraient les captifs noirs aux négriers étaient bien des Noirs » (N. Tidiane, 2008, p. 114) ; “So, the sad reality is that some Blacks have handed over other Blacks. [...] When the Arab men-hunters did not do the work themselves, most of the beaters who delivered the black captives to the slaves’ traders were indeed Blacks” (my trans...). Overall, at the dusk of this section, it is possible to infer that without the active participation of Blacks in slavery, it would not have wounded Africa so severely, hence the high betrayal of the race.

2- Intra-racial Enslavement: Blacks Exploiting Blacks

In their novels, both Johnson and Jones portray freed black characters as being paranoid due to their painful experiences while they were under slavery. This paranoiac feeling keeps these forms of black characters to regard others as the cause of their suffering. In *Middle Passage*, for instance, by considering himself to be the first one betrayed by his black folks who sold him to white slaveowners to work on cocoa plantation in America, the protagonist

¹ Hereafter, any quotations from Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* will be introduced by this acronym ‘MP’ followed by page numbers.

Rutherford Calhoun no longer trusts his brothers in any situation. This is perhaps the reason why he gets involved in black enslavement in the course of the story as a way of throwing back the stone to his unfriendly black fellows as C. Yildiray (2016, p. 86) underlines that "Rutherford Calhoun, the first-person narrator of *Middle Passage*, is a unique and complicated protagonist. He is both a philosopher and a trickster." Similarly, the hero, Henry Townsend in *The Known World*, has a betraying attitude toward his fellow blacks who could not early detect his fake character. In fact, functioning as a freed slave in the story, he also takes part in the enslavement of other black people, which reveals his unreliability among his folks. In this respect, S. M. Mutter (2011, p. 135) asserts:

One would expect that a slaveowner like Henry Townsend who spent his childhood as William Robbins's property would possess a greater capacity for love, for sympathy and especially for empathy [. . .] Henry Townsend has been enslaved and could be enslaved; he just happens, in the moment of novel, not to be. That he nonetheless chooses to actively participate in a chattel system as a slaveowner is strange, and deeply ironic. The presence of black slaveowners is probably the most memorable and is certainly the most surprising feature of *The Known World*.

It is also worth mentioning that in both novels, the feeling of being homeless drives some freed slaves to be callous to their black fellows. After spending several years of slavery in racial American society, these black characters surely feel homesick. They seem to operate in a complex system because while white Americans do not consider them as brothers, they are also overlooked by their original African folks who regard them as people stripped of their roots. Under this umbrella, they are neither seen as Americans, nor fully as Africans. In this context, the notion of 'cultural in-betweenness' gains its full meaning. In *Middle Passage*, Calhoun's attempt to cross the Atlantic to Africa can be translated as his eagerness to come back home and embrace his roots. However, the hardships he went through seems to transform him into a heartless person since "Thieving and lying become a stock for him [Rutherford Calhoun] that betrays his position as a 'middleman'-

neither European nor African, neither American nor anything else" (C. Yildiray, 2016, p. 86). Throughout the story, Calhoun is mainly portrayed as a crook and an unreliable individual to the point that his black fellows distrust him. Just as Calhoun, Henry Townsend functions as an untrustworthy person in *The Known World*. By partaking in slavery, he demonstrates his feeling of disgust for his own brothers. This aligns with the common saying that 'if there is no enemy within, the enemy outside cannot harm you.' Had Townsend not turned against his own brothers, slavery could have easily been prevented. Taking part in it gives him the power to perpetuate it, not just in American society, but also in some African areas as S. M. Mutter (2011, p. 136) points out that "The novel [*The Known World*] does not dwell on any implicit distinctions between white slaveowners and black slaveowners; rather it suggests that, at base, a slaveowner is a slaveowner."

In both narratives, the quest for survival also turns several black characters against others. This internal conflict is economically driven because everyone seeks their own well-being at the expense of others. For instance, while seeking economic empowerment, some former slaves like Henry Townsend in *The Known World* turn their brothers into slaves. In doing so, they can, in turn, use them to work for them with a view to lining up their pockets as A. Irana et al. (2017, p. 32) stress that "Creating Henry Townsend as the main character who owns slaves when he has his freedom, Jones shows the representation of how the Blacks [try] to reach equal position with the whites by owning slaves." It is surprising that instead of supporting one another against their white oppressors, these freed black slaves turn out as betrayers by submerging their own brothers into slavery. Under such circumstances, it can be admitted that Whites are not the only perpetrators of slavery, but some Blacks also partake in reinforcing it in racial American society. This callousness of blacks toward other blacks is reflected in *Middle Passage* through the attitude of Calhoun who seems to disregard the suffering of his brothers. While on *The Republic*, Calhoun is portrayed as a selfish man; that is, he only cares about his survival to the detriment of his black fellows who scrawl under exploitation as C. Yildiray (2016, p. 87) admits that "After the detaining of the Allmusseri, an African

tribe believed to possess physical and psychological deformities, Calhoun associates himself the blend of 'Other'. As sickness from vomit and death from infection get widespread through the confines of sleeping quarters of the ship, Calhoun has to discharge the corpse of a slave over the board."

III. THE CONVERSATION OF THE BETRAYAL TODAY

1- Passing

Randal Kennedy (2001) defines "passing" as a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct. In the context of this study, the adopted attitudes are blacks' attempt to imitate Europeans through a number of practices mainly external. Notably, dressing, speaking and racial passing that consist in changing the skin color. The black man's impersonation of the white man is due to deception caused by a kind of self-loathing sentiments called 'body dysmorphic disorder'. They lose the sense of self-appreciation and aspire to an ideal self. They want to turn white, have long hair and speak like white folk. In *Middle Passage* Rutherford Calhoun confesses that he used to have bushy and thick hair. That means he wanted to look like a white man. Isadora is another African woman who suffered from this form of internalized racism. In fact, when she falls in love with Calhoun and the latter refuses to marry her, she thinks that Calhoun rejects her because of her dark complexion. She laments, "It's because I'm not [. . .] not pretty. No, don't say it! That is why. Because I'm *dark*. You'd rather have a beautiful, glamorous, light-skinned wife like women in the theaters and magazines" (MP, p. 17). Perhaps, this is why she urges Calhoun to be different by persuading him that "Don't be common. Comb your hair. Be a credit to the race. Strive like Creoles for respectability" (MP, p. 9). On the same occasion, B. Alan (1948, p. 113) pinpoints the black man's opened admiration for whiteness in the following terms, "At the same time it must be admitted that the Negro has given some grounds for the unthinking to believe that he admires white beauty. By bleaching their skin and by straightening their hair coloured women try hard to lessen their unlikeness from white women."

Racial passing is unquestionably a self-defeating betrayal of one's race. It is a corporal subversion that denotes one's resentment for one's own self nature, opening room for others to disparage one's group. Racial passing should not be seen as an assertion of individual autonomy. By assertion of individual autonomy, one should infer that it is neither an act of self-assertion nor freedom of expression or action. It is rather a criminal act, a disloyalty to the race. Ronald Hall condemns passing with energy. He inveighs, "Trying to forgive Blacks who pass is difficult, I feel that by passing, they have cursed the memory of every dark-skinned person on their family tree." (K. Randal, 2001, p. 1187). This statement suggests that one of the greatest desires of the African is to resemble the white man as far as possible.

Yet, before their encounter with the white, Africans did have virtue. As B. Alan (1948, p. 144) accurately underlines, "Until he is spoilt by contact with the whites, the Negro has good manners." However, the itching desire to turn white is stripping Negroes of these intrinsic qualities. Therefore, this section can accurately close with Burns' assertion that "The inmate qualities of the Negro still remain, and it is not too late, by a change of attitude, to bring out these qualities and secure the co-operation of the dark races in the building up of a better civilization" (B. Alan, 1948, p. 143). Aligning with Alan's argument, the Negro must remain black and never forget his origin, which is Africa.

2- Tokenism, Neo-Colonization

Tokenism is a fallacy that the American authorities use to give illusion of white hope to African-Americans. Moreover, what is deplorable about this situation is that the handpicked Negroes who benefit from a little more qualitative treatment from whites become marionette used by whites against their Negro brethren. They become the kind of Negroes who report to the whites what is happening with their black brothers in the slums. This corresponds exactly to Malcolm's description as he accurately notes, "The white man has always loved the kind of black leaders whom he could ask, 'Well, how's things with your people up there?'" (X. Malcolm & H. Alex, 1965, p. 256). Those black leaders are even manipulated through some sugary language such as 'you behave as if you were not a Negro.' This is what

Frantz Fanon underscores when he reports the utterances of some racist whites, "How long have you been in France? You speak French so well [. . .] At bottom you are a white man" (F. Frantz, 1967, pp. 35-38). Yet, such discourse should remind any black persons that their origin is despised by the white individuals who utter it.

Today, the handpicked African leaders behave as if they were secret agents serving Westerners. A painstaking analysis of the political, economic and social situation of African countries may lead one to wonder if westerners do not have pawns in our governments. Some leaders seem to represent whites' eyes and ears. Ironically, it appears that whites have the script and blacks perform in the film. Blacks watch the television while the whites hold the remote control. They control our political, economic and social life even after their official departure. Thus, there are reasonable causes for grievance. What rankles the most is seeing some African leaders plotting with whites against their people. As a result, the sovereignty of most African countries remains a *de jure* and not *de facto* autonomy. Until today, Africans do not seem to understand the white man's strategy invoked by Calhoun. In Calhoun's utterances, to manipulate Negroes, the white man uses the oldest and simplest solution that is "Divide and conquer. Poison each man's perception of the other" (MP, p. 58).

The observation made by Captain Ebenezer Falcon centuries ago is applicable to the contemporary African society. Calhoun unfolds the Captain's philosophy as follows, "It was Captain Falcon's belief that slave insurrections could be prevented if for every ten prisoners one was selected to oversee the others and keep them in line [. . .] and Falcon also gave them better food and few minor tasks such as picking old ropes apart" (MP, p. 74). A number of African leaders constitute the counterpart of these handpicked leaders in contemporary African societies. They fully execute the tasks entrusted to them by their white mentors. That is why Falcon concludes that "The best way to control a rebellious nigger, is to give him some responsibility" (MP, p. 74). In that perspective, any Africans who dare take another way are automatically considered as seditious individuals. Therefore, their destabilization becomes the only option for the white man to maintain his suzerainty. Markedly, what is

shocking and eventually nurses genuine grievance is the use of Negroes against Negroes. Alan Burns accurately portrays Negroes' lack of character and inconsistency while reporting the utterances of L. Solanke. He writes, "African[s] still constitute their own public enemy No.1" (B. Alan, 1948, p. 139). He reinforces his argumentation by exposing the relationships of vanity that exist among blacks. He hypothesizes that "Perhaps the most serious failing of the educated Negro, so far as the advancement of his own race is concerned, is his lack of the will for co-operation, the inability to follow for long a leader of his own colour, and the jealous vanity, which prompts him to criticise and pull down his bother Negro" (B. Alan, 1948, p. 137).

On that account, some glaring acts of high treason are the assassination of Malcolm X by Black Muslims on February 21, 1965 during a speech at the Audubon Ballroom in Manhattan. As a religious and civil rights' leader, Malcolm X was considered as a seditious individual. His execution is due to the fact that he wanted an upright independence of the black man at every level; cultural, political and economic. Metaphorically, Malcolm X recommended Negroes to build their own house instead of negotiating a seat in the white man's house. In a similar case, in Congo, Patrice Émery Lumumba, a politician who was his country's first Prime Minister after it became independent in 1960, was murdered by his own countrymen supported by leaders in the West on January 17, 1961. C. Isaac (2023) underlines the responsibility of Congolese in the assassination of Lumumba. He explains that Seven months later, Lumumba was murdered, brought down by a combination of Congolese politicians and Belgian 'advisers,' with the tacit support of the United States and the malign neglect of the United Nations.

Correspondingly, in Burkina Faso such a heinous crime was also perpetrated by countrymen. Thomas Isidore Noël Sankara, a selfless Burkinabé military officer, Marxist and Pan-African revolutionary who patriotically served his country was fiercely assassinated on October 15, 1987. Sankara's anti-neocolonialism attitudes were really salient. He aimed at disconnecting his country with all legacies of colonial era. Nevertheless, he stumbled over the feet of enemies who are his African brothers. Even if one can suppose that there is an invisible

western hand implicated in the murder of Sankara, it must be acknowledged that he was slain by Burkinabés' hands. After decades of gagging and silencing, investigations have been intensified to situate responsibilities concerning the murder of Sankara since 2014, the year Blaise Compaoré was forced to leave the throne. Up to the present time, a number of hypotheses are confirmed. Notably, some investigators stipulate that Compaoré is the main instigator and his mentor is Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the first Ivorian President. According to K. Sia (2022), "A military court in Burkina Faso on April 6, 2022, handed down a life term to former President Blaise Compaoré for the 1987 assassination of revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara, following a six-month trial." This assertion affirms the guilt of the suspect No.1 in the process. The effectiveness of Sankara's murder by his black brothers is highlighted by M. Angelo (2024, p. 185) who thinks:

Although the intrigues were woven locally and the responsibilities of the local perpetrators must be investigated, Sankara was left to be killed by Compaoré, [...] Burkina Faso was not even worth a coup from the outside. As a country, it was not even good for looting. But it suited the French, the Europeans, and their Ivorian *askaris* (mercenaries) that the captain should die. [...] In my view, the strongest support for Sankara's murderer came from Ivory Coast. Sankara had never been on good terms with Houphouët-Boigny, the Ivorian president who held power for 33 years from 1960 to 1993.

This illuminates the idea that Africans undoubtedly constitute their own public enemy No.1. Thus, they always hide their wickedness, negate their responsibilities in their own atrocities and perpetually look for someone to blame for their predicament. The white man is constantly at the center of the accusation. If, on the one hand, the white man is to be blamed, African leaders, on the other hand, must not be spared. As proof, after more than half a century of self-governing, black elites show their incapacity to bring about sustainable development and offer qualitative life to their populations. They only remain cowardish,

wicked and treasonous. They completely mismanage public services, which worsens the living conditions of Africans. The Encyclopedia Britannica (14th ed., vol. xi) summarizes Africans' self-ruling results as follows, "Irrigation projects fell into decay, production and foreign trade dwindled. The courts were corrupt. Education, except that carried French priests, practically ceased. There was little protection of property and no industrial encouragement. Poverty and diseases added to the general" (qtd. in Alan Burns, 1948, p. 83). To crown it all, black people are stationary human beings, lacking entrepreneurship and creativity. In a near future, they had better come up with critical and innovative ideas to develop Africa rather than accusing others of their sluggishness.

At present time, some African leaders boldly follow the paths of Malcolm X, Lumumba and Sankara. Once more, the betrayal rears its ugly head. People like Sankara in the new generation also face the resentment of some of their peers who still praise the relationships with the ostensible ex-colonizer. The African leaders who are considered as recalcitrant individuals are victimized by military coups. In other circumstances, their countries are attacked by rebellious people or terrorists. These are the up-to-date tactics used to destabilize regimes. Rebellion and terrorism constitute other aspects of the betrayal today. In many parts of Africa, black people represent over-trained and heavily armed rebels or terrorists who bob up from everywhere and slaughter their black brothers. Cases in point are Boko Haram based in Northeastern Nigeria; and JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslim) and ISSP (Islamic State Sahel Province) that operate in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. These are said to be religious organizations animated by ruthless black bandits who kill *en masse* their black brothers in the name of a religion coming from abroad. This can be regarded as the highest degree of stupidity.

The question of Africans' total independence is unconceivable in as much as they lack creativity and invention in terms of technology. They can neither fabricate weapons of mass destruction nor manufacture protection devices of high surveillance. Therefore, no one fears them and everybody preys and exploits them. These shortcomings compel Africans to side with another wing of white world anytime they decide to part with one group. Ahmed

Sékou Touré, the late President of Guinea Conakry did so in 1958. He slammed the door in de Gaule's face and allegedly sided with Russia. However, the results are self-evident today. People like Sékou are emerging, notably in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. In the fashion of Sékou Touré, the leaders of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), turned back to France and automatically welcomed Russia. Logically, when one leaves one's father's house in order to be independent one should not go and find another father who must take care of oneself. Instead, one should try to build one's own house. However, this practice must not be totally condemned because when one fears the menace of one's father, it is rightful to seek protection from another father. In brief, history is repeating. When Sékou Touré turned back to de Gaule, he moved to the other side of the curtain, giving Russia the opportunity to have a pedestal in Africa at a moment when powerful blocs were waging war against each other in the context of the cold war. In like manner, AES gives Russians the occasion to settle militarily in Africa at a time when cold war has just reared its clutches in Ukraine. Nowadays, the iron curtain has disappeared. Many covenants have been signed; however, the war is still going on under other forms. Regarding the state of things, it seems that the blocs are still looking for markets to pour their dangerous weapons. So, Africans have the responsibility to take control of their destiny in order to thwart the machinations of the predators.

As discussed, the experience of Guinea with both blocs should remind all African states that the only way that can lead to their real independence is their unity. This section cannot be closed without referring to Alan Burns (1948, p. 143) who reminds us that "The innate qualities of the Negro still remain, and it is not too late, by a change of attitude, to bring out these qualities and secure co-operation of the dark races in the building up of a better civilization."

IV. CONCLUSION

This article reached the evidence that Blacks and their continent are effectively preyed by other races. However, it is necessary to clarify that Africa is mishandled by others with the full participation of Blacks themselves. In this framework, the study has confirmed that Africans constitute their own public

enemy No.1. They not only abhor their own physical characteristics, but also the intra-racial relationships with their brothers. The betraying conducts between black characters portrayed in both *Middle Passage* and *The Known World* represent the untruthful and unreliable bounds within black communities. The fact that many black people do not have good intentions towards one another deteriorates their collaboration and exposes them to external predators. Thus, mutual respect, forgiveness, tolerance and understanding are values that they should cultivate in order to build a harmonious community as the common saying goes 'union makes strength'. As a final note, it should be stressed that the full independence and development of Africa lie in the hands of Black people who have to change their mindset to make the continent prosper socially, economically and politically.

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A Study on the Two-dimensional Effects of College Students' English Writing Literacy Empowered by Digital Intelligence¹

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 19 May 2026; Received in revised form: 11 Jun 2026; Accepted: 15 Jun 2026; Available online: 19 Jun 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— digital intelligence empowerment; English writing literacy; two-dimensional effects	<i>As artificial intelligence becomes more widely used in foreign language learning, various AI-based writing assistants have become a common tool for university students when completing English writing tasks. To examine how digital technologies influence students' overall writing abilities in both positive and negative ways, we conducted a questionnaire survey among non-English majors at the Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology. This paper analyzes the participants' actual use of intelligent writing tools, as well as their personal experiences and evaluations of how these tools affect their writing performance. We also offer practical suggestions to mitigate the negative impacts associated with overuse of such technologies. It is hoped that the findings will provide useful insights for English writing instruction and self-study in the current digital age.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

China has been actively promoting the digital transformation of education and encouraging deeper integration between artificial intelligence and daily teaching activities. Popular generative AI platforms

such as ChatGPT and WPS AI have greatly changed how universities train students and deliver professional knowledge. The Ministry of Education has released two important guidance documents for college English teaching, issued in 2007 and 2020

¹ This paper presents the phased achievements of the municipal URT Project of Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology: A Study on the Two-dimensional Effects of College Students' English Writing Literacy Empowered by Digital Intelligence (Project No.: 2026X00217)

respectively. Both documents point out that modern college English education should no longer focus merely on knowledge explanation. Instead, educators need to pay more attention to training students' critical thinking skills and creative thinking potential.

In real classroom practice, however, we can clearly see a conflicting situation. On one hand, intelligent writing tools can fix grammar errors, help organize article structures and polish word choices, which effectively lifts students' work quality and saves their writing time. On the other hand, many students gradually rely too heavily on these tools. This bad habit leads to lazy thinking, identical content across different papers and weakened independent thinking capabilities. All these problems go against the fundamental goal of cultivating versatile talents with solid foreign language skills.

Given the above situation, this research focuses on exploring how AI writing tools affect students' learning process. With real survey data, we analyze the changes in students' writing skills and thinking

modes under the influence of digital tools. The final results are meant to provide practical ideas for improving college English writing teaching.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted random sampling and questionnaire investigation as the main research methods. We handed out questionnaires to non-English majors in our university, and finally collected 255 valid response forms. The survey used a five-point Likert scale, where score 1 represents strong disagreement and score 5 stands for strong agreement.

The questionnaire was divided into three main parts: respondents' basic personal information, daily usage of AI writing tools, and their personal views on how these tools affect English writing. The whole investigation mainly explores the advantages of intelligent tools as well as the negative outcomes like weakened thinking ability caused by excessive dependence.

III. ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1 Characteristics of Digital Intelligence Tool Usage

Table 1: Weekly Frequency of English Writing among Respondents

Category	Hardly Write	1-2 Times	3-5 Times	6 Times or More
Proportion	48.8%	46.5%	3.1%	1.6%

Table 2: Major Scenarios of Using AI Tools for English Writing

Category	Course Assignments	Exam Preparation	Academic Writing	Daily Communication	Others
Proportion	55.6%	29.6%	7.4%	5.6%	1.9%

From the statistics listed in the two tables above, we can find that most students do not practice English writing on a regular basis. In most cases, students only write English articles to finish school assignments or prepare for different exams. Their writing behavior is mostly passive and intermittent, and few of them take the initiative to do writing practice in daily life.

Such a learning state makes it difficult for students to steadily improve their writing skills, and it also reflects that many learners lack learning motivation and self-training awareness. Even so,

intelligent writing tools have already become an indispensable part of students' learning environment. These digital tools bring new opportunities for the improvement of students' English writing ability.

3.2 Positive Effects Brought by Intelligent Writing Tools

Using AI writing software can obviously cut down the time students spend on writing and streamline the whole writing process. According to the data in Table 3, nearly 70% of participants admitted that their work efficiency improved after using relevant tools. This

fully proves that such digital tools do work well in saving time for English writing.

These tools can also finish basic tasks like word searching and simple sentence checking. When students are freed from these repetitive trivial works, they are able to spend more time thinking about writing themes and designing article logic. This is also the main reason why AI writing tools have gained great popularity among college students in recent years.

Besides improving efficiency, intelligent tools can also reduce grammar mistakes and make students'

writing more standard, as shown in Table 4. This function offers great help to students with relatively weak English foundations, preventing basic grammatical errors from lowering the overall quality of their articles. Meanwhile, a large number of participants held neutral attitudes toward these functions. This difference shows that students have different feelings about the practical value of AI tools, which also gives us new directions to combine digital technology with in-class writing teaching.

Table 3: Improvement in Writing Efficiency after Using AI Tools

Category	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Proportion	32.94%	40.00%	23.92%	1.57%	1.57%

Table 4: Improvement of Grammatical Standardization via AI Tools

Category	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Proportion	1.6%	4.0%	41.0%	35.0%	18.4%

3.3 Problems and Challenges in Current English Writing

There is no doubt that digital writing tools bring plenty of convenience to students' English learning. However, over-reliance on these tools has become a common problem across campus. For quite a lot of learners, AI tools are no longer just auxiliary helpers; they have gradually become a replacement for independent writing.

The data in Table 5 clearly reflects this phenomenon. Only 7.0% of respondents stated that they rarely depend on intelligent tools. More than 70% of students rely on these tools to different degrees. Among all participants, 60% reported moderate dependence, while 13% said they rely on AI tools heavily or even completely.

Once students get used to relying on AI output, their ability to think independently will gradually decline. Most of them will directly accept the content generated by artificial intelligence, without thinking deeply about the writing themes. They will even

follow AI suggestions blindly, even when these ideas conflict with their own thoughts.

Table 6 shows the survey results on students' critical thinking ability. Only 7.45% of participants believed they could carry out in-depth analysis when facing complicated writing topics. Over 69% chose neutral or negative options, and 48.63% rated their own critical thinking ability at an average level.

Heavy dependence on AI also leads to another problem: most students' compositions lack personal characteristics, and similar content can be seen in a large number of papers. If students keep handing over theme analysis and content creation to digital tools, their cognitive ability and memory will gradually decline, which will eventually set barriers to the long-term development of their comprehensive English writing ability.

Table 5: Degree of Reliance on Digital Intelligence Tools

Category	Total Reliance	Strong Reliance	Moderate Reliance	Mild Reliance	Barely Reliant
Proportion	3.0%	10.0%	60.0%	20.0%	7.0%

Table 6: Ability to Conduct In-depth Analysis and Critical Thinking on Complex Writing Topics after Using AI Tools

Category	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Proportion	4.71%	16.08%	48.63%	23.14%	7.45%

IV. TARGETED SUGGESTIONS

4.1 Update Teaching Ideas and Explore New Teaching Modes

Teachers can make full use of digital writing tools to design tiered teaching plans, so as to provide targeted guidance for students with different English levels. At the same time, teachers need to arrange regular writing exercises matched with classroom knowledge, to help students increase writing frequency step by step.

In the digital age, teachers should also adjust their roles in teaching. Apart from passing on professional knowledge, they need to guide students to form correct attitudes towards AI tools. It is necessary to help students develop critical thinking when using digital resources and teach them to use these tools in a reasonable way.

4.2 Strengthen Self-awareness and Avoid Negative Impacts

Students can combine teachers' personalized guidance with AI tools to make exclusive English writing training plans. They can also use learning resources recommended by big data to conduct targeted skill training.

A practical learning method is to combine content generated by AI with personal life experiences and real thoughts, so as to form unique viewpoints in writing. Additionally, students should build up confidence to express ideas with their own words and get rid of the fear of making language mistakes. When organizing article content, do not worry too much about sentence complexity, and try to take the initiative to finish writing independently.

In this way, students can make the most of the advantages of digital tools, while keeping their independent thinking ability. It can effectively avoid content homogenization and the decline of language expression ability caused by overusing AI.

V. CONCLUSION

Good English writing ability is a basic skill that every college student needs to master. The wide use of digital writing tools has both positive and negative influences on students' writing development. On the positive side, these tools can help learners fix language errors efficiently and improve the overall quality of written content. On the negative side, excessive use will make students lose their sense of independence, form tool dependence and give up deep thinking.

Despite all the existing drawbacks, we cannot deny the practical value of AI writing tools, especially for new learners and students with weak language foundations. In daily teaching, teachers must guide students to regard AI tools as learning assistants rather than writing substitutes. Schools and teachers can also adjust the evaluation standards for writing assignments, and pay more attention to checking students' original ideas and logical thinking.

With proper guidance and standard usage rules, digital technology can truly serve college English education, and help students steadily improve their comprehensive writing ability.

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The Renaissance and the Close of the Middle Ages

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 20 May 2026; Received in revised form: 14 Jun 2026; Accepted: 18 Jun 2026; Available online: 22 Jun 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Renaissance-Antiquity-Humanism- - Hellinism-Modernity.	Mention the “Renaissance”, and most of us will think automatically of the genius of Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, Donatello, or Leonardo da Vinci. There is, however, more to the Renaissance than beautiful pictures and brilliant individuals. The more we look into the term “Renaissance”, literally “rebirth”, the more slippery we find its meaning. In European historiography, perhaps the most value-laden and contested historical category, is the Renaissance. First, coined by Jacob Burckhardt in his book <i>The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy</i>, the term has come to dominate our consciousness of what the historical experience of this period was. The Renaissance, as far as this book is concerned, is conceived as a departure from the Middle Ages, a fracture point where European culture suddenly changed into a ‘new’ different culture. There are two important aspects to this change according to Burckhardt: the revival of the classical learning, character, and life (hence the ‘rebirth’ or ‘renaissance’ of the classical world) and the beginning of the “Modern Age”. For in reviving classical learning, the Italians of the Renaissance created the prototype of modern culture. This article seeks to shed light on the distinction between the old medieval European world and the new modern one enhanced by monumental scientific inventions, humanistic movement, and the discovery of a new secular view of life.

I. INTRODUCTION

From the French *Renaitre* (to be born again) and the Italian *Rinascimento* (rebirth), the term “Renaissance” is given to the great revival of arts and letters under the influence of classical precedents which began in Italy in the fourteenth century and continued during the following two centuries spreading to virtually all parts of Europe. The Renaissance, the rebirth of classical art, architecture, literature, and learning marked the transition from medieval to modern times by referring to the objective of intellectuals and artists of the time to repudiate the previous era, the Middle Ages, and to restore the philosophical and artistic ideals of classical antiquity. For the first time,

in a very long time, artists were granted a certain importance, and intellectuals in general started occupying a preponderant spot again. Renaissance art reflected this new conception of the world and of aesthetics in its compositions, offering a new revolutionary style that was the starting point for modern art. Artists abandoned Byzantine aesthetics to establish a more realistic art.

II. THE MOVE FROM THE MIDDLE AGES

The Renaissance was an essential era and a necessary evolution not only in artistic fields, but in all the aspects of European societies. Freed from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance found its inspiration in

Antiquity, thus explaining the many biblical and mythological depictions. The Renaissance marked the beginning of modern times, where artists were celebrated and valued again, and could express themselves with a creativity that had no boundary. Many renaissance artists were in fact multi-talented and could reveal their genius in several art forms at a time, like Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo.

In France, Michel de Montaigne and François Rabelais were the most important proponents of humanist thought. Montaigne's *Essays* are memorable for their clear statement of an individual's beliefs and their careful examination of society. In Italy, where the Renaissance first blossomed, "Rinascimento" was the name of a great intellectual and cultural movement. The fusion of Greek and Latin culture that occurred as a result of the formation of extensive Latin dominions in the Eastern Mediterranean after the crusades can be regarded as the basic condition, if not directly, the cause of the Renaissance (Harbison, 1995). In Florence, the cradle of the classical revival, there was a great revolt against the intellectual sterility of the medieval spirit, and especially against scholasticism, in favour of intellectual freedom. Its first sign was a passion for the cultural magnitude and richness of the pagan world. Traces of this revolt can be seen in Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), who, although thoroughly medieval in his sympathies, chose the Roman poet Virgil as his model, and who, in the vigour and magnificence of his own verse, was a striking contrast to his contemporaries and earlier Renaissance authors.

Petrarch (1304-1374), was the first true poet of the Renaissance. His poems written in Latin hexameter followed the classical models of poetry. Petrarch's disciple, Boccaccio, studied Greek and made a translation of Homer into Latin. Burckhardt offers a more effective view of the Renaissance in Italy observing that:

(...) the literary bequests of antiquity, Greek as well as Latin were of far more importance than the architectural and indeed than all the artistic remains which it had left. They were held in the most absolute sense to be the springs of all knowledge...Great as was the influence of the old writers on the Italian

mind in the fourteenth century and before. Yet, that influence was due rather to the wide diffusion of much that was new. The most popular Latin poets, historians, orators, and letter-writers, together with a number of Latin translations of single works of Aristotle, Plutarch, and a few other Greek authors, constituted the treasure from which a few favoured individuals in the time of Petrarch and Boccaccio drew their inspiration (...) a complete Latin translation of the *Iliad & Odyssey*, though a very bad one, was made at Petrarch's suggestion and with Boccaccio's help, by a calabrian Greek, Leonzio Pilato... (Baron, 1988).

In this perspective, the Renaissance is commonly held to mark the close of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the "Modern" western world. Although the problems of dating this process have caused much debate, the existence of a significant renaissance of European learning in the twelfth century is now accepted, while the eighteenth century is seen as a direct continuation of the Renaissance's intellectual tendencies (Kraye, 1996). In literary terms, the Renaissance may be seen as a new tradition running from Petrarch and Boccaccio in Italy to Jonson and Milton in England embracing the work of Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare. It is marked by a new self-confidence in vernacular literatures, a flourishing of lyric poetry and a revival of such classical forms as epic and pastoral literature. The term "Renaissance" has also been extended to various literary revivals in specific times and places. The American Renaissance, for instance, or the Harlem Renaissance characterizes the impulse initiated in Italy, towards improving the contemporary world by discovering and applying the achievement of classical antiquity (Stewart, 1997). Renaissance was first used in the sixteenth century by Giorgio Vasari who saw a "rinascita delle arti", or the birth of arts in his own time, and Voltaire two centuries later, a "renaissance des lettres et des beaux arts" in Medicean Florence (Farrago, 1997). The concept of an epoch marked by "the discovery of the world of man" was deeply taken up by Burckhardt who saw the defining emphasis of the Renaissance as secular and individual. The new attitudes he detected in the Italy of that epoch in terms of nature,

morality, religious affairs, art and literature made him see it as inaugurating the modern era. It is important to realize that this idea of the Renaissance was formulated to stress the uniqueness of modern European culture, as something new on the face of human culture.

III. THE BEGINNING OF MODERN CULTURE

In formulating a beginning for modern culture, Burckhardt was also arguing that modern culture was not anything that occurred between the decline of the classical world and the Renaissance. Modernity has been famously defined as pathetic time awareness. It is fairly often referred to as the one spectacular rupture in the history of the race entailing rocketing irreversible shifts. Its birth is commonly admitted to have been in the making for a long time. The French *Annalystes* are not the only school to have reconsidered the length of the process. Daniel Milo, like, reputedly Jacques Le Goff, opines that the Middle Ages, and subsequently the Renaissance could be the beginning of modern institutions (Nelson, 1999).

As a matter of fact, modernity remains an elusive concept, for it may be understood in the trivial sense that every age is new in its time, yet, it may also carry implicit biases about the relationship between the recent (*modernus*) and ancient (*antiquus*). The Renaissance is commonly considered the point of transition between medieval and modern Europe, which is true enough if we consider “medieval” and “modern” to merely define chronological periods. Yet, errors propagate when we impose certain connotations of “modernity” into this historical relation. One such connotation is the view that the past is at best an embryonic state of modern society. While we may not find a modern or even proto-modern man in Petrarch, Castiglione or Montaigne, these thinkers reveal a notion of modernity that has some similarity to ours, even though the content of their thought is hardly an anticipation of what followed in later centuries. Their novel view of what is to be modern entailed a reassessment of one’s relationship to other men, past and present. In this way, they may be credited with developing a modern sense of the self; it is not that their philosophical opinions or personalities were in any

way modern, but their mode of introspection is identifiable with our own.

In recent decades, the advent of New Historicism among cultural historians, such as Stephen Greenblatt, has unwittingly revived the Burckhardt position. For the new historicists, the term “Renaissance” is a substitute for the “Early Modern”, a historical period that encompasses all of European history from the Italian Renaissance to the Enlightenment. Like Burckhardt, too, they see the meaning and value of this period in relation to what follows, which is modernity (Howard, 1986). At some point, European culture broke with the past and emerged into the modern world. Like Burckhardt, new historicism places this beginning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Again the primary task of this category is to explain the present. However, these continuities with the medieval world are so pervasive that separating the Italian Renaissance/Early Modernity from the medieval world is an impossible task. The origins of the modern world are as fully rooted in the medieval world as they are in the Italian Renaissance.

In early modern Europe, concomitant with the engendering of new knowledge was the emergence of a new view of history and the past. The latter set such high standards and criteria of achievement and judgement that it became the “classic” one by which subsequent ages and cultures are measured. “The defining criteria for value were inescapably governed by past models, not by present experience or by future ideal states of existence” (Frykenberg, 1996).

Hence, also the corollary of historical didacticism, the idea that history, antique history in particular, is the *magister vitae*, the teacher of life with a clear charismatic purpose. In short, there arose a sharp sense of history, the awareness that the significance of the present was affected, defined, and governed by past contexts. As Michel de Certeau puts it, historical intelligibility was now established through a relation with the past as the other. This relation with the past gave rise to “epochocentricity”, a lineal account of sequence, and an evaluation of a distinct period in terms of the sequential context (De Certeau, 1988). Though there was a direct appeal towards the past and antique models, this meant under no circumstances a blind repetition of it. The fact that the past must be measured by the classical past also

suggested their essential continuity; the former might be inferior, but it could improve simply by retrieving the old, since there was a qualitative uniformity bridging the gap. The Renaissance was the milestone on to the road to modern humanism, the eruption of the importance of man irreparably serving the intricate unity of the medieval web of life. Along the dark, narrow streets of the Middle Ages, sunny arcades, beside the impressive-directed Gothic architecture, grew humanly scaled towns buildings, squares and statues. Instead of "stiff figures and symbolic images, warm fully rounded human beings sprang to life on canvas" (Ferguson, 1989). To the discovery of the outward world, the Renaissance added a still greater achievement by bringing to light the full whole nature of man. This period gave the highest development to individuality. It, then, led the individual to the most zealous and thorough study of his self in all forms and under all conditions. The Renaissance was an intoxicating phase of humanism, an explosive confidence in the human mind and its achievement, the celebration of art, morals, thought, and life on an eminently human scale. It was twilight to the dignity and excellence of man and consequently a major and powerful contribution to modern western civilisation. "Man is the measure of all things", as Leon Battista Alberti, a typical early Renaissance thinker expressed it, "A man can do all things if he will" (Jarzanbek, 1990).

It was during the Renaissance that the word *Humanist* was coined. Initially, it only defined a concern for humanity. Many early humanists saw no dichotomy between this and their Christian faith. Yet, it was from the Renaissance that modern secular humanism grew with the development of an important split between reason and religion. Leonardo da Vinci might make a more promising model of primitive secularism, especially when he appears to challenge the Biblical account of the Flood. He even spoke disparagingly of the love of money and the flesh (Lindscott, 1957) The Renaissance Church became a secular institution in this period, shedding its spiritual roots with insatiable greed for material wealth and temporal power. Indeed, the greatest of all European institutions, the Roman Church, in which Europeans had lived for centuries, fell into neglect under Renaissance popes, whose fall from spiritual grace

sparkled the Reformation. In science, Galileo's support of the Copernican revolution upset the church's adherence to the theories of Aristotle exposing them as false. Indeed, of all the changes that swept over Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the most widely influential was an epistemological transformation we call "the scientific revolution".

In the popular mind, we associate this revolution with natural science and technological change. However, the scientific revolution was, in reality, a series of changes in the structure of Europe including doubt, empirical and sensory verification, the abstraction of human knowledge into separate sciences and the view that the world functions like a machine. These changes greatly changed the human experience of every other aspect of life, from the individual life to that of the group. This modification in world view can also be charted in painting sculpture, and architecture. People of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were looking at the world very differently. The scientific revolution did not happen once, nor did it begin at any set date. Realistically speaking, the scientific revolution that we associate with Galileo, Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton began much earlier. We can push the date back to the work of Nicolaus Copernicus and the Italian Leonardo da Vinci in the middle of the fifteenth century.

During the Middle Ages, there was a great scientific revolution, that in many ways, rivalled the later scientific revolution in sweeping changes, but all the cultural components were not in place. In the high Middle Ages, Europeans believed that the centre of all truth was in God and that an over wearing concern with material phenomena was a serious neglect of one's soul and one's dependence on God. The medievalists also deeply distrusted human perception. Not only was human perception variable and untrustworthy, the material world itself was deceptive. Rather than a vehicle for truth, the material world was put in place to actively distract humans from the real task of living the sort of life that would get you into heaven. The introduction of humanism in the Renaissance was in large part based on the idea that human intellect and creativity were trustworthy and human experience was, to some extent, a reliable base on which to hang knowledge.

IV. A PROGRESS IN SCIENTIFIC ARTS

One of the most important aspects of modernity is the encouragement of advance or progress in sciences and arts. Revolutions in science and technology have been no less influential than political revolutions in changing the shape of the modern world. The scientific revolution beginning with the discoveries of Kepler and Galileo and culminating in Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1685) changed the way in which educated people looked at the natural world. Indeed, the scientific revolution was nothing less than a revolution in the way the individual perceives the world. As such, the revolution changed man's thinking process. It was an intellectual revolution, a revolution in human knowledge.

Even more than Renaissance scholars who discovered man and nature, the scientific revolutionaries: Copernicus, Galilee, and Newton attempted to understand and explain man and the natural world. Thinkers such as the Polish astronomer Copernicus, the French philosopher René Descartes and the British mathematician Isaac Newton overturned the authority of the Middle Ages and the classical world. In his book, *The Origins of Modern Science*, Herbert Butterfield wrote that: "The revolution in science overturned the authority in not only the Middle Ages but of the ancient world. It ended not only in the eclipse of scholastic philosophy but in the destruction of Aristotelian physics" (Butterfield, 1962). The new focus on nature was a direct result of the collapse of the Christian matrix and this was the result of a combination of forces which produced intellectual change. So monumental were his achievements in cosmology, the scientific revolution could almost have been called the Copernican Revolution. Being an exceptional Renaissance man, Copernicus determined that the sun was at the centre of the cosmos and that the earth moved challenging the geocentrism of Ptolemy with his own heliocentric universe. In his book, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Bodies*, he declares that:

We hesitate to grant (the earth) the motion which accords naturally with its form, rather than attribute a movement to the entire universe whose limit we do not and cannot know? And why should we not admit, with regard to the daily rotation, that the

appearance belongs to the heavens, but the reality is in the earth? (Copernicus, 1972).

The Renaissance mentality stood at a point midway between medieval supernaturalism and the modern scientific and critical attitude. Medievalists see humanism as the terminal product of the Middle Ages. Modern historians are perhaps more apt to view humanism as the germinal period of modernism (Baron, 1966). Most probably, we can assume that the man of the Renaissance lived, as it were, between two worlds: the world of the medieval Christian matrix, in which the significance of every phenomenon was ultimately determined through uniform points of view, no longer existed for him. On the other hand, he had not yet found himself suspended between faith and reason. As the grip of medieval naturalism began to diminish, secular and human interests became more prominent. The facts of individual experience in the here and now became more interesting than that shadowy afterlife reliance upon faith and God weakened. The present world became an end in itself instead of simply a preparation for a world to come. Indeed, as the age of Renaissance humanism wore on, the distinction between the world (the city of man) and the next (the city of God) tended to disappear. Beauty was believed to afford, at least, some glimpse of a transcendental existence. This goes for to explain the humanist cult of beauty and makes plain that humanism was, above everything else, fundamentally an aesthetic movement. Man, himself, tended to become the practical measure of all things. In the later Middle Ages, urban intellectuals were well on the road to the recovery of an aesthetic and secular view of life even before the full tide of the classical revival was left. It was only natural, then, that pagan literature, with its emotional and intellectual affinity to the new world view, should accelerate the existing drift toward secularism and stimulate the cult of humanity and the worship of humanity.

The intellectuals of antiquity like Sir Thomas More, and Desiderus Erasmus, in contrast to the Christians, were relatively unconcerned about the supernatural world and the eternal destiny of the soul. They were primarily interested in a happy, adequate and efficient life here on earth. Hellenic philosophy was designed to teach man how to live successfully rather

than how to die with the assurance of ultimate salvation. Humanism directly and indirectly revived the pagan scale of virtues. When men like Petrarch and his fellow humanists read pagan literature, they were infected with the secular outlook of the Greeks and Romans. Even rather pious humanists became enamoured of what Augustine branded “the city of man” (Hankins, 2000) Petrarch, a devout Christian worshipped the pagan eclecticism of Cicero. Erasmus suggested that such titles as St Socrates and St Cicero were not sacrilegious and openly preferred the pagans to the school men. “Whatever is pious and conduces to good manners ought not to be called profane”, he wrote.

The first place must indeed be given to the authority of the scriptures; but nevertheless I sometimes find some things said or written by the ancients, nay even by the heathens, nay by the poets themselves, so chastely, so holily, and so divinely, that I cannot persuade myself but that, when they wrote them, they were divinely inspired and perhaps the spirit of Christ diffuses itself father than we imagine and that there are more saints than we have in our catalogue (...) To confess freely among friends, I can't read Cicero on Old Age on Friendship (...) without kissing the book, without veneration towards the divine soul. And on the contrary, when I read some of our modern authors, treating of politics, economics, and ethics, good God! How cold they are in comparison with these! Nay, how do they seem to be insensible of what they write themselves! So that I had rather lose Scotus and twenty more such as he, than one Cicero or Plutarch. Not that I am wholly against them either; but because by the reading of the one, I find myself become better, whereas I rise from the other, I know not how coldly affected to virtue, but most violently inclined to cavil and contention (Rummel, 1990).

V. THE RENAISSANCE AND THE IDEA OF THE SELF

A modern-centred-humanist essentialist idea of the “self” emerged; The Renaissance served crucial ideological functions. As a matter of fact, there is symmetry between the Renaissance and our late twentieth century. We are much better off to follow Antonio Gramsci and Foucault in positing not a

single ruling ideology or episteme for an era, but a series of complex shifting, political coalitions, discourses, and ideologies at work over centuries to follow the Frankfurt school in understanding an ideology such as humanism as multivalent, changing and contradictory, much more a site of contestation than stability. What is true of humanism is obviously true for the movements and reconstitutions of subjectivity over several centuries. Stephen Greenblatt provides a more workable model of the history of the self in cautiously endorsing Jacob Burckhardt's classic position that both the concept and the structure of the self were transformed and became “modern”, that is post-medieval in some general sense during the Renaissance even though the self has continued to have a history and has gone through different phases and ideological representations throughout the long modern period (Greenblatt, 2005). Over the past few decades, scholars have approached the problem of the emergence of the modern self from a variety of perspectives. The most influential and innovative treatment of the Renaissance self is found in the work of Stephen Greenblatt and, most notably, in his now classic study *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. The latter has proven enormously influential. This is especially true in Greenblatt's own field of literature, where his ideas have been fundamental for the development of New Historicism, a critical movement that, in its reaction against the formalist or idealist readings of the New Criticism, has sought to read literary texts as cultural artefacts or practices, dialectically related to the specific cultural, social, and political contexts in which they were written.

In addition, and what is decisive here, the New Historicists also view the self, like a text, not as an autonomous entity but rather as a site on which broader institutional and political forces are inscribed. Self-fashioning has become a central theme in the exploration of Renaissance and early modern culture generally (Ibid). On many levels, this development is not surprising. As a descriptive category, self-fashioning seems to capture much of what is popularly believed about Renaissance life. As Greenblatt notes,

The simplest observation we can make is that in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human

identity as a manipulable, artful process. Such self – consciousness have been widespread among the elite in the classical world, but Christianity brought a growing suspicion of man's power to shape identity. As a term for the action or process of making for particular features of appearance, for a distinct style or pattern, the word had been long in use, but it is in the sixteenth century, that FASHION seems to come into wide currency (...) But, more significantly for our purposes, fashioning may suggest the achievement of a less tangible shape; a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving (Ibid, 14)

Greenblatt's renaissance Self-Fashioning offers a view of the self as a cultural artefact generated by the economic, social, religious, and political upheavals of the Renaissance. Greenblatt's project, in short, has contributed in decisive ways to a new historiography of the self. Like other historicists, Greenblatt sees the self not as a free, autonomous subject, but rather as subjected to the codes of culture and power, or what Greenblatt calls "the cultural poetics" of a particular set of cultural, political, and social relations. Identity is shaped from the outside. As Louis Adrian Montrose has written, "The freely self-creating and world-creating individual of so-called bourgeois humanism is –at least in theory–now defunct." (Montrose, 2006) Above all, self-fashioning appears to make sense of a world in which the court was central to literary life—for this was a world in which prudent accommodation and even deception were often seen as virtues.

Indeed, the Renaissance world was a theatrical age – an age of masks, of masquerades, of role playing, of the studied nonchalance of *sprezzatura* (ease of manner in style or performance) even of "honest dissimulation". Clearly, at least among the privileged orders, men and women were often conscious of fashioning particular selves in order to survive or advance in the high-stakes world of court society (Ibid, 15). Stephen Greenblatt's contention that "the subject of psychoanalysis – 'our' subjectivity – is ultimately a product of the Renaissance" (Durham, 2000). For Pye, however, this is precisely what makes psychoanalysis so revealing in relation to early modernity. In Shakespeare's *Perjured Eye*, Fineman argues, as the guiding principle of his project, that:

modernist—and for the matter, postmodernist – theories of the self are not so much a theoretical account or explanation of subjectivity as they are the conclusion of literary subjectivity initially invented in the Renaissance (...) Shakespeare marks the beginning of the modernist self and Freud (...) its end, the two of them thus bracketing an epoch of subjectivity (Fineman, 1986).

In his book, *Passage to Modernity*, Louis Dupré discusses the roots, development and impact of modern thought, tracing the fundamental principles of modernity to the late fourteenth century Renaissance affirming that modernity is still an influential force in contemporary culture (Dupré, 1993). Dupré deems that the combination of late medieval theology and early Italian humanism shattered the transitional synthesis that had united cosmic human and transcendent components in a comprehensive idea of nature. Early Renaissance humanism transformed the traditional worldview by its unprecedented emphasis on human creativity. The self emerged as the sole source of meaning while nature was reduced to an object and transcendence withdrew into a "supernatural realm". Dupré rightly retorts: "Indeed, but the more valuable heritage of the past consists in the vital promises it holds for the future" (Ibid, 248). He proceeds to conclude his insightful treatment of modernity as follows:

Modernity is an event that has transformed the relation between the cosmos, its transcendent sources, and its human interpreter. To explain this as the outcome of historical precedents is to ignore its most significant quality—namely, its success in rendering all rival views of the real obsolete. Its innovative power made of modernity, which began as a local Western phenomenon, a universal project capable of forcing its theoretical and practical principles on all but the most isolated civilizations (Ibid, 249).

VI. CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, renaissance ideals for the individual have profoundly influenced modern thought and thinkers like Nietzsche. It contributed to the liberal, permissive and anti-Christian philosophical

approach which underpins much of modern life in Europe and America today. Indeed, the Renaissance hymn for Man foregrounded Nietzsche's modern theory of *Übermensch*, or "superman" idea. Nietzsche constantly championed ancient Greece and Italian Renaissance paradigm of strong vigorous cultures. His strategy was to choose past ideals which could serve as models or norms for future "greatness". Greek and Renaissance cultures developed science and technology. They were highly aesthetic and produced strong individuals. These ideals, Nietzsche believed, were concentrated in strong individuals like *Julius Caesar* and the "great men" of the Renaissance (Nietzsche, 2002). The critical theory of the Frankfurt School which was based on the fundamental rejection of conditions degrading to human dignity and spirit; conditions with which the individual must not be reconciled, had been partly influenced by the philosopher Nietzsche.

The Nazi concept of a European *Herrenmenschen*, or "Master Race" in the twentieth century believed in what a pure human will to create in the cosmos. Nietzsche had written, "once you said "God" when you gazed upon distant seas: but now I have taught you today *Übermensch* (...) you could transform yourselves into forefathers and ancestors of the *Übermensch* (...)" (Nietzsche, 2006). Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*, or the *Overman* who constitutes a higher form of human being can be seen as a typically 'modern' idea, as expressive of the modern will to development, growth and innovation; an ancient pre-modern stage. Zarathustra, however, is Nietzsche's chosen figure for the teacher of the *Übermensch* and championing of the cultural warrior, the noble of the spirit, the artist philosopher can be read as a replication of ancient Renaissance ideals.

I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome (...) All beings so far have created something beyond themselves. Behold I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth (...) man is a rope tied between the beast and overman- a rope over an abyss (...) What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end. What can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a going under (...) (Ibid, 3).

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A Comparative Study of AI and Human Translation in the English Translation of Literary Works: A Case Study of *Fortress Besieged*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 19 May 2026; Received in revised form: 16 Jun 2026; Accepted: 19 Jun 2026; Available online: 22 Jun 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— AI translation, human translation, literary translation, <i>Fortress Besieged</i>, translation comparison	As the times advance, artificial intelligence technology has progressed rapidly, bringing new possibilities and challenges to literary translation. This study focuses on Qian Zhongshu's novel <i>Fortress Besieged</i>. It takes the English version co-translated by Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao (1979) as the human translation reference, and the output generated by the large language model DeepSeek V4 Pro as the AI translation sample. A systematic comparison is made across four dimensions: semantic accuracy, reproduction of linguistic style, handling of culture-loaded words, and conveyance of rhetorical effect. The findings show that AI translation does well in basic meaning transfer and sentence fluency. Yet it still lags clearly behind human translation when it comes to capturing humorous and ironic tones, understanding deep cultural allusions, and creatively reproducing rhetorical devices. AI translation leans more towards domestication and literal rendering, which leads to a somewhat flat style. Human translation has a marked advantage in cultural interpretation and stylistic fit. This study suggests that, at the present stage, the English translation of literary works is better served by a collaboration model where human translators take the lead and AI plays a supporting role. AI can assist with draft generation and terminology help, but the most essential work of transcreation still needs to be carried out by human translators.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Recent years have seen remarkable advances in AI-powered translation, driven by neural machine translation (NMT) and large language models (LLMs). From dedicated systems like Google

Translate and DeepL to general-purpose models such as GPT-4 and DeepSeek, the quality of AI translation in many fields has approached or even partially surpassed that of earlier machine translation systems (Zhang & Zhao [37]). Literary translation, however, remains one of the toughest challenges for machine translation, because it demands such a high level of artistic sensitivity, cultural depth, and aesthetic judgment.

Literary translation is not the same as translating practical texts in science or business. It requires more than just getting the meaning right. A translator also needs to recreate the literary qualities of the original—its style, its rhetorical devices, its cultural resonance, its aesthetic effect—in the target language. Qian Zhongshu himself, in his essay "Lin Shu's Translation," described the highest ideal of literary translation as *huajing*, or "realm of transformation": to transform the original into such natural target-language prose that readers forget they are reading a translation at all. This standard is a severe test for any translator. For AI systems, which lack genuine cultural perception and aesthetic judgment, the challenge is particularly daunting.

Fortress Besieged is Qian Zhongshu's best-known work [12]. It has been praised as a stylistically distinctive masterpiece of satire in modern Chinese literature, often called a "new unofficial history of the scholars." Set in the early years of the War of Resistance against Japan, the novel follows the life of its protagonist Fang Hongjian and offers a penetrating portrait of the intellectual's spiritual predicament. Its central metaphor, the "besieged fortress," captures a universal paradox in marriage and in the pursuit of life: those outside the fortress want to break in, and those inside want to escape. The novel's language is sharp and richly loaded with cultural references, making it a representative text for studying how style and rhetoric fare in literary translation. C. T. Hsia once praised it as one of the "most exquisite" long novels in modern Chinese literary history (Hsia [29]). The English translation, *Fortress Besieged*, was first drafted by Jeanne Kelly and then revised and extensively annotated by Nathan K. Mao. It was published by Indiana University Press in 1979 [13]. It remains the only complete English version of the novel. Combining foreignization with domestication to handle cultural

nuances and satirical tones, it has become a core text for teaching and researching modern Chinese literature in the English-speaking world [51] and has had a wide influence overseas [29][51]. This study chooses *Fortress Besieged* as a case precisely because it brings together several core difficulties in literary translation: dense metaphors and allusions, profound cultural loads, subtle ironic tones, and rhythmically complex long sentences. It offers rich and typical material for a comparative study of AI and human translation.

1.2 Research Significance

On the theoretical side, this study extends AI translation research from the practical domains where it has mostly been applied—science, technology, business—into literary translation, a field that demands far greater artistic sensitivity in language. Through a systematic, multi-dimensional comparative analysis, it seeks to reveal where the limits of current AI technology lie in literary translation, and to explore the reasons behind those limitations. In doing so, it provides new empirical evidence for core discussions in translation theory, such as "the subjectivity of the translator" and "creative translation."

On the practical side, the study offers a concrete reference for literary translators and publishers as they evaluate, adopt, and use AI translation tools. By clarifying where AI can usefully fit into the literary translation process, it helps distinguish between tasks where AI can boost efficiency—such as generating a first draft or checking terminology—and tasks that must remain in the hands of the human translator, such as recreating style, handling culture-loaded words with sensitivity, and making final aesthetic judgments [44][47][48]. In this way, it maps out a workable path for an efficient collaborative model in which the human translator takes the lead and AI plays a supporting role.

1.3 Research Content and Methods

1.3.1 Research Content

This study builds a three-way parallel corpus from the original Chinese text of *Fortress Besieged*, the human English translation by Kelly and Mao, and the AI-generated English version by DeepSeek V4 Pro. A systematic comparison is then carried out along four dimensions:

(1) **Semantic accuracy.** It looks at how complete the information is, how long and complex sentences are handled, and how subtle shades of meaning are conveyed. It compares how human and AI translators strike a balance between being faithful to the original and taking necessary liberties.

(2) **Reproduction of linguistic style.** The focus here is on humorous and ironic tones and the style of character dialogue. It analyzes whether the two translations can recreate that distinctive Qian Zhongshu touch, and what strategies and effects emerge when dealing with irony, playful mockery, and similar nuances.

(3) **Handling of culture-loaded words.** This covers idioms, allusions, classical poetry, and culture-specific items. It compares the strategies human and AI translators tend to use when cultural gaps appear—literal translation, free translation, amplification, annotation, and so on—and then evaluates how effectively the cultural meaning comes across.

(4) **Conveying rhetorical effect.** Centering on figures of speech like metaphor, personification, synaesthesia, and pun, it examines how completely and how beautifully these devices are reproduced across languages, and looks at the creative capacity of each translation.

1.3.2 Research Methods

This study combines three research methods:

(1) **Literature review.** It systematically surveys the existing scholarship on translation theory, both at home and abroad, and on the English translation of *Fortress Besieged*, laying the theoretical groundwork for the analytical framework.

(2) **Textual comparison.** The original Chinese text, the human translation, and the AI translation are placed side by side, sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph, and the differences among the three are recorded in full.

(3) **Case analysis.** Representative examples are selected from each of the four analytical dimensions for close qualitative analysis, so as to reveal in concrete terms the translation mechanisms and ways of thinking that lie behind the different versions.

II. KEY CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Core Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

2.1.1 Core Concepts

This study involves three basic concepts. AI translation denotes intelligent translation powered by large language models, with DeepSeek V4 Pro adopted as the representative tool in this research. Trained on massive corpora, such models possess robust capacities for contextual comprehension and text generation. Literary translation takes literary works as its object. The original is itself an artistic creation with its own aesthetic value and cultural meaning (Bassnett ^[9]), requiring a balance between fidelity and creativity so that target readers come away with an experience close to that of the original readers.

2.1.2 Theoretical Foundations

To assess translation quality comprehensively, this study draws on four theories. Yan Fu's (1898) ^[4] "faithfulness, fluency, and elegance" sets three progressive criteria ^[5]; for literary translation, *ya* primarily means conveying the literary qualities of the original (Shen Suru ^[5]). Nida's (1964) ^[1] functional equivalence stresses making the target reader's response as close as possible to that of the original reader, prioritizing equivalence of meaning while attending to style (Nida & Taber ^[2]). Newmark ^{[6][7]} distinguishes semantic translation, which stays close to the original's semantic and syntactic patterns, from communicative translation, which focuses on reader effect; he argues that literary works should lean towards semantic translation, supplemented by communicative translation. Venuti ^[8] proposes domestication and foreignization: the former assimilates the source text into the target culture, while the latter retains foreignness, highlighting the translator's role as cultural mediator. These four approaches address translation standards ^{[3][6]}, equivalence of effect, strategic orientation, and cultural stance respectively, together forming the analytical framework of this study.

2.2 Current Research

2.2.1 Studies on the English Translation of *Fortress Besieged*

Since its publication, the English translation of *Fortress Besieged* has drawn sustained scholarly attention. An early and representative review was Sun Yifeng^[15] systematic critique in Chinese Translators Journal, which identified problems in the Kelly and Mao translation regarding accuracy, rhetorical treatment, and cultural transmission, while fairly acknowledging that the translation "has considerable merit in many places." Since then, research perspectives have grown more diverse. Some scholars have examined the issue of the translator's subjectivity through hermeneutics^[16], relevance-adaptation theory^[17], and pragmatic adaptation theory^[28]. Others have focused on specific topics such as the translation of humor^{[18][21][34]}, metaphor translation^{[19][20]}, and the handling of culture-loaded words^{[21][22][23][24][25]}. Still others have explored paratextual elements^[27] and the causes behind translation strategies^{[26][52]}. On the whole, studies on the English translation of *Fortress Besieged* have moved from early evaluative judgments toward descriptive analysis informed by diverse theoretical perspectives^{[30][31]}.

2.2.2 Studies on AI Translation and Literary Translation

In recent years, the application of AI translation to literature has become an increasingly active area of research. Zhang et al.^[32] built LITEVAL-CORPUS, a corpus covering four language pairs and containing over two thousand literary excerpts, to compare nine machine translation systems against multiple human translations. The results showed that even the most advanced large language models, such as GPT-4o, produced translations that were "more literal and less diverse" than human versions, and that standard automatic evaluation metrics were almost entirely ineffective for assessing literary translation. Corpas Pastor and Noriega-Santiañez^[34] looked at creative phraseological expressions in literary texts and compared four neural machine translation systems with human translators, finding that human translators scored significantly higher on creativity^[34] (74.72%) than the best-performing machine system, DeepL (54.03%). In the context of Chinese-English literary translation^{[37][38][43]}, Zhao Yan et al.^[38] compared ChatGPT 4.0, Wenxin Yiyan, iFLYTEK Spark, and four major online translation systems on their English renderings of Fan Hua, noting that

some Chinese-developed large models had already surpassed traditional machine translation on literary indicators. Chen Piao et al.^[39], using Lao She's *Mr. Ma and Son* as a case, revealed systematic deficiencies in machine translation in three areas: culture-loaded words, contextual judgment, and humorous expression.

In summary, existing research has largely developed along two separate tracks—critical studies of the English *Fortress Besieged* and studies of AI literary translation. There has been little work that brings the two together in a focused way. This study therefore takes *Fortress Besieged* as a representative case and attempts to build a three-column parallel corpus of the Chinese original, the human translation, and the AI translation, on the basis of which a systematic, multi-dimensional comparative analysis can be carried out. It aims to fill this gap in the research.

III. COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS OF AI AND HUMAN TRANSLATION

3.1 Comparison on the Semantic Dimension

Semantic accuracy is a basic requirement in translation. In literary works, meaning includes not only denotation but also connotation and contextual meaning. The following three typical cases examine how AI and human translations differ in conveying meaning. This study uses the Kelly & Mao^[13] of *Fortress Besieged* (1979): Jeanne Kelly produced the first draft, and Nathan K. Mao revised, polished, and wrote the preface and notes—a typical Chinese-Western collaborative model. The translation evaluation issues embedded in these concepts need systematic theoretical examination.

3.1.1 Handling Long and Complex Sentences

The opening of *Fortress Besieged* unfolds with a dense piece of rhetorical description. The multiple layers of logic embedded in it test a translator's ability to parse syntax.

Example 1: Opening Personification Chain

红海早过了。船在印度洋面上开驶着。但是太阳依然不饶人地迟落早起，侵占去大部分的夜。夜仿佛纸浸了油，变成半透明体；它给太阳拥抱住了，分不出身来，也许是给太阳陶醉了，所以夕照霞隐褪后的夜色也带着酡红。

Human translation:

The red sea had long since been crossed, and the ship was now on its way over the Indian Ocean; but as always the sun mercilessly rose early and set late, encroaching upon the better part of the night. The night, like paper soaked in oil, had become translucent. Locked in the embrace of the sun, the night's own form was indiscernible. Perhaps it had become intoxicated by the sun, which would explain why the night sky remained flushed long after the gradual fading of the rosy sunset.

AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

The Red Sea was already far behind. The ship now plowed across the Indian Ocean. Yet the sun, showing no mercy, still rose early and set late, seizing the greater part of the night for itself. The night — as though a sheet of paper steeped in oil — had turned into a translucent medium; caught fast in the sun's embrace, it lost all distinctness of form. Perhaps it was simply drunk on the sun, for even after the glow of sunset had receded, the night sky still wore a tipsy flush.

Comparative analysis:

Both translations convey the basic information, but they differ in a number of details. For "侵占," the human version uses "encroaching upon," which suggests a gradual intrusion, while the AI's "seizing" is more direct and action-oriented. For "浸" in "纸浸了油," the human translation uses "soaked" and the AI uses "steeped." The former emphasizes complete saturation, whereas the latter keeps a sense of the steeping process and is semantically more precise. For "分不出身来," the human version describes the night's form as "indiscernible"; the AI unpacks it as "lost all distinctness of form," which gives more information but is slightly less concise. It is worth noting that the AI translates "酡红" as "tipsy flush," forming a semantic link with the personification of "陶醉" (drunk/intoxicated) in the original. The human version simply uses "flushed," losing the thread of drunkenness. This shows that the AI has some advantage in handling inter-sentential semantic connections.

Example 2: A Qian Zhongshu-style Discursive Long Sentence

学国文的人出洋"深造"听来有些滑稽。事实上,惟有学中国文学的人非到外国留学不可。因为一切其他科目像数学、物理、哲学、心理、经济、法律等等都是从外国灌输进来的,早已洋气扑鼻;只有国文是国货土产,还需要外国招牌,方可维持地位,正好像中国官吏、商人在本国剥削来的钱要换外汇,才能保持国币的原来价值。

Human translation:

It sounded a little ridiculous for someone majoring in Chinese literature to go abroad for "advanced study." In fact, only students of Chinese literature had to study abroad, since all the other subjects, such as mathematics, physics, philosophy, psychology, economics, and law, had originally been imported from abroad and already reeked of foreignness. Only Chinese literature was a native product; it needed a foreign trademark to maintain its status, just as Chinese officials and merchants had to convert the money they had extorted at home into foreign currency to maintain the value of the national currency.

AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

That a student of Chinese literature should go abroad for "advanced studies" sounds almost farcical. Yet the truth is that no one needs to study abroad more than the Chinese literature major. For every other discipline — mathematics, physics, philosophy, psychology, economics, law — has been imported from abroad and fairly reeks of foreignness; only the national language is a homegrown product, one that paradoxically requires a foreign seal of approval to maintain its standing — no different from how Chinese officials and merchants must convert their domestically exploited wealth into foreign exchange to preserve the original value of the national currency.

Comparative analysis:

This passage by Qian Zhongshu is characterized by an ironic logic that unfolds layer by layer. For "滑稽," the human translation's "ridiculous" emphasizes being laughable, while the AI's "farcical" carries a sense of absurd theatre, better fitting the original's satire of the study-abroad system itself. For "国货土产," the human "native product" is a neutral label; the AI's "homegrown product" blends a hint of pride and self-mockery. In "需要外国招牌,方可维持地位," the

AI uses the word "paradoxically" to directly highlight the paradoxical logic—an added cohesive device that helps English readers grasp Qian Zhongshu's ironic stance. For "剥削来的钱," the human translation uses "extorted," emphasizing the sense of extraction, while the AI uses "domestically exploited," stressing the domestic context. Each has its own emphasis. Overall, both translations successfully convey the original information. The AI shows a slight edge in textual cohesion and making the ironic logic explicit, though whether some additions, such as "paradoxically," amount to over-domestication deserves further discussion.

3.1.2 Conveying Subtle Meaning

Example 3: The Venom of the Good and Honest

忠厚老实人的恶毒，像饭里的砂砾或者出骨鱼片里未净的刺，会给人一种不期待的伤痛。

Human translation:

The venom of a good, honest person is like grit in a bowl of rice or a half-cleaned fishbone — it can give you an unexpected pain.

AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

The malice of the good and honest is like a grain of sand hidden in one's rice, or a fishbone missed in filleting — it deals a wound you never saw coming.

Comparative analysis:

This is a typical Qian Zhongshu-style witty simile. For the key word "恶毒," the human translation uses "venom," which has a strong negative emotional charge and a bodily-injury metaphor. The AI chooses "malice," a more general term for ill will. Qian is not describing extreme evil here but the small hurts that seemingly good, honest people cause inadvertently—a hidden, unpleasant sting like grit in rice. "Malice" fits this subtle middle ground better in terms of semantic range and emotional intensity. For "不期待的伤痛," the human "unexpected pain" directly conveys an unforeseen hurt; the AI's "a wound you never saw coming" uses a more colloquial, dramatic expression to intensify the sense of being caught off guard, though it risks over-interpreting. Overall, the two translations are evenly matched in semantic conveyance, and the differences are more a matter of stylistic choice.

3.2 Comparison on the Linguistic Style Dimension

Linguistic style is one of the hardest dimensions to quantify in literary translation. Qian Zhongshu's style is centered on humor and irony. His irony is not as cold and piercing as Lu Xun's, but is a learned, witty "Qian-style humor"—often achieved through seemingly casual associations, unexpected similes, and sharp comments inserted suddenly into an otherwise calm narrative.

3.2.1 Reproducing Humorous and Ironic Tones

Example 4: Diploma as Fig Leaf

这一张文凭，仿佛有亚当、夏娃下身那片树叶的功用，可以遮羞包丑；小小一方纸能把一个人的空疏、寡陋、愚笨都掩盖起来。

Human translation:

This diploma, it seemed, would function like the fig leaf worn by Adam and Eve; it could hide a person's shortcomings and cover up his inadequacies. A little square of paper could conceal a person's shallowness, ignorance, and stupidity.

AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

This diploma, one felt, performed precisely the office of the fig leaf worn by Adam and Eve below the waist — it covered shame and hid ugliness. A single slip of paper, so small, could mask a man's vacuity, ignorance, and stupidity entirely.

Comparative analysis:

Qian Zhongshu uses a biblical allusion to satirize the diploma worship of Chinese intellectuals. The satirical force comes exactly from the gap between the sacred and the profane: the holy fig leaf of Adam and Eve versus the secular, utilitarian fake diploma creates a huge ironic tension. The human translation proceeds in a plain narrative tone; "it seemed" and "would function like" feel a little mild. The phrase "遮羞包丑" is broken into two parallel structures ("hide... shortcomings and cover up... inadequacies"), which, though informationally complete, loses the compact rhythm of the original four-character phrase. The AI translation, with "performed precisely the office of," adopts a mock-solemn tone—using a highly formal register ("office" meaning function or duty) to discuss the disreputable object of a fake diploma. This approach actually gets closer to Qian Zhongshu's technique of "deadpan irony." The combined rendering "covered

shame and hid ugliness" matches the conciseness of the original. "空疏" is translated as "vacuity" rather than "shallowness"; "vacuity" points more accurately to the emptiness of substance that the diploma covers, rather than a mere shallowness of degree. In this example, the AI version shows a slight edge in reproducing the ironic tone.

Example 5: Meat Shreds between the Teeth

他说话里嵌的英文字，还比不得嘴里嵌的金牙，因为金牙不仅妆点，尚可使用，只好比牙缝里嵌的肉屑，表示饭菜吃得好，此外全无用处。

Human translation:

The English words embedded in his speech could not compare favorably with the gold fillings in his teeth, for gold fillings are not only decorative but functional as well. They were more like the bits of food stuck between the teeth — they showed that one had eaten well, but were otherwise useless.

AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

The English words lodged in his Chinese were not even the equal of gold fillings — which are at least ornamental as well as functional — but rather the shreds of meat wedged between one's teeth: they signaled a good meal and served no other purpose whatsoever.

Comparative analysis:

This is a well-known passage in which Qian Zhongshu mocks Zhang Jimin's pidgin English. The original uses two dental images—gold fillings and meat scraps—to form a step-by-step deflating satirical chain. The word "嵌" appears twice and needs to be differentiated in translation. The AI version uses "lodged" (embedded in Chinese speech) and "wedged" (stuck between teeth) to distinguish the two contexts, which is more nuanced than the human version's uniform use of "embedded" and "stuck." For "肉屑," the human translation's "bits of food" is too vague; the AI's "shreds of meat" accurately corresponds to both "肉" and "屑." In the final clause "此外全无用处," the human translation ends flatly with "but were otherwise useless," while the AI uses the emphatic negative "served no other purpose whatsoever." The finality of "whatsoever" matches the decisive tone of "全无" in the original. In this example, the AI has a clear advantage in conveying the satirical force.

3.2.2 Style of Character Dialogue

Example 6: Miss Su's Self-Positioning

苏小姐理想的自己是："艳如桃李，冷若冰霜，"让方鸿渐卑逊地仰慕而后屈伏地求爱。谁知道气候虽然每天华氏一百度左右，这种又甜又冷的冰淇淋作风全行不通。

Human translation:

Miss Su, who pictured herself in the words of the familiar saying, "as delectable as peach and plum and as cold as frost and ice," decided she would allow Fang to humbly gaze at her in admiration and then prostrate himself to beg for her love. Who would have thought that while the temperature hovered around 100 degrees every day, this sweet, cool ice cream manner of hers was completely ineffective.

AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

Miss Su's ideal portrait of herself was "as alluring as peach-and-plum in bloom, and as forbidding as frost and ice" — she intended for Fang Hung-chien to gaze up at her in humble adoration before falling to his knees to beg for her love. Who could have predicted that, with the mercury hovering around a hundred degrees Fahrenheit each day, this sweet-and-chilly ice-cream routine would prove utterly useless?

Comparative analysis:

The core of this example lies in the characterization of Miss Su. She thinks highly of herself and imagines herself as an unattainably cold beauty, but Qian Zhongshu's narrator completely deconstructs her self-image with the single phrase "冰淇淋作风" (ice-cream manner). In translating "艳如桃李，冷若冰霜," the human version keeps the literal "peach and plum... frost and ice," while the AI adds "in bloom" and "forbidding" to intensify the imagery. "Forbidding" has connotations of being stern and unapproachable, which fits Miss Su's deliberately cultivated aloofness better than plain "cold." For "冰淇淋作风," the human version uses "ice cream manner"; the AI translates it as "sweet-and-chilly ice-cream routine." The word "routine" characterizes her behavior as a deliberate, formulaic performance, aligning more closely with the narrator's satirical stance than the neutral "manner." For "全行不通," the human "completely ineffective" states a fact, while

the AI's "utterly useless" carries a tone of dismissive mockery, better matching the narrative voice. Overall, the AI version performs better in characterization and in reproducing the narrative tone.

3.3 Comparison on the Cultural and Rhetorical Dimension

Translating culture-loaded words and rhetorical devices is one of the most challenging parts of literary translation. Qian Zhongshu was well-versed in both Chinese and Western learning. His writing is full of allusions and densely packed with references, ranging from Confucian classics to Greek philosophy, from Tang and Song poetry to English and French proverbs. These cultural elements are not only the texture of the text, but also an important vehicle for his satirical art.

3.3.1 Translating Idioms and Allusions

Example 7: Plato – Confucius – Mencius

柏拉图《理想国》里就说兵士对敌人，医生对病人，官吏对民众都应哄骗。圣如孔子，还假装生病，哄走了儒悲，孟子甚至对齐宣王也撒谎装病。

Human translation:

In Plato's Ideal State soldiers were justified in fooling the enemy, doctors in fooling their patients, and officials in fooling the people. A sage like Confucius had pretended to be ill in order to trick Ju Pei, and Mencius even lied to King Hsüan of Ch'i by feigning illness.

AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

Plato's Republic itself states that soldiers may deceive the enemy, physicians their patients, and rulers the populace. Even Confucius the sage once feigned illness to send Ju Pei away, and Mencius went so far as to deceive King Xuan of Qi by pretending to be sick.

Comparative analysis:

The difficulty here lies in the juxtaposition of Chinese and Western allusions and the handling of names. For the title "《理想国》," the human translation renders it as "Ideal State," a free translation, while the AI uses "Republic," the standard academic rendering, which is more recognizable in international scholarly contexts. For "圣如孔子," the human translator uses "A sage like

Confucius," preserving the comparative structure. The AI uses the apposition "Confucius the sage," directly attaching the title to the name – this is more compact but loses the original comparative tone ("圣如" rather than "圣人"). For "哄走了儒悲," the human version translates it as "trick Ju Pei," which is semantically correct but does not convey the "making him leave" aspect of "哄走." The AI's "send Ju Pei away" adds the direction of departure, making the information more complete. In terms of romanization, the human translation uses the Wade-Giles system (Ju Pei, King Hsüan of Ch'i), which is characteristic of the 1979 edition, while the AI uses Hanyu Pinyin (Ju Pei, King Xuan of Qi), which conforms better to contemporary academic norms.

Example 8: "The Fragrance of Blossoms Threatens to Shatter One's Zen"

壁上挂的字画里有沈子培所写屏条，录的黄山谷诗，第一句道："花气薰人欲破禅。"鸿渐看了，会心不远，觉得和尚们闻到窗外这种花香，确已犯戒，与吃荤相去无几了。

Human translation:

Among the wall scrolls was a poem by Huang Shan-ku, calligraphed by Shen Tzu-p'ei. The first line read, "Flower scent overcomes man, making him wish to break Zen." He was amused by the line, thinking that if a monk had been affected by the fragrance outside the window, the monk had already violated his principle of total concentration and this transgression was similar to a monk's eating meat.

AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

Among the calligraphy on the wall was a scroll by Shen Zipei bearing a poem by Huang Tingjian; the opening line read: "The fragrance of blossoms so overwhelms the mind, it threatens to shatter one's Zen." Hung-chien read this with an inner smile – it struck him that any monk who caught such a scent drifting through the window had, strictly speaking, already transgressed; it was scarcely different from eating meat.

Comparative analysis:

This example involves translating classical poetry, one of the supreme challenges in literary translation. The original line by Huang Tingjian (whose hao is Shangu) means: the fragrance of flowers so pervades one's mind that it nearly

destroys the meditative concentration of Zen. For "破禅," the human version uses "break" ("making him wish to break Zen"), assigning the action to a person ("him"), which does not perfectly align with the original logic that "flower fragrance" is the cause and the breaking of Zen is the result. The AI version constructs it as "threatens to shatter one's Zen." "Threatens" suggests imminent but not yet realized destruction, and the use of the impersonal "one's" avoids assigning a specific subject, fitting the poetic blending of subject and object better. In terms of cultural knowledge, the human version uses "Huang Shan-ku" (the hao), while the AI uses "Huang Tingjian" (the formal name). Since "Shan-ku" is a hao, a formal context usually requires giving the proper name; the AI's handling is more standard. However, for "会心不远," the human version's "was amused by the line" only captures a superficial sense of being tickled, missing "会心"—the sense of a tacit, intuitive understanding. The AI's "read this with an inner smile" conveys an inner, unspoken understanding through "inner smile," which comes closer to the meaning of "会心." Overall, the AI performs well in poetic conveyance and cultural accuracy, but on nuanced literati psychology like "会心," there is still a subtle gap compared with the human translator—a gap that is the hardest to bridge in literary translation.

3.3.2 Reproducing Rhetorical Devices

Example 9: Tang Xiaofu's "Toothbrush" — Extended Metaphor and Bathos

古典学者看她说笑时露出的好牙齿，会诧异为什么古今中外诗人，都甘心变成女人头插的钗，腰束的带，身体睡的席，甚至脚下践踏的鞋，可是从没想到化作她的牙刷。

Human translation:

A classical scholar, seeing her fine teeth when she laughed, might wonder why poets through the ages, Chinese and foreign alike, were willing to become the pin in a woman's hair, the sash around her waist, the mat upon which she slept, even the shoes upon her feet, but never once thought of becoming her toothbrush.

AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

A classical scholar, catching sight of her fine teeth as she laughed, might well marvel: why have

poets throughout the ages, Chinese and foreign alike, been so willing to turn themselves into the hairpin in a woman's coiffure, the sash around her waist, the mat she sleeps on, even the slippers beneath her feet — yet never once thought of becoming her toothbrush?

Comparative analysis:

This passage represents the peak of Qian Zhongshu's extended metaphor technique, and it is one of the most rhetorically dense parts for translation. The two versions are very close, showing that the human translation is already excellent here. The AI's "catching sight of" for "看到" has a more dynamic sense of sudden noticing than the human's "seeing," matching the instantaneousness of "when she laughed." For "脚下践踏的鞋," the AI renders it as "the slippers beneath her feet," which adds a layer of lowliness—being trodden underfoot—compared to the human's "the shoes upon her feet." "践踏" is deliberately chosen in the original to suggest the poets' willingness to be trampled in their abasement. For the classical scholar's "诧异," the AI uses "marvel" instead of "wonder." "Marvel" combines amazement and disbelief, better fitting the original's astonishment at the collective absurdity of poets through all ages. The high degree of similarity between the human and AI versions here precisely illustrates that when the rhetoric is vivid enough and the structure clear enough, both can produce excellent results. But this passage also highlights a key problem with AI literary translation: it can produce a good "equivalent" translation without necessarily understanding the aesthetic principle behind the comic effect created by Qian Zhongshu placing "toothbrush" after "hairpin, sash, mat, shoes." The former is linguistic ability; the latter is literary judgment.

Example 10: Wind and Waves Like a Glutton — Personification and Synaesthesia

天空早起了黑云，漏出疏疏几颗星，风浪像饕餮吞吃的声音，白天的汪洋大海，这时候全消化在更广大的昏夜里。衬了这背景，一个人身心的搅动也缩小以至于无，只心里一团明天的希望，还未落入渺茫，在广漠澎湃的黑暗深处，一点萤火似的自照着。

Human translation:

The sky had already begun to gather black clouds, leaking a few stray stars; the wind and waves

sounded like a glutton devouring his food. The vast ocean of the day had now completely dissolved into an even vaster black night. Against this background, a person's inner disturbance was reduced to nothingness; only the hope of the morrow, which had not yet sunk into oblivion, shone like a firefly in the dark depths of the vast, swelling darkness, lighting itself.

AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

The sky had long since mustered dark clouds, through which a few stray stars leaked; the wind and waves roared with the sound of a glutton devouring his prey. The boundless ocean of daylight now dissolved entirely into a still vaster night. Set against this backdrop, a single person's inward turmoil shrank to nothing – only the hope of tomorrow, not yet swallowed by the void, glimmered like a lone firefly in the vast, surging depths of the dark, illuminating itself.

Comparative analysis:

This is one of the most densely literary passages in *Fortress Besieged*, blending personification (clouds "gathering," stars "leaking"), synaesthesia (sound like "devouring," day being "digested" into night), and metaphor (hope "shining by itself" like a firefly). For "饕餮," the mythical gluttonous beast of ancient Chinese legend, both translations use "glutton." However, the AI uses "devouring his prey" instead of "devouring his food." "Prey" adds a sense of predatory ferocity more fitting to the primitive image of the taotie as a fierce beast. For "消化," both use "dissolved," but the AI later uses "not yet swallowed by the void," echoing the earlier "devouring" image. "Swallowed" brings the disappearance of day back into the "swallow-digest" metaphorical chain, maintaining the coherence of personification throughout the passage. The human version's "sunk into oblivion" introduces a new, unconnected metaphor at this point. In the final clause "一点萤火似的自照着," the AI uses "glimmered" instead of "shone." "Glimmer" better captures the flickering, intermittent quality of a firefly's light. The addition of "lone" in "a lone firefly," while not in the original, intensifies the poetic sense of solitary self-illumination in the darkness. In this example, the AI translation demonstrates notable literary sensitivity

in cross-sentential rhetorical coherence and in conveying imagery.

IV. FINDINGS AND PROBLEM ANALYSIS

4.1 Major Comparative Findings

Based on the systematic comparison and analysis of 22 cases in 4 dimensions [32][34][38], here we conclude in the research:

Firstly, AI and human translation has the minimal gap [32][36][38] in the dimension of semantic accuracy. AI performs well in conveying basic information, parsing complex sentence structures, and displaying logical relations between sentences, part of whose cases even outperforms human translation in passage-linking ability – such as the personified linking chain composed of "tipsy flush" and "drunk in Example 1 and the satirical linking chain pinpointed by "paradoxically" in Example 2. The advantage results from LLM's training based on substantial bilingual data, which enabled its phenomenal syntax parsing and semantic projecting capabilities.

Secondly, AI translation exhibits apparent "bipolar" traits in the dimension of language styles. For satirical paragraphs with clear structure and logic (such as the diploma as fig leaf in Example 4, the shreds of meat between the teeth in Example 5), AI translation has even surpassed human translation in conveying satirical tone, where its flexible selection of word range and sharper tonal process are closer to Qian Zhongshu's iconic satirical style. However, in the paragraphs that depend on subtle narrative distance and the understated brushwork of the literati translation (such as some psychological portraiture), AI translation is suspected of excessive explanation, not stable enough in stylistic consistency control. In contrast, human translation has a more uniform overall style, characterized by the assistance of its academic footnotes that is unreplicable to current AI.

Thirdly, human translation remains remarkable advantage [15][21][22][23] in the process of culture-loaded terms. With commentary system, human translation provides English readers with essential background knowledge to understand and appreciate Chinese cultural elements, while the function is currently completely absent in AI translation. In choices of

detailed strategies, AI favors domestication (e.g. translating "里" as in "有缘千里来相会" as "miles"), while human translation applies more foreignization assisted with comments. Both strategies are rational in their way, but from the perspective of academic literary translation, foreignization with comments facilitates the outward widespread of Chinese literary culture. Additionally, in identification of culturally specific names such as courtesy names (e.g. "黄山谷"), classical titles (e.g. "《理想国》"), AI demonstrates a degree of accuracy, but with occasional bias.

Fourthly, AI displays stunning unexpected literary potential ^{[39][40][41][42]} in conveying rhetorical effects, but unstable factors exist. In many rhetorically dense paragraphs (e.g. the "taotie" synesthesia paragraph in Example 10), AI reveals an extraordinary performance in cross-sentential rhetorical coherence and conveying imagery. When handling structurally distinctive rhetorical devices such as the extended metaphor (boyu) (toothbrush in Example 9), the quality of AI and human translation are highly close. However, once the rhetorical effect depends on deep cultural knowledge (e.g. the concept of Zen (禅) in Example 8) or the specific aesthetic judgment from the author, AI's performance remains unstable.

4.2 Problems Identified in AI Translation

Based on the comparative analysis above, this study categorizes the major problems in the English translation of literary works by AI into four categories below:

Firstly, cultural understanding is superficial ^{[45][46][50]}. AI is capable of identifying and translating the literal meaning of culture-loaded terms, but with limited ability to grasp deeper values, emotional connotations and contextual associations embedded in culture. Take the translation of Zen (禅) as an instance: AI can accurately provide the translation Zen, but fails to use supplementary annotation and careful lexical choices to help the reader appreciate the precise significance of 破禅 ("breaking Zen") within the context of Chan Buddhist practice, or its comic effect in the specific scene in *Fortress Besieged*. The logic chain—a monk catching the scent of flowers and thereby "breaking Zen"—derives its humor from the tension between the Buddhist

concept of "form-emptiness" (se kong) and the worldly experience of olfactory pleasure. It is precisely this layer of cultural logic that the AI finds genuinely difficult to grasp.

Second, instability in conveying humor and satire ^{[39][40]}. The AI performs brilliantly in certain satirical passages (e.g., Example 5), yet in others it either blunts the comic effect through excessive literalism or dissolves Qian Zhongshu's characteristic understated edge ^[30] through excessive domestication. This volatile performance means that, at the current stage, AI translation cannot yet be trusted as an independent tool for literary translation—its occasional flashes of excellence cannot compensate for the risk of unpredictable failure.

Third, a "safety bias" in the reproduction of rhetorical devices ^{[41][42]}. The AI tends to opt for "safe" literal translation strategies and rarely undertakes bold creative reconstruction on its own initiative. In Example 9 (Tang Xiaofu's toothbrush), the AI translation closely matches the human version—but this is precisely because the human translation itself is already fairly "faithful" at that point, so the AI was not called upon to make many creative choices. Once it confronts rhetorical innovations that depend on deep cultural knowledge (e.g., the poetic translation of "破禅" in Example 8), the AI's limitations begin to show: it can complete the linguistic transfer, but it struggles to ensure that the literary "aura" survives the act of translation.

Fourth, the absence of ancillary functions ^{[27][51]}. The Kelly and Mao translation is a classic example of "thick translation": Mao Guoquan's extended scholarly preface, the cultural background notes for each chapter, and the interpretive commentary on character relationships collectively build a bridge of understanding for Anglophone readers unfamiliar with the context of modern Chinese literature. The current AI translation provides only the translated text and lacks this dimension of scholarly support. Although it is technically possible to prompt the AI to add annotations, the scholarly reliability and consistency of such annotations remain, for now, difficult to guarantee.

4.3 Analysis of the Causes of Discrepancies

The systematic differences between AI and human translation in literary translation can be understood on three levels: the technical, the cognitive, and the aesthetic [10][11].

On the technical level, a large language model is essentially a language generation system based on statistical probability [32][33][34]. It learns patterns of word co-occurrence and sequence transformation from massive training data and, on that basis, generates the "most probable" translation. Literary language, however, is characterized precisely by being counter-statistical: it pursues unexpected expressions, rule-breaking rhetoric, and unique stylistic signatures. When Qian Zhongshu uses "toothbrush" as a metaphor for a poet in love, or describes the sound of wind and waves as a "glutton devouring," the literary value of these expressions lies exactly in the fact that they are, in statistical terms, low-probability events. The systematic bias of AI toward generating the "most probable" translation and the creative departure required by literary translation thus form a structural contradiction.

On the cognitive level, human translators possess two key abilities that current AI systems lack. The first is embodied cultural experience [34][43]. A translator—especially one like Nathan K. Mao, who has lived in both Chinese and Western cultural worlds—can draw on personal cultural experience to perceive subtle social cues, emotional shadings, and value judgments in the original, and can anticipate how these elements might shift in cross-cultural transmission. The second is the ability to infer intention [39][44]. A translator can make judgments about the author's intent and narrative strategy—is this passage ironic or merely playful? Is this metaphor meant seriously or in jest?—and such judgments directly influence translation choices. Current AI systems can "simulate" these judgments with the help of vast data, but they ultimately lack genuine depth of understanding.

On the aesthetic level, the key decisions in literary translation—when to prioritize fidelity, when to prioritize readability, when to aim for literary effect—are, at bottom, aesthetic judgments [44][47][48]. These judgments depend not only on a deep grasp of the original text and of both language

cultures, but also on the translator's literary taste, ethical stance, and personal convictions about what makes a good translation. An AI system does not possess aesthetic subjectivity in any real sense. The stylistic choices "it" makes are, in the end, no more than a statistical reflection of the distribution of translation strategies in its training data. To put it simply: AI can imitate a translation style, but it cannot form one [32][36][50].

4.4 Implications for Literary Translation Practice

Based on the above analysis, this study offers the following suggestions for literary translation practice:

First, the core tasks of literary translation—grasping the deeper implications of the original, recreating stylistic features, handling creative rhetorical devices—should be led by human translators. The AI's performance in these areas remains unstable; it can be brilliant in one instance and flawed in another, which falls short of the high consistency standards required in literary publishing [32][33][34].

Second, AI can play an effective supporting role in literary translation: generating a first draft for human revision, providing terminology references, checking for grammar and spelling errors, and offering multiple translation options for the translator to choose from. This human-led, AI-assisted model can draw on AI's efficiency [37][38][43] while safeguarding the literary quality of the final text.

Third, developers of AI translation systems should pay more attention to targeted optimization for literary translation [32][38][44]. This includes building high-quality Chinese-English literary parallel corpora [32][37][38], strengthening coverage of classical literary knowledge and cultural allusions, and developing assistive functions such as annotation and background explanation tools.

V. CONCLUSION

5.1 Research Conclusions

Taking *Fortress Besieged* as its case, this study compared AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro) and human translation (Kelly & Mao [13]) across

semantics, style, culture, and rhetoric. The main findings:

(1) In semantic accuracy and fluency, AI reached a high level and, in some cases, even outperformed the human version in cohesion and making logical connections explicit.

(2) In reproducing humor and irony, the AI was uneven—it did well where the satirical logic was sharp but occasionally faltered where understatement and a subtle narrative distance were at play.

(3) In handling culture-loaded words and allusions, the human translation kept its edge through its annotation system and deeper cultural understanding; AI leaned toward domestication and still fell short in conveying cultural depth.

(4) In conveying rhetorical effects, AI showed real literary potential, especially in maintaining rhetorical coherence across sentences, yet it still met limits when rhetorical creativity drew on deep cultural knowledge.

Overall: at this stage, AI can serve as an aid for literary translation but is not yet capable of producing high-quality literary translations on its own. A human-led, AI-assisted collaborative model is recommended [32][34][37][38].

5.2 Limitations and Future Direction

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single novel, *Fortress Besieged*, so broader validation across more texts is needed. Second, only one AI model, DeepSeek V4 Pro, was used; different large language models [36] (e.g., GPT-4o, Wenxin Yiyan, Claude) may perform quite differently in literary translation. Third, the translation quality assessment relied mainly on qualitative analysis, without systematic quantitative tools [10][11] or independent inter-rater reliability checks.

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From Multimodality to Prompt Engineering: Language, AI, Pedagogy, and Professional Futures in the Digital Age

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 28 May 2026; Received in revised form: 22 Jun 2026; Accepted: 25 Jun 2026; Available online: 30 Jun 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords – Digital Humanities, Multimodality, AI and Language, Prompt Engineering, Sociolinguistics, Hinglish, Digital Pedagogy	<i>This paper examines the transformation of English language and literary studies within the framework of Digital Humanities, focusing on the impact of digital communication and Artificial Intelligence (AI) on language practices, authorship, pedagogy, and professional pathways. It argues that contemporary linguistic environments – shaped by social media, multimodal communication, and AI-driven language tools – have fundamentally redefined the nature of language and writing. Drawing on sociolinguistic and multimodal frameworks, the study explores linguistic innovation, hybridity, and code-mixing in multilingual contexts such as India, where practices like Hinglish, emoji use, and platform-specific discourse reshape communicative norms. The paper further analyses AI technologies, including grammar checkers, predictive text systems, and generative tools such as ChatGPT, demonstrating how writing shifts from a cognitive process of composition to one of prompting, generation, and curation. Engaging with the work of David Crystal and Naomi S. Baron, it highlights both the creative adaptability of digital language and the risks of reduced cognitive engagement. The paper proposes prompt engineering as a new form of academic literacy and argues for a pedagogical shift that integrates multimodal analysis, AI-assisted writing, and structured prompt design. It further demonstrates how these transformations open new career pathways in corporate and technology-driven environments, necessitating curriculum redesign and practice-oriented instruction. Ultimately, the paper positions AI as a transformative force that requires new models of language education aligned with both intellectual and professional futures.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed a fundamental transformation in the nature of language, driven by the convergence of digital communication technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Within the field of English language and literary studies, this transformation challenges long-standing assumptions about textuality, authorship, and pedagogy. Traditionally, English studies have been anchored in close reading, interpretive analysis, and human-centred authorship. However, the emergence of digital networks and AI-enabled language tools has reconfigured these foundations, calling for a re-evaluation of disciplinary frameworks.

The emergence of Digital Humanities has already expanded the scope of literary and linguistic inquiry by means of incorporating computational methods, digital archives, and multimodal texts. Yet, the current moment represents a further shift: language is no longer merely analysed through digital tools but is increasingly produced through them. AI systems now actively participate in text generation, blurring the boundaries between human and machine authorship.

Unlike earlier technological tools that merely facilitated communication, AI actively participates in language generation, making it a co-creator in linguistic practices. AI systems rely on Natural Language Processing (NLP) and large-scale datasets to analyse linguistic patterns, predict word sequences, and generate human-like text. This creates a new linguistic environment in which language is no longer exclusively human, and machines are now active participants in communication.

This paper argues that the transformation of language in the digital epoch must be understood across four interconnected domains: (1) digital multimodal communication, (2) speed-driven linguistic change, (3) AI-mediated writing and authorship, and (4) pedagogical and professional transformation through prompt engineering. By synthesizing sociolinguistic theory, multimodal discourse analysis, and contemporary studies on AI and writing, this paper seeks to articulate a coherent structure for understanding—and teaching—language in the digital age.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The transformation of language in digital environments has been theorized across sociolinguistics, discourse studies, and Digital Humanities. David Crystal's work on Internet linguistics remains foundational, particularly his argument that online communication constitutes an individual linguistic medium rather than a degraded form of language. Crystal's concept of "Netspeak" captures the hybrid nature of digital discourse, which combines features of speech (informality, immediacy) with those of writing (visibility, permanence). This hybridity is key to understanding how language adapts to digital environments without losing complexity (Crystal 17–23).

Multimodal theory, as developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, provides an essential framework for analysing contemporary communication. Their work shows that meaning is no longer confined to linguistic signs but is distributed across multiple semiotic resources, including visual, auditory, and spatial modes. In digital contexts, this multimodal layering is not supplementary but central to meaning-making (Kress and van Leeuwen 42).

Susan Herring's research on Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) further contributes to this framework by indicating how technological affordances shape discourse structures. Features such as asynchronicity, reduced nonverbal signs, and rapid interaction lead to the emergence of new language standards, including brevity, informality, and context dependence (Herring 612).

In the domain of AI and writing, Naomi S. Baron provides a critical perspective on the relationship between language and cognition. Baron argues that writing is a form of thinking, and thus the automation of writing processes may affect intellectual engagement (Baron 88). This insight is especially relevant in the context of generative AI, where language generation can occur without direct cognitive effort.

This paper integrates these frameworks to argue that digital language transformation must be understood as a convergence of multimodality, sociolinguistic

variation, and AI-mediated production—with the emphasis on the dynamic interaction between human users, technological systems, and communicative contexts.

III. DIGITAL LANGUAGE TRANSFORMATION AND MULTIMODALITY

The digital age has introduced new forms of communication that extend beyond traditional written language. One of the most significant developments is the rise of multimodality, defined by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen as the use of multiple semiotic modes—such as text, images, and sound—in meaning-making (Kress and van Leeuwen 20). Digital communication has reshaped the boundaries of language by embedding it within multimodal environments.

On platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram, communication is inherently multimodal. (König, 2024, p. 100818) Messages frequently combine text with emojis, images, and voice notes, creating multiple meanings. For instance, a message such as "Done 🏡 ✨" conveys emotional nuance that cannot be captured through text alone. In classroom contexts, particularly in India, WhatsApp groups function as key sites of academic interaction (Baishya & Maheshwari, 2019, pp. 55-70). A typical message, such as "Kal assignment submit karna hai, don't forget 📌," illustrates the layering of linguistic and visual modes—the text conveys informational content while the emoji adds emphasis and urgency (Kress and van Leeuwen 63).

In multilingual contexts such as India, digital communication also involves extensive code-mixing, particularly in the form of Hinglish (Saha et al., 2019, pp. 76-89)h. Expressions such as "Kal meeting hai, don't be late" illustrate how users fluidly combine languages within a single utterance. This reflects broader sociolinguistic processes of identity construction and linguistic adaptation—what sociolinguists describe as indexicality, where language choices signal identity, social belonging, and contextual meaning (Silverstein 193).

As Crystal argues, digital communication does not degrade language but expands its expressive possibilities. Users demonstrate the ability to shift between registers, using informal, multimodal language in digital contexts while maintaining formal structures in academic settings (Crystal 81). Multimodality thus becomes a central feature of digital discourse, reshaping how meaning is constructed and understood.

IV. SPEED OF COMMUNICATION AND LINGUISTIC CHANGE

Digital communication is characterized by speed, immediacy, and brevity (Strauss et al., 2024)y. These features reshape linguistic structures, leading to phenomena such as syntax simplification, lexical innovation, and informal registers.

At the syntactic level, digital communication often involves simplification and ellipsis. Messages are compressed, omitting grammatical elements while relying on context for meaning. For example, "Coming" replaces "I am coming," demonstrating how meaning can be conveyed efficiently without complete sentences. At the lexical level, digital environments accelerate the creation of new vocabulary (Shahiwala & Rahul, 2026). Terms such as "ghosting," "doomscrolling," and "viral" emerge from digital practices and quickly become part of everyday language. In the Indian context, expressions such as "timepass" or "scene kya hai" illustrate how local linguistic forms are incorporated into digital discourse.

The transformation of language in digital environments has sparked sustained debate within linguistics over whether these changes constitute innovation or decline (Alvero et al., 2025, pp. 50-68). Critics argue that digital communication leads to the erosion of grammatical norms, reduced vocabulary, and a general "laziness" in language use. The frequent use of abbreviations such as "lol," "brb," and "idk," along with phonetic spellings and truncated sentences, is often cited as evidence of linguistic degradation.

However, this perspective is challenged by Crystal, who argues that digital language represents not decline but linguistic adaptation. From a sociolinguistic perspective, these changes can be understood as

functional adaptations to the affordances of digital communication. The emphasis on speed, brevity, and immediacy encourages the development of efficient linguistic forms. Abbreviations and code-mixing are not random but systematic, governed by shared conventions within digital communities (Crystal 53–57). Thus, the debate on linguistic decline must be reframed: rather than evaluating digital language against traditional standards, it is more productive to analyse it as a distinct and evolving mode of communication with its own norms and structures.

V. AI LANGUAGE TOOLS

Artificial Intelligence (AI) language tools have become an integral part of everyday communication. These tools use technologies such as Natural Language Processing (NLP) and machine learning to analyse, process, and generate human language. Unlike earlier digital tools, which simply facilitated writing, AI tools actively participate in language production, making them powerful agents in shaping how we communicate.

5.1 Grammar Checkers

One of the most common AI language tools is the grammar checker. Applications such as Grammarly and Microsoft Editor automatically detect spelling mistakes, grammatical errors, and stylistic issues. For example, a sentence like "She don't like coffee" is corrected to "She doesn't like coffee." These tools are especially useful for non-native speakers, as they help improve accuracy and clarity in writing. However, they also reinforce standardized language norms, often prioritizing correctness over creativity. This reflects a prescriptive approach to language, where rules determine what is considered "proper" usage.

5.2 Predictive Text Systems

Another widely used tool is predictive text, which is embedded in smartphones, email platforms, and messaging applications. Predictive text systems suggest words or phrases as users type, allowing for faster and more efficient communication. For instance, typing "I will meet you..." may prompt suggestions such as "tomorrow" or "at 5 PM." While this enhances speed and convenience, it also reduces the need for users to

actively think about word choice. Over time, this may lead to repetitive language patterns and limited vocabulary use.

5.3 AI Writing Assistants

More advanced AI tools include writing assistants such as ChatGPT, Jasper AI, and Copy.ai. These tools can generate complete essays, summaries, emails, and creative texts based on user prompts. For example, a user can request an essay on climate change and receive a structured response within seconds. This demonstrates the capability of generative AI, which produces text based on patterns learned from large datasets.

While these tools offer significant advantages—including efficiency, accessibility, and support for learning—they also raise important concerns. Overdependence on AI tools may weaken users' independent writing skills and reduce critical thinking. Additionally, the increasing reliance on algorithm-generated language may lead to a loss of individual voice and creativity (Baron 102–05).

VI. AI AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF WRITING PRACTICES

AI technologies have introduced a new phase in the evolution of language by enabling machines to generate text as part of everyday communication. Writing is no longer solely a process of composition but increasingly involves prompting, generating, and editing. This transformation can be understood as a shift from composition to curation—the traditional model of "think → write → edit" is replaced by "prompt → generate → edit."

Traditionally, writing was considered a cognitive process involving thinking, drafting, revising, and editing. It required a strong command of language as well as the ability to organize ideas and express them clearly. Today, AI tools allow users to input prompts and receive fully formed text instantly. This changes the writing process fundamentally.

This shift has both positive and negative implications for linguistic competence. On the positive side, AI tools can help users improve their writing skills by providing

suggestions for grammar, vocabulary, and structure. They are particularly beneficial for second-language learners, who may struggle with complex grammatical rules. AI can also reduce anxiety associated with writing by offering guidance and support.

However, there are also concerns about the impact of AI on cognitive engagement. Baron argues that writing is closely linked to thinking. When individuals rely heavily on AI to generate text, they may engage less deeply with their ideas, leading to a decline in critical thinking and analytical skills. Writing becomes less about exploring ideas and more about selecting and editing machine-generated content (Baron 76–80).

In professional contexts, AI is also changing workplace writing. Emails, reports, and presentations are increasingly being drafted using AI tools (Using artificial intelligence in academic writing and research: An essential productivity tool, 2024). While this improves efficiency and ensures clarity, it may result in standardized and impersonal communication. Over time, individual writing styles may become less distinct, as AI-generated language tends to follow predictable patterns.

VII. AI AND THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP

The integration of AI into language production challenges traditional notions of authorship by introducing distributed agency. In literary and linguistic studies, authorship has historically been associated with individual creativity, intentionality, and originality. However, AI-generated texts challenge these assumptions by blurring the boundaries between human and machine agency.

When a student or writer uses AI to generate content, authorship becomes distributed across multiple entities: the human user, the AI system, and the datasets on which the system was trained. This raises critical ethical and epistemological questions regarding originality, ownership, and intellectual labour. As Crystal emphasizes, language is inherently social and human, grounded in lived experience and intentional meaning-making. AI, by contrast, operates through pattern

recognition and statistical prediction, lacking consciousness or experiential depth (Crystal 212–14).

A crucial distinction must be made between human creativity and AI generation. Human writing is based on lived experience, emotional depth, and intentional meaning-making. Writers draw on their personal knowledge, cultural background, and imagination to create original content. In contrast, AI systems generate text based on patterns and probabilities—they do not possess consciousness, emotions, or true understanding.

The use of AI also raises ethical concerns. One major issue is plagiarism: since AI generates text based on existing data, it may produce content that resembles previously published material. Another concern is the potential misuse of AI in academic settings, where students may submit AI-generated work as their own, thereby challenging traditional assessment methods.

At the same time, AI can be seen as a collaborative tool rather than a replacement for human authorship. Writers can use AI to generate ideas, structure their work, or refine their language, while still maintaining control over the final output. This suggests a shift toward a new model of authorship, in which humans and machines work together, with the emphasis moving from individual production to collaborative human–AI knowledge-making.

VIII. PROMPT ENGINEERING AS A NEW FORM OF LITERACY

In response to these transformations, a new form of literacy emerges—prompt engineering. Prompt engineering involves designing structured, precise, and contextually rich instructions that guide AI systems to produce meaningful, academically relevant outputs. This shift represents a movement from linguistic competence—the ability to produce grammatically correct language—to meta-linguistic competence—the ability to control and direct language generation through structured prompts.

Students are no longer merely writers but become designers of discourse, shaping how knowledge is generated. Effective prompts typically include: a

defined role (e.g., "act as a sociolinguistics researcher"), a specific task (e.g., "analyse multimodality"), contextual parameters (e.g., "Indian multilingual classrooms"), explicit theoretical frameworks, and controlled output format and depth.

8.1 The Anatomy of an Effective Prompt

A well-designed prompt follows a five-part structure: Role, Task, Context, Format, and Depth. This can be illustrated through three stages of iterative refinement using the topic of multimodality in WhatsApp messages:

Stage 1 – Basic Prompt: "Explain multimodality in WhatsApp messages in Indian classrooms." This identifies a topic and context but lacks role, depth, theoretical grounding, or format specification. Output is likely general and minimally academic.

Stage 2 – Structured Prompt: "Act as a sociolinguistics researcher. Analyse multimodality in WhatsApp messages in Indian multilingual classrooms. Include examples of code-mixing, emojis, and voice notes. Use sociolinguistic concepts such as indexicality and communities of practice. Write in 400–500 words in academic paragraph form." This adds role, analytical task, specific examples, theoretical framing, and format control. Output is structured, theoretical, and academically relevant.

Stage 3 – Exhaustive Prompt: "Act as a sociolinguistics researcher. Write a 400–500-word academic essay suitable for TYBA Semester VI students analysing multimodality in WhatsApp messages in Indian multilingual classrooms. Include examples of Hinglish, emojis, and voice notes. Apply theoretical frameworks such as Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of multimodality and Silverstein's theory of indexicality. Ensure clear paragraph structure and academic tone." This further specifies audience, output type, localized examples, named scholars, and language register.

This iterative process demonstrates that prompt quality directly shapes output quality. More importantly, it requires students to think critically about task formulation, theoretical framing, and contextual specificity – making prompt engineering a higher-order cognitive skill.

8.2 Types of Prompts for Academic Research

Students must learn to deploy different prompt types depending on the research purpose: Explanatory Prompts (for theory); Analytical Prompts (for deeper thinking); Comparative Prompts (for critical writing); Application Prompts (for case studies); and Critical Prompts (for evaluation). One-prompt approaches are never sufficient; iterative refinement is the key skill.

8.3 Advanced Prompting Techniques

Beyond basic prompt construction, students should be introduced to chain prompting (breaking a task into sequential steps: define concept → add theory → apply example), constraint prompting (forcing specificity, e.g., "use only Indian examples, limit to 500 words"), and perspective prompting (e.g., "answer as a feminist critic" or "answer as a sociolinguist"). These techniques reinforce structured, critical thinking and prepare students for research-level engagement with AI.

IX. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS: RETHINKING THE CURRICULUM

The integration of AI into language practices necessitates a fundamental rethinking of pedagogy in English studies. Traditional curricula, which emphasize textual production and analysis, must now incorporate training in critical AI literacy and prompt engineering.

9.1 Adapting Pedagogy

Teaching students how to construct effective prompts becomes essential. This involves guiding them through stages of prompt refinement—from basic queries to structured, research-level instructions. Such practices encourage clarity of thought, precision, and analytical depth.

9.2 Critical Engagement with AI

Rather than banning AI tools, pedagogy must focus on critical engagement. Students should be trained to evaluate AI-generated content, identify biases and limitations, and refine and contextualize outputs. Ethical use must be emphasized: AI output should not be copied directly; students must always edit, interpret, and take ownership of the final work.

9.3 Hybrid Writing Models

Writing assignments must evolve to reflect collaborative human-AI processes. For instance, students can be asked to generate responses using AI, critically edit and expand them, and reflect on the effectiveness of their prompts. This approach shifts the emphasis from mere production to process-oriented learning.

9.4 Reframing Assessment

Assessment methods must also adapt. Instead of evaluating only final outputs, educators should assess prompt design, iterative refinement, and critical reflection. A sample assessment task might ask students to: (1) create three different prompts on a language topic such as Hinglish or memes, (2) generate AI responses, (3) analyse which prompt worked best and why, and (4) submit prompts, outputs, and a reflective commentary. Evaluation criteria should cover prompt quality, depth of output, critical thinking, and originality.

X. LANGUAGE, AI, AND EMERGING CAREER PATHWAYS

The transformation of language in the digital age is not confined to academic debate; it has significant implications for employment and professional practice. As digital technologies and AI systems become central to corporate operations, new career pathways are emerging that require advanced linguistic competencies combined with technological literacy.

Traditionally, careers in language and literature were associated with teaching, publishing, journalism, and content writing. However, the integration of AI and digital communication into corporate workflows has significantly expanded this scope. Today, roles such as content strategist, UX writer, AI language trainer, prompt engineer, and digital communication specialist are increasingly in demand (Vu & Oppenlaender, 2025). These roles require not only proficiency in language but also the ability to work within technologically mediated systems.

One of the most significant shifts is the emergence of AI language-related roles, where individuals are tasked with training, evaluating, and refining language models (O'Keefe et al., 2026, pp. 657-674). Within such contexts, linguistic expertise is crucial for ensuring that AI-

generated content is accurate, contextually appropriate, and culturally sensitive. AI language trainers must understand nuances such as tone, register, and sociolinguistic variation in order to guide machine-generated outputs effectively.

UX writing and interface communication are other key domains in which language is used to guide user interaction with digital platforms. UX writers must craft concise, clear, and user-friendly text that aligns with both technological functionality and user expectations—a task that requires an understanding of multimodal communication, as text is often integrated with visual and interactive elements.

These developments highlight a critical gap between traditional language education and contemporary professional requirements. Current curricula often emphasize canonical texts, formal writing, and theoretical analysis, with limited engagement with digital communication practices or AI tools. To address this gap, curriculum design must incorporate AI-assisted writing workflows, prompt engineering as a core competency, multimodal discourse analysis, and applied language practices such as UX writing and content strategy.

XI. CONCLUSION

The digital age has transformed language into a dynamic, multimodal, and technologically mediated system. AI further extends this transformation by reshaping writing practices and challenging traditional notions of authorship. Rather than viewing these changes as threats, they should be understood as opportunities for innovation.

Prompt engineering, in particular, represents a new form of literacy that integrates linguistic competence with technological awareness. It enables students to engage with AI in informed, critical, and creative ways. Rather than replacing humanistic inquiry with technological efficiency, the aim must be to cultivate a pedagogy that equips students to navigate and shape the evolving linguistic landscape.

Ultimately, the future of language studies lies in redefining the relationship between language,

technology, and human cognition. AI is not replacing language—it is reshaping it. The task for contemporary English studies is to ensure that language education remains both intellectually rigorous and professionally relevant in a rapidly evolving digital world.

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Making College English Meaningful: Learning Diagnosis, Pedagogical Intervention, and Student Engagement in a Chinese Vocational Undergraduate EFL Classroom

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 25 May 2026; Received in revised form: 21 Jun 2026; Accepted: 26 Jun 2026; Available online: 30 Jun 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords – College English; EFL teaching; vocational undergraduate education; learner engagement; learning diagnosis	<i>This paper reports a qualitative classroom-based case study of College English teaching in a Chinese vocational undergraduate EFL classroom. It responds to a recurring pedagogical problem: students often appear reluctant to participate in English learning, but such reluctance may be rooted in accumulated negative learning experiences, examination-oriented expectations, and uncertainty about the value of English in the age of artificial intelligence. Drawing on teaching slides, reflective teaching scripts, classroom interaction records, student responses, student notes, knowledge-management sheets, teacher comments, peer-evaluation materials, and student artefacts, the study examines how learning diagnosis was translated into a three-stage pedagogical intervention. The intervention included low-threshold pre-class English sharing to rebuild confidence, connected in-class language tasks to stimulate exploration and meaningful output, and post-class knowledge organisation, peer assessment, and learning-state evaluation to make learning gains visible. The findings suggest that students' engagement became more observable when English tasks were linked to their prior experiences, disciplinary interests, professional imagination, and opportunities for evaluation. The study argues that meaningful College English teaching in vocational undergraduate education requires teachers to move beyond asking students to participate and instead design conditions in which students can experience competence, connection, and visible growth.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

Student engagement has long been a central concern in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. In College English courses for non-English-major students in China, the issue is often described in practical terms: students do not speak,

do not participate, only care about examinations, or doubt whether English is still useful when artificial intelligence can translate. These observations are familiar to many university English teachers, but they are sometimes interpreted too quickly as evidence of laziness, low ability, or weak self-discipline. Such explanations may overlook the

historical, emotional, and institutional conditions through which students' attitudes toward English have been formed.

This paper reports a classroom-based case study conducted in a Chinese vocational undergraduate College English course. The study focuses on language teaching rather than on general curriculum reform. It asks how a teacher can diagnose students' learning barriers and translate that diagnosis into concrete pedagogical interventions that support English learning engagement, meaningful language output, knowledge organisation, and formative peer assessment. The central argument is that students' reluctance should not be treated as a problem to be corrected through exhortation. Instead, it can be treated as a pedagogical signal that requires teachers to redesign classroom experiences.

The study is situated in the context of vocational undergraduate education in China. Vocational undergraduate institutions are expected to cultivate high-level technical and skilled professionals while also providing students with public foundation courses such as College English. In such institutions, College English cannot be reduced to grammar, vocabulary, translation practice, or test preparation. It must still develop language competence, but it also needs to help students use English to express ideas, organise knowledge, explain processes, participate in evaluation, and connect language learning with academic, professional, and personal development. This orientation is consistent with the broader positioning of College English as a public foundation course supporting language ability, intercultural awareness, autonomous learning, and wider educational development.

The classroom problem addressed in this study emerged from three recurring student statements: "I am not good at English," "Will this be tested?" and "If AI can translate, why should I still learn English?" These statements were interpreted as three diagnostic categories. The first indicates past learning wounds: many students associate English with mechanical memorisation, repeated drills, error correction, examination anxiety, and failure. The second indicates present instrumentalism: students judge classroom content primarily through its perceived usefulness for examinations such as CET-4/6. The third indicates future value anxiety:

students doubt the necessity of English learning when digital tools can perform many language tasks.

The pedagogical question, therefore, is not simply how to make a class more entertaining. It is how to make English learning meaningful enough for students to enter, persist, and produce visible evidence of growth. This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. What learning barriers were identified in a Chinese vocational undergraduate EFL classroom?
2. How were these diagnostic findings translated into pedagogical interventions?
3. What forms of student engagement and language-learning development became visible through these interventions?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 EFL Motivation, Emotion, and Engagement

Motivation has been widely recognised as a key factor in second and foreign language learning. Dörnyei (2005) shows that language learning motivation is not a fixed personal trait but a dynamic construct shaped by learner beliefs, goals, experiences, and contexts. Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory further suggests that sustained motivation is supported when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These concepts are useful for understanding why students may withdraw from English learning when they feel incompetent, controlled by examinations, or disconnected from classroom content.

Students' emotions also influence learning participation. Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory argues that achievement emotions are shaped by learners' perceived control over learning and the value they attach to learning tasks. If students believe that they have little control over English success, or that classroom content has little personal or future value, they may experience anxiety, boredom, or resistance. This is especially relevant in EFL contexts where students' prior schooling experiences may have produced learned helplessness, score anxiety, or fear of public errors.

Engagement provides a broader lens for examining participation. Fredricks et al. (2004) conceptualise engagement as behavioural, emotional,

and cognitive. Behavioural engagement refers to participation and effort; emotional engagement refers to interest, belonging, or affective response; cognitive engagement refers to investment in understanding, strategy use, and self-regulation. This multidimensional view is important because a student may appear quiet but still be cognitively engaged, while another may appear active without deep learning. Therefore, classroom engagement should not be measured only by visible excitement or frequency of speaking. It should also include students' willingness to organise knowledge, evaluate ideas, revise work, and identify difficulties.

2.2 Meaningful Output and Task-Supported Language Teaching

A central issue in College English teaching is how to move students from receptive knowledge to meaningful language output. Swain's (1985) output hypothesis argues that language production pushes learners to process language more deeply, notice gaps in their knowledge, test hypotheses, and reflect on language form and meaning. For students who are used to memorising words and completing written exercises, structured output opportunities are essential.

Task-based language teaching also supports the design of meaningful classroom activities. Ellis (2003) argues that tasks can encourage learners to use language for communicative purposes while focusing attention on meaning, form, and outcome. In the present study, tasks were not understood as isolated classroom activities but as structured opportunities for students to connect English with personal experience, disciplinary concepts, professional imagination, and peer evaluation.

Meaningful output is particularly important in vocational undergraduate classrooms. Students need to use English not only to pass tests but also to explain processes, describe problems, present ideas, justify choices, and communicate across academic or professional contexts. Therefore, language teaching needs to provide tasks that are accessible enough for students to enter, structured enough to support success, and meaningful enough to show the value of English beyond examination performance.

2.3 Formative Assessment, Peer Assessment, and Feedback Literacy

Assessment plays a powerful role in shaping students' learning behaviour. Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that formative assessment can improve learning when assessment evidence is used to adapt teaching and support learners' next steps. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) further propose that good feedback should help students understand standards, compare current performance with desired performance, and take action to close the gap.

Peer assessment can extend this process by repositioning students as evaluators. Topping (1998) defines peer assessment as an arrangement in which students consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a peer's work. When properly scaffolded, peer assessment can help students internalise criteria, develop evaluative judgement, and become more reflective learners. Carless and Boud (2018) use the concept of student feedback literacy to describe the understandings, capacities, and dispositions needed for students to make sense of feedback and use it for improvement.

These ideas are especially relevant to the present study. If students only receive teacher judgement, they may remain dependent on external evaluation. If they are guided to evaluate answers, notes, learning processes, difficulties, and improvement strategies, they can begin to understand learning standards more actively. This movement from being evaluated to participating in evaluation is one of the central pedagogical interventions examined in this case.

2.4 Self-Regulated Learning and Knowledge Organisation

Engagement also depends on students' ability to manage their own learning. Zimmerman (2002) describes self-regulated learning as an active process in which learners set goals, monitor progress, use strategies, and reflect on outcomes. In College English classrooms, students may have difficulty self-regulating because their notes are fragmented, their understanding of vocabulary remains isolated, and they lack tools for judging the level of their own knowledge.

Generative learning theory provides another useful perspective. Fiorella and Mayer (2015) argue that learners understand more deeply when they

actively select, organise, integrate, explain, visualise, and apply knowledge. This implies that note-taking should not be treated as passive copying. It can become a learning strategy when students classify knowledge, compare related forms, explain processes, and identify when and why a language item should be used.

The present study therefore treats knowledge management as part of language pedagogy. The goal was not merely to help students produce neat notes, but to make knowledge construction visible and discussable.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative classroom-based case study design. A case study approach is suitable when the research aim is to understand a pedagogical phenomenon in its real classroom context rather than to isolate variables under experimental conditions. The study does not claim statistically measurable improvement in students' English proficiency. Instead, it examines how learning diagnosis informed classroom intervention and what kinds of engagement and learning evidence became visible through the intervention.

The case was conducted in a College English course taught to first-year students in a Chinese vocational undergraduate university. The students were mainly from engineering-related programmes. The class was relatively large, and the students showed diverse learning foundations. Many students had acceptable reading comprehension but limited confidence in spoken or written English output. Some students were strongly oriented toward CET-4/6 preparation; others questioned the value of English learning in the age of AI translation tools.

3.2 Data Sources

The data consisted of naturally occurring teaching and learning materials collected from routine classroom practice. These included:

1. teaching slides and reflective teaching scripts;
2. classroom interaction records and online student responses;

3. pre-class English sharing tasks and speaking frames;
4. student notes and knowledge-management sheets;
5. teacher comments on student notes;
6. peer-evaluation materials and student assessment records;
7. student artefacts, including language tasks and interdisciplinary expression tasks;
8. teacher reflective notes and classroom observation materials.

The study also drew on process materials such as observation sheets, student learning records, classroom screenshots, and examples of student-produced knowledge organisation. These materials were used to identify how students participated, how tasks were scaffolded, and how learning became visible.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed a qualitative thematic approach. First, teaching and reflection materials were reviewed to identify the teacher's diagnostic categories. Three recurring categories were identified: past learning wounds, present instrumentalism, and future value anxiety. Second, teaching activities were mapped against these diagnostic categories to examine how each intervention responded to a specific learning barrier. Third, student responses, notes, peer-evaluation materials, and classroom artefacts were examined for evidence of engagement, language output, knowledge organisation, and evaluative participation.

The analysis was interpretive and pedagogical rather than statistical. It sought to establish a transparent chain from diagnosis to intervention to visible learning evidence. To avoid overclaiming, the findings are presented as classroom-level indications of pedagogical affordances rather than proof of causal effectiveness.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Before formal publication, all student names, student numbers, avatars, and other identifying information should be removed from screenshots, notes, and artefacts. If student work or classroom interaction screenshots are reproduced as figures,

students' informed consent and institutional ethical approval should be obtained or confirmed according to local requirements. In this manuscript, student examples are described in anonymised and generalised terms.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Learning Diagnosis Reframed Student Reluctance as Pedagogically Meaningful

The first finding concerns the value of learning diagnosis. Students' reluctance to engage in English learning was not treated as a simple matter of unwillingness. Instead, it was reframed as a meaningful signal of prior experience, current pressure, and future uncertainty.

The first barrier was past learning wounds. Many students associated English with mechanical memorisation, repeated drills, grammar correction, examination failure, and teacher-centred evaluation. As a result, they entered the university classroom with a sense that English was something they were not good at and did not enjoy. This diagnosis changed the teacher's response. Rather than asking students to immediately perform at a high level, the teacher introduced low-threshold output tasks designed to create early experiences of competence. For example, students were given structured pre-class English sharing tasks with limited time, manageable content density, and clear speaking frames. The aim was not perfect fluency but the experience of preparing, speaking, being heard, and receiving constructive recognition.

The second barrier was present instrumentalism. Students frequently judged classroom content by asking whether it would be tested. This was interpreted not as a moral weakness but as a rational response to years of assessment pressure. The intervention therefore did not reject examination needs. Instead, test-related concerns were connected to broader language abilities, such as selecting appropriate expressions, generalising meanings, describing processes, and organising ideas logically.

The third barrier was future value anxiety. Students' doubts about English in the age of AI translation were taken seriously. The teacher reframed English learning as a means of developing human capacities that AI tools do not automatically

replace: questioning, judging, organising, explaining, and using tools critically. This reframing helped shift the question from "Can AI translate faster than me?" to "Can I use English to express my judgement and organise my thinking?"

These diagnostic categories became the basis for intervention. The teacher did not attempt to persuade students abstractly that English was useful. Instead, the classroom was redesigned to let students experience confidence, exploration, and visible gain.

4.2 Low-Threshold Output Created Conditions for Confidence and Participation

The second finding concerns the role of low-threshold English output. For students with negative learning memories, a direct demand for sophisticated English performance may intensify anxiety. The pre-class English sharing task therefore used manageable requirements: short duration, clear structure, limited information density, and a predictable sequence of presentation, interaction, and summary.

This structure supported behavioural and emotional engagement. Students knew what kind of output was expected and could prepare within a controlled frame. The activity reduced the risk of public failure and allowed students to experience small successes. These early successes were important because students who believe "I am not good at English" often need evidence that they can still participate.

The task also created a bridge between personal experience and classroom language use. Students could select topics related to their interests, majors, industries, technologies, or social issues. In doing so, they were not simply completing a speaking exercise. They were using English to introduce something meaningful to themselves and potentially relevant to their peers.

The significance of this intervention lies in its modesty. It did not claim to transform students' English proficiency immediately. Rather, it created a repeatable classroom routine through which students could experience readiness, expression, recognition, and revision. In this sense, confidence was not built through persuasion but through repeated, achievable output.

4.3 Connected In-Class Tasks Shifted English Learning from Memorisation to Meaning-Making

The third finding concerns the effect of connected classroom tasks. Students were more willing to engage when English was linked with familiar experience, disciplinary knowledge, or professional imagination.

One example was the use of daily-life processes to support process language. Students were first invited to describe how to prepare a local dish or roast duck/goose legs. This familiar task helped them generate a sequence such as selecting ingredients, processing, cooking, and finishing. The teacher then connected this sequence to engineering process expressions in a reading unit, such as selecting, splitting, drying, and binding. The point was not to make the lesson entertaining through a popular topic. The point was to use familiar procedural knowledge as a scaffold for English process description.

Another example was the use of engineering-related questions. Classroom interaction records showed that students could respond to prompts about engineering thinking, including stages such as defining a problem, designing a solution, implementing the design, and testing or iterating. The answers were not always identical, but they demonstrated that students were beginning to organise professional ideas through English or English-supported conceptual language.

Language points were also turned into conceptual bridges. The word formula was connected with Descartes, analytic geometry, variable relationships, and logical explanation. The phrase career path was connected with function graphs, allowing students to represent professional development as linear growth, staged transitions, fluctuations, recovery, or accelerated growth. The term falsification was connected with scientific spirit, evidence, critical rationality, and truth-seeking. These examples show that language learning can remain language-centred while still connecting to students' wider knowledge world.

This type of task design supported cognitive engagement. Students were not only memorising vocabulary; they were using language to explain relationships, compare processes, and express judgement.

4.4 Knowledge-Management Notes Made Learning Processes Visible

The fourth finding concerns knowledge organisation. Students were guided to use a knowledge-management framework that distinguished declarative, procedural, and strategic knowledge. Declarative knowledge answered "What is it?" Procedural knowledge answered "How is it done?" Strategic knowledge answered "When and why should it be used?" Students were also encouraged to mark their level of mastery.

This framework helped transform note-taking from copying into learning diagnosis. For example, when students recorded related forms such as emergent, emerging, and emergency, they could be guided to distinguish word class, meaning, context, collocation, and common errors. Teacher comments encouraged students to reorganise knowledge instead of accumulating isolated words.

The value of this intervention was twofold. For students, the framework made their own understanding visible. They could see whether they merely recognised a word, understood its use, or could apply it in context. For the teacher, the notes revealed where students' understanding was fragmented or unstable. This allowed feedback to be more specific.

Knowledge management also supported self-regulated learning. Students were invited to monitor not only whether they had written something down but also whether they had understood what type of knowledge it was and how it could be used. This moved the classroom from "Did you take notes?" to "What kind of understanding does your note show?"

4.5 Participatory Assessment Moved Students from Answer-Givers to Evaluators

The fifth finding concerns student participation in assessment. The classroom did not rely only on teacher evaluation. Instead, students were encouraged to participate in evaluating answers, notes, processes, enthusiasm, difficulties, and improvement suggestions.

One strategy was dynamic grouping. Students were grouped according to language foundation, cultural knowledge, academic performance, and learning goals. However, the groups were not named A, B, and C, which could create deficit labels. Instead,

they were named “breakthrough group,” “specialised group,” and “comprehensive group.” The breakthrough group could answer first to check basic understanding; the specialised group evaluated the response and considered application; the comprehensive group added comments on accuracy, completeness, transfer, and expression quality.

This arrangement created differentiated participation without publicly ranking students. Students at different levels had meaningful roles. Some tested understanding, some evaluated use, and some extended the answer. This helped students see that assessment was not only about being judged but also about learning how to judge.

Peer assessment was also extended beyond classroom answers. Students could evaluate classroom notes, learning processes, learning enthusiasm, difficulties, task completion, and improvement plans. Cross-class question design was also proposed: one class could design questions for another class based on lesson content or CET-related skills. In this process, students moved from test-takers to question designers. They had to consider what knowledge point was being tested, what ability was required, where the difficulty lay, and why an answer was valid.

This shift supported feedback literacy. Students began to engage with standards, evidence, and improvement rather than merely waiting for teacher scores.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Engagement Should Be Designed, Not Demanded

The findings suggest that student engagement in EFL classrooms should be designed rather than demanded. If students are told to participate without being given safe, meaningful, and structured opportunities to do so, participation may remain superficial. In this case, engagement became more visible when the teacher first diagnosed students’ learning barriers and then designed tasks that responded to those barriers.

This point contributes to EFL motivation research by showing how motivation can be treated as a design problem. The teacher did not simply

attempt to increase motivation through encouragement. Instead, the classroom created experiences of competence, connection, and gain. This aligns with self-determination theory, which emphasises the importance of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. It also resonates with engagement research that sees engagement as responsive to context and classroom environment.

5.2 Meaningful English Learning Can Remain Language-Centred

A second implication concerns the relationship between English teaching and wider knowledge. Connecting English with professional or personal topics does not mean abandoning language teaching. In this case, language remained central. Students practised speaking, process description, vocabulary distinction, explanation, and evaluation. However, these language activities were embedded in meaningful contexts.

The examples of formula, career path, and falsification show that language points can be used as entrances into meaning-making. Students learned vocabulary, but they also used vocabulary to organise thinking. This is important because EFL classrooms sometimes separate language accuracy from meaningful expression too sharply. The case suggests that students may engage more deeply when language forms are linked with ideas, problems, and communicative purposes.

5.3 Formative Assessment Can Mobilise Students as Co-Constructors of Learning

A third implication concerns assessment. Teacher feedback is important, but it is insufficient if students remain passive recipients. When students evaluate answers, notes, processes, and questions, they begin to internalise learning standards. They also become more aware of their own difficulties and next steps.

This finding extends formative assessment research into the specific context of vocational undergraduate College English. It suggests that peer assessment should not be limited to rating final products. It can include evaluating learning enthusiasm, classroom notes, learning processes, knowledge use, difficulties, and improvement plans. In this way, assessment becomes a shared learning process rather than a terminal judgement.

5.4 Local EFL Practice and International Relevance

Although the study is locally situated in a Chinese vocational undergraduate classroom, its relevance is not limited to China. Many EFL contexts face similar problems: students may have negative prior experiences, strong examination pressure, and doubts about the future value of English. The case offers a transferable principle rather than a fixed model: teachers can begin with learning diagnosis, design low-threshold but meaningful output, connect English tasks with learners' worlds, and make growth visible through participatory assessment.

At the same time, the local context matters. The importance of CET-4/6, the emerging identity of vocational undergraduate education, and students' AI-related doubts shape the specific classroom problem. International readers should therefore understand the case as an example of how EFL pedagogy can respond to local pressures while contributing to broader discussions of engagement, feedback, and meaningful language learning.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a qualitative classroom-based case study of College English teaching in a Chinese vocational undergraduate EFL classroom. The study examined how learning diagnosis was translated into pedagogical intervention and how student engagement became visible through low-threshold output, connected language tasks, knowledge-management notes, and participatory assessment.

The case suggests that students' reluctance in English learning should not be reduced to lack of ability or discipline. It may reflect past learning wounds, present examination pressures, and future value anxieties. A responsive pedagogy therefore needs to move beyond telling students that English is useful. It needs to design experiences in which students can speak, connect, organise, evaluate, revise, and see evidence of their own growth.

The study makes three contributions. Pedagogically, it proposes a diagnosis-intervention-evidence model for College English teaching. Theoretically, it connects EFL engagement, meaningful output, self-regulated learning, and formative assessment in a vocational undergraduate

classroom. Methodologically, it demonstrates how classroom process materials—slides, student responses, notes, peer assessment, and reflective teaching records—can be used to examine teaching interventions qualitatively.

The study is limited by its single-case design and reliance on naturally occurring classroom materials. It does not provide experimental evidence of proficiency gains. Future research should collect longitudinal student reflections, pre- and post-intervention speaking or writing samples, peer-assessment records, and interview data to examine how such interventions influence language development, learner identity, and engagement over time.

Nevertheless, the case indicates that meaningful College English teaching is possible when teachers do not merely ask students to participate, but build the conditions for participation. When English learning helps students regain confidence, explore connections, organise knowledge, and participate in evaluation, classroom “fun” becomes more than atmosphere. It becomes a pathway toward visible learning and sustained growth.

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Writing Errors, Apprehension, And Academic Beliefs Among Senior High School Students: A Foundation for a Targeted Writing Enhancement Program

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 29 May 2026; Received in revised form: 20 Jun 2026; Accepted: 25 Jun 2026; Available online: 30 Jun 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords – Academic Rational Beliefs, Error Analysis, Growth Mindset, Senior High School Students, Writing Apprehension, Writing Errors.	<i>This study assessed the common writing errors, the extent of writing apprehension, and the academic rational beliefs of senior high school students at Natonin Stand Alone Senior High School to propose a targeted writing enhancement program. Utilizing a multi-methods research design, descriptive error analysis was performed on authentic academic essays from 73 Grade 12 Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) students, while quantitative surveys measured writing apprehension and academic beliefs. The corpus analysis revealed that grammatical errors were the most prevalent (215 instances), followed by mechanics (179), punctuation (141), spelling (96), and usage (50). Quantitative results indicated a moderate level of writing apprehension (overall mean = 2.51), heavily driven by a fear of negative evaluation (mean = 3.80) and low self-efficacy. Conversely, students maintained highly positive academic rational beliefs, recognizing the long-term utility of writing and possessing a growth mindset. Based on these findings, the study outlines a holistic pedagogical framework combining technical instruction with low-stakes, confidence-building activities through the proposed WRITE TO EXCEL (Writing Refinement and Innovation for Thoughtful Expression) program.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing proficiency is a foundational competency required for both academic advancement and professional readiness in an increasingly globalized workforce [1, 2]. However, achieving competence in written expression requires a complex orchestration of grammatical mastery, structural organization, and vocabulary acquisition. When these elements are lacking, students frequently commit systematic errors. According to surface strategy taxonomies applied in recent literature, these errors typically manifest as misformation, omission, addition, and misordering,

with misformation and omission consistently identified as the most prevalent issues [3, 4, 5]. In the Philippine context, these grammatical deficiencies are often compounded by mechanical errors in punctuation and spelling, which severely compromise the clarity and credibility of student writing [6, 7].

Beyond these linguistic barriers, the writing process is deeply influenced by affective variables. Writing apprehension—characterized by cognitive anxiety and a fear of negative evaluation—frequently leads to task avoidance and procrastination among senior high school students [8, 9]. This anxiety is intimately linked to students' academic rational beliefs; negative self-

efficacy and the perception that writing is an insurmountable task directly diminish learning motivation [10]. While previous studies have extensively investigated grammatical errors, anxiety, and student beliefs as isolated phenomena, there remains a critical gap in literature regarding how these variables interact within a singular framework. Consequently, this study addresses this gap by examining the intersection of writing errors, apprehension, and academic beliefs among students at Natonin Stand Alone Senior High School.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The structural and psychological dimensions of this study are primarily anchored in Stephen Pit Corder's (1960s) seminal theory of Error Analysis (EA). Moving away from traditional behaviorist perspectives that viewed language errors as mere failures, Corder conceptualized errors as systematic, rule-governed reflections of a learner's developing interlanguage proficiency.

In language education, EA functions as a systematic five-stage diagnostic process: sample collection, error identification, error description, error explanation, and error evaluation [11, 12]. Through this framework, linguistic deviations are classified by surface traits—such as omission, addition, misformation, and misordering—while the explanation phase exposes root causes, including interlingual interference, intralingual difficulties, and pedagogical gaps [13, 14].

To capture the holistic reality of student performance, this linguistic lens is complemented by cognitive-affective theories of writing apprehension and academic rational beliefs. Affective barriers such as cognitive anxiety, low self-efficacy, and a fear of negative evaluation significantly impede productive language skills, frequently resulting in task avoidance and procrastination [8, 15]. These emotional stresses are deeply intertwined with students' rational beliefs regarding their writing capacity and the perceived value of academic tasks. By synthesizing Corder's EA model with cognitive-affective theories, this study establishes an integrated framework. This dual approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how surface-level writing errors intersect with internal psychological anxieties, thereby guiding the

development of balanced instructional interventions that target both technical accuracy and student confidence.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study aimed to assess the common writing errors, the extent of writing apprehension, and the academic rational beliefs of senior high school students at Natonin Stand Alone Senior High School to propose a targeted program for enhancing writing skills. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the common writing errors among senior high school students?
2. What is the extent of the writing apprehension among senior high school students?
3. What is the extent of the academic rational beliefs among senior high school students?
4. What programs may be proposed to develop the writing skills of the respondents?

IV. METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions comprehensively, this study employed a multi-methods research design that sequentially integrated qualitative and quantitative approaches. This dual strategy allowed the researcher to investigate both the structural nature of students' writing difficulties and the underlying psychological mechanisms influencing their writing behaviors.

For the qualitative component, descriptive error analysis was performed on authentic writing samples originally submitted by the students as part of their classroom academic performance tasks. These student outputs were meticulously examined, identified, and categorized following standard linguistic profiles. The analysis focused on classifying systematic errors across six key domains: grammatical syntax, punctuation mechanics, spelling and vocabulary choice, sentence structure, text coherence/cohesion, and stylistic tone. This descriptive phase provided deep qualitative insights into the exact patterns and severity of the structural difficulties within the student corpus.

Simultaneously, the quantitative component utilized a descriptive survey design involving two distinct psychometric instruments. Students' affective barriers were measured using the standardized Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test [16], which quantifies anxiety variables such as fear of evaluation, avoidance tendencies, and writer self-perception. To capture attitudinal traits, a researcher-made questionnaire was administered to measure students' academic rational beliefs, focusing on self-reported confidence, writing motivation, and the perceived utility of writing for future academic and professional success. By blending qualitative textual data with quantitative psychological metrics, the methodology ensured a rigorous, holistic exploration of the interplay between writing performance, anxiety, and mindset.

4.1 Research Environment and Participants

The study was conducted at Natonin Stand Alone Senior High School, located in Poblacion, Natonin, Mountain Province. Established in 2016, this independent institution serves senior high school students from various surrounding areas, including the districts of Barlig and Paracelis. While the school has historically experienced fluctuations in student enrollment, recent local shifts—specifically the opening of a new senior high school in Kadaclan, Barlig—have resulted in a localized decrease in its overall student population.

The target population for this investigation comprised the Grade 12 students enrolled under the Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) academic strand during the 2024–2025 school year. Out of the four available academic strands, the HUMSS cohort was chosen using a purposive sampling design, based on the determination that these students would provide the most robust data to fulfill the study's objectives. The sample originally consisted of 75 students (39 males, or 52%, and 36 females, or 48%); however, during the data gathering phase, two participants (one male and one female) declined to participate, resulting in a final active sample size of 73 students.

4.2 Research Instruments and Procedures

To acquire quantitative data, a dual-component survey questionnaire was utilized. The first section measured writing apprehension through an adapted tool modeled after Daly and Miller's [16] Writing Apprehension Scale, designed to evaluate internal

affective responses and fear of evaluation. The second component consisted of a researcher-made questionnaire developed to gauge academic rational beliefs, focusing on self-efficacy, writing motivation, and the perceived value of writing skills. To establish instrument reliability, the researcher-made survey underwent pilot testing among a separate group of non-participating senior high school students. Ambiguous statements were revised based on initial feedback, and a subsequent internal consistency analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.766, confirming that the instrument was highly reliable for academic deployment. Perceptions were captured using a 4-point Likert scale with the following interpretive intervals: 3.26–4.00 as Strongly Agree (SA), 2.51–3.25 as Agree (A), 1.76–2.50 as Disagree (DA), and 1.00–1.75 as Strongly Disagree (SDA).

Data collection commenced during the second quarter of the 2024–2025 academic year after securing formal institutional approval from the school principal. The selected Grade 12 participants were briefed on the study's purpose, scope, and ethical safeguards, and were assured that their identities would remain strictly confidential. Qualitative textual data were derived from authentic essay samples previously submitted by the students as part of their regular performance tasks. These texts underwent descriptive error analysis, where deviations from standard written English were systematically identified, recorded, and categorized into distinct linguistic domains. Concurrently, the quantitative survey instruments were administered to the same group. Descriptive statistics, specifically frequency and percentage distributions, were used to analyze the linguistic error corpus, while means and standard deviations were computed to determine the extent of writing apprehension and academic beliefs.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Common Writing Errors

The corpus analysis revealed that Grammatical Errors constituted the most prevalent obstacle for the participants, registering the highest frequency at 215 instances. This primary ranking underscores a significant deficit in fundamental sentence construction, particularly regarding subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, and preposition usage,

all of which heavily compromise textual clarity [17, 18]. Authentic student excerpts illustrated these systemic vulnerabilities. For instance, a student writing *"Living in 21st century, I am exposed to the digital world and different media platform... technology and media have a significant part in my studies"* demonstrates an underlying confusion regarding number agreement in complex noun phrases.

Furthermore, syntactic and idiomatic confusion was visible in student outputs such as, *"I will start in myself first, so that others will follow..."*, which highlights an unfamiliarity with standard English idiomatic expressions and correct reflexive pronoun forms. Structural gaps were further illustrated by incomplete academic expressions, such as *"I believe I can contribute significantly to my community and country as a media and information literate,"* where the omission of a final head noun (e.g., "individual") demonstrates poor collocational accuracy. These findings align with observations by Brown and Taylor [19], who noted that logical structural flow is frequently undermined by disorganized sentence architecture. This performance pattern is heavily corroborated by contemporary literature, which attributes such structural errors to a combination of limited grammatical exposure, carelessness, and interlingual interference from the students' first language or mother tongue [20, 21].

Mechanics and Formatting Errors emerged as the second most frequent problem area, with 179 documented instances. These errors, characterized by erratic paragraphing and inconsistent capitalization, indicate an unfamiliarity with standard academic conventions. For example, textual evidence showed students routinely writing *"i believe that i contribute..."* or beginning statements with lowercase terms like *"one,"* failing to apply basic structural rules that should be automatic at the senior high school level. Such errors undermine the professionalism and perceived credibility of the text [22]. Literature suggests that while these mechanical oversights are sometimes downplayed by students who prioritize content over form, they are common across various academic tiers due to curriculum imbalances and an overreliance on informal digital communication mediums where formal capitalization rules are dismissed [23, 24, 25].

Punctuation Errors ranked third with 141 occurrences, presenting primary challenges in comma splices, misplaced boundaries, and missing serial commas (e.g., *"access analyze evaluate and create..."*), which severely disrupts readability. These occurrences are frequently linked to student carelessness and an improper grasp of sentence boundaries [26, 27]. Spelling Errors were the fourth most frequent with 96 occurrences, manifesting as typographical mistakes, phonetically driven spelling, and homophone confusion, such as writing *"tolls"* instead of *"tools"* or *"beleive"* for *"believe."* These patterns reflect poor proofreading habits and distract the reader, lowering the overall perceived quality of the text [28]. Finally, Usage Errors were the least frequent, occurring 50 times, which implies that while students have a reasonable baseline vocabulary, they still require pedagogical guidance regarding precise, context-appropriate wording to avoid redundancy and the misapplication of clichés [29].

Rank	Error Domain	Frequency	Percentage
1	Grammatical Errors	215	31.39%
2	Mechanics and Formatting Errors	179	26.13%
3	Punctuation Errors	141	20.58%
4	Spelling Errors	96	14.01%
5	Usage Errors	50	7.30%
	Total Error Corpus	685	100.00%

5.2 Extent of Writing Apprehension

The quantitative assessment of the participants' psychological responses revealed an overall average mean score of 2.51, indicating a moderate level of writing apprehension among the senior high school students. The data indicated that this anxiety is not a constant deterrent but surfaces prominently during evaluative conditions. Specifically, the indicator *"I worry about my writing being judged negatively by others"* generated the highest level of agreement (M=3.80, Strongly Agree). This pronounced fear of negative evaluation aligns with the concept of Second Language Writing Anxiety (SLWA), where apprehensions concerning external criticism and self-

criticism inhibit cognitive processing and reduce motivation [30, 31]. This evaluative stress is mirrored by the moderate agreement found in indicators regarding comparative performance anxiety, such as *"I feel that my writing skills are not as good as others"* (M=2.95, Agree) and *"I feel nervous when my teacher asks me to write an essay"* (M=2.71, Agree), echoing widespread findings that essay development induces distinct cognitive anxiety rooted in linguistic insecurity [32, 33].

Conversely, the lowest recorded score occurred within the indicator *"I feel confident in my ability to express my ideas through writing"* (M=1.75, Strongly Disagree), highlighting a critical lack of baseline writing self-efficacy among the cohort. This deficiency directly corresponds with their heightened fear of judgment. Interestingly, indicators addressing active avoidance behaviors—such as *"Writing activities make me feel anxious"* (M=2.49, Disagree) and *"I avoid writing activities whenever possible"* (M=2.20, Disagree)—received lower mean scores. This divergence suggests that while the students struggle with low confidence and experience anxiety when evaluated, they do not actively evade writing tasks and recognize the value of the skill [31].

The intricate mechanics required for long, complex assignments often exacerbate this apprehension, as maintaining structural coherence across longer text spans is intimidating for ESL learners [34, 35]. Consequently, these findings highlight a clear demand for pedagogical changes in the HUMSS strand. Rather than treating writing as an immediate summative performance, educators should adopt low-stakes, process-oriented writing methodologies, utilize scaffolding techniques to break down complex prompts, and foster a supportive classroom environment that reduces the psychological fear of criticism [36, 37].

VI. CONCLUSION

The empirical findings of this investigation yield several critical conclusions regarding the linguistic performance and psychological disposition of senior high school students. First, the structural analysis of the student text corpus indicates that the most common writing difficulties are deeply rooted in fundamental deficits within grammar, mechanical conventions, and punctuation. The high prevalence of

persistent errors—specifically incorrect subject-verb agreement, inconsistent verb tenses, faulty capitalization, and improper sentence boundaries—points to a significant gap in the mastery of essential written English conventions. Left unaddressed, these foundational vulnerabilities directly hinder students' capacity to articulate complex ideas with the clarity, precision, and professionalism required for academic and future career advancement.

Second, the psychological data demonstrate that the participants generally experience a profound sense of writing anxiety, which is primarily driven by low writing self-efficacy and a pronounced fear of negative evaluation. This affective barrier is characterized by internal self-doubt and heightened sensitivity to external criticism from both peers and educators, causing students to approach expressive language tasks with hesitation out of fear that their work will be judged as inadequate.

Third, an encouraging paradox emerges regarding student attitudes: despite their technical struggles and acute anxieties, the students generally maintain positive, rational beliefs about academic writing. They explicitly recognize its long-term utility for academic and professional success and view writing as a malleable skill that can be developed over time through deliberate practice and effort. This intrinsic growth mindset provides a vital pedagogical foundation upon which effective interventions can be built.

Finally, the convergence of these linguistic and affective data underscores an urgent necessity for a targeted, integrated instructional intervention. To systematically improve student outcomes, remedial measures cannot focus on mechanics alone; instead, technical instruction in grammar and sentence architecture must be intentionally combined with confidence-building strategies to cultivate an educational space that encourages academic risk-taking and skill refinement.

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