

HUMANISTIC EDUCATION TODAY: LITERARY INTERPRETATION AS A PATH TO AUTHENTICITY AND INDEPENDENT THINKING

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Abstract

In today's global information society, employers seek graduates who can manage complex tasks, approach problems from multiple perspectives, make informed decisions, and demonstrate skills appropriate to their professional field. At a time when discussions about the importance of humanistic education are taking place across various forums, an important question emerges: can literature contribute to the development of such competencies? To what extent can the study of literature support originality and independent thinking when technological tools – especially artificial intelligence – significantly influence and reshape our cognitive habits? This paper aims to demonstrate the potential of literary education to cultivate deeper forms of critical thinking while fostering authenticity, creative reasoning, and personal cognitive development. In this context, literature – both national and foreign – provides an epistemological and pedagogical environment in which these abilities can be meaningfully nurtured. Through complex narrative structures, diverse voices, and situations that prompt ethical and moral reflection, literary texts encourage students to reflect on perspective, context, and identity in an integrated way. They offer a cognitive-emotional space in which readers encounter otherness, explore ambiguity, and acquire distinctive interpretative strategies that cannot be automated or delegated to technology. This potential is particularly evident in migrant and transnational literature, which provides the foundation for the theoretical and didactic concept presented in this paper, aiming to contribute to current professional and societal reflections on the role and relevance of humanistic education. We give particular attention to how literary interpretation can stimulate the development of critical thinking, enhance sensitivity to subtle and implicit layers of meaning, and strengthen the individual capacities through which people construct their understanding of the world and their place within it.

Keywords: *Critical thinking, literary interpretation, authenticity, humanistic education.*

1. Introduction

Contemporary higher education is shaped by rapidly changing labor market demands and ongoing technological development. In such a context, education cannot be reduced to the mere accumulation of facts and knowledge detached from deeper understanding and the ability to apply them creatively. Essential competencies increasingly include the ability to select information, identify its main ideas, think critically, and make decisions based on independent judgment. Universities today face the challenge not only of cultivating professional and technical competencies, but also of developing ethical sensitivity and guiding students toward responsibility for their own understanding.

One of the most significant factors transforming the educational process is the development of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI). Their presence and influence cannot be ignored or doubted: AI systems can search for and summarize information, generate coherent texts, contextualize them, and even imitate style and academic discourse. The problem within the educational process today is not the existence of AI itself, but the risk that students may cease to distinguish between understanding grounded in human experience and reflection and its simulation produced by a computer. Artificial intelligence can answer the question “*How can this text be understood?*” based on statistical analysis and available data, but it cannot answer the question “*Why did I understand it in this particular way, what does it reveal about me, and what does it evoke in me?*” It is precisely at this point that the irreplaceable value of humanistic education, and literary interpretation in particular, becomes evident. Through literary interpretation, students enter a dialogue with a text through their own life experiences, confront it with their

identity, and integrate its meanings into their own value system. In this way, an authentic personality capable of independent judgment and sensitive understanding of the world gradually develops.

In a context characterized by information overload and the rapid availability of automatically generated responses, it is therefore essential to cultivate a conscious and responsible approach to the use of artificial intelligence – not only in terms of academic integrity but also regarding students' cognitive, emotional, and value-based development. Without such competencies, young people become more vulnerable to misinformation, conspiracy theories, and manipulative narratives that spread rapidly within digital environments.

Education must therefore intentionally support the development of higher cognitive processes such as analysis, synthesis, generalization, and the ability to draw appropriate conclusions. These needs are also reflected in international discussions on the future of work and education. In its reports on key skills for 2025, the World Economic Forum (WEF) emphasizes not only technological literacy but also analytical and creative thinking, adaptability, empathy, and motivation. Together with reading literacy and language competencies, these skills constitute a fundamental prerequisite for further cognitive development.

This paper aims to demonstrate that literary interpretation represents an effective tool within humanistic education for developing critical and creative thinking and for cultivating independent judgment. The paper has a theoretical and didactic character and is methodologically grounded in the work of František Miko and the tradition of the Nitra School, which emphasizes the uniqueness of the interpretative act and its formative influence on the reader's personality. This framework is applied to migrant and transnational literature with a focus on the metacognitive aspects of interpretation and the reflection of personal experience in confrontation with a literary text.

2. Theoretical background: Humanistic education and the process of literary interpretation

Humanistic education traditionally focuses on developing understanding, imagination, and critical thinking, through which individuals acquire the ability to orient themselves within the cultural and value-based complexity of the world and to understand diverse forms of human experience (Nussbaum, 2010). Through its content, it preserves the experiences of previous generations and conveys different value orientations, often indirectly – through narrative, character conflict, and diverse narrative perspectives. In this way, students can encounter different human experiences without being forced into a single “correct” interpretation or predetermined interpretative conclusions. From this perspective, humanistic education can be understood as a process of active interpretation in which students are encouraged to engage in independent reflection and to assume responsibility for their own understanding.

From the perspective of cognitive psychology, these processes are closely connected with the development of critical and creative thinking. Within humanistic education, critical thinking can be understood as a complex ability to realistically assess different aspects of intellectual activity (both one's own and that of others) based on an individual's cognitive, attitudinal, and personal dispositions (Ruisel, 2014). This form of thinking relies on advanced cognitive processes such as analysis, evaluation, and creative processing of information, including the ability to formulate original conclusions, as conceptualized in the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Closely related to originality is creative thinking, which allows individuals to transcend conventional interpretative approaches and generate new, meaningful, and contextually justified ideas.

Literary texts provide an exceptionally stimulating environment for the development of these abilities. Their multiplicity of meanings, implicitness, contextual dependence, and the meaning-forming function of language place demands on readers that require slow, attentive, and analytical reading. This mode of reception contrasts with the type of rapid reading typical of the digital age. Academic reflections on reading in online environments point out that digital media significantly influence reading habits and affect cognitive processes related to text comprehension (Ficzere, 2021). Reading oriented primarily toward searching for and quickly selecting information reaches its limits when applied to literary texts, since it cannot adequately capture their suggestiveness, metaphorical nature, and subtle semantic shifts. Furthermore, literary texts do not construct meaning in isolation but within a network of relationships with other texts and contexts, a phenomenon addressed in literary theory through the concept of intertextuality (Žemberová, 1995). In pedagogical contexts, this is reflected in the fact that understanding a text arises through its conscious and unconscious connections with other texts (Gavora, 2008).

An inseparable component of literary interpretation is the ethical and affective dimension of understanding. Literary language expands individual experience by enabling readers not only to understand emotions, conflicts, and moral dilemmas they may never have personally encountered, but also to identify with situations and characters that reflect their own inner experiences. Working with literary texts, therefore, stimulates the integrated development of cognitive and personal abilities that interact within the interpretative process. In this sense, literary interpretation may be understood as a space activating multiple

forms of intelligence in accordance with Gardner's theory (1999), since understanding a text involves not only linguistic analysis but also an awareness of different perspectives and reflection on one's own attitudes and feelings.

3. The expressive system as a tool for metacognitive reading

In the process of literary interpretation, metacognition plays a crucial role. Metacognition refers to an individual's ability to become aware of their own cognitive processes and to reflect on the reasons that lead a reader to a particular understanding (Flavell, 1979). A reader not only follows what a text means but also asks why it is interpreted in a particular way and what strategies are employed in the process of interpretation. This ability plays a key role in complex cognitive activities that require the coordination, control, and regulation of multiple mental processes, such as reading comprehension (Ficzere, 2025).

In literary interpretation, metacognition can be intentionally developed through analytical approaches that enable students to identify and reflect upon their own reading strategies. One such tool is the expressive system developed by František Miko (1970), one of the leading representatives of the Nitra School. Its theoretical foundations allow for a systematic examination of literary texts as structured wholes while simultaneously reflecting on their effect on the reader. The four fundamental expressive categories – conceptuality, iconicity, experientiality, and operability – do not merely define the formal characteristics of a text but also function as a cognitive map of reading. Through this framework, literary interpretation shifts from intuitive understanding to a conscious and reflective process that can be articulated, justified, and critically evaluated.

Conceptuality directs interpretation toward precise semantic relationships and logical coherence, thereby supporting the development of critical thinking. Iconicity focuses on imagery and the distinction between literal and figurative levels of meaning in order to convey a particular image or model of the world and to draw the reader's attention to the detail of expression (Plesník, 2011). Experientiality emphasizes the affective dimension of reading and encourages students to reflect on their own emotional responses. Literary texts mediate aesthetic experience, which readers experience subjectively and which contributes to the development of empathy and emotional sensitivity. Students learn to distinguish between what the text genuinely evokes and what they project onto it based on their own experiences. Finally, operability refers to the orientation of expression toward the communicative act itself – whether it is a statement, evaluation, or appeal – and enables readers to recognize how a text directs their attention (Miko, 1970).

Within the educational process, the expressive system therefore functions not only as an analytical tool for working with literary texts but also as a means of developing students' metacognitive abilities. It allows them to become aware of their own interpretative strategies, to take responsibility for them, and to connect cognitive understanding with emotional and value-based reflection. In this sense, interpretation can be understood as a process of cultivating the reading experience and expanding the possibilities of reception, as also emphasized by Nosková (2014).

4. Literary interpretation in higher education: Migrant and transnational literature

Literary interpretation activates students' thinking by encouraging them to engage with texts through their own experiences and values. Reading thus becomes a process in which students ask questions such as: *Who tells this story? What remains unspoken? Why is the narrative structured in this particular way? How does what I read relate to my own experiences and to what I know from my surroundings?* Interpretation, therefore, represents not merely a search for meaning but an exploration of various contexts – narrative, reader-oriented, and socio-cultural (including political, historical, and ideological contexts) – that interact within the text and shape its understanding. Literary text thereby becomes a space in which students develop the ability to observe how meaning emerges in the interaction between text and reader.

Migrant and transnational literature provide a particularly stimulating environment for such an approach to interpretation because they emerge at the intersection of multiple cultures, languages, and national as well as personal identities. Migrant literature primarily focuses on the experience of migration, the tension between adaptation and attachment to the country of origin, and processes of social exclusion. Transnational literature refers to literary production and reception within a space that transcends the boundaries of national and cultural systems. In didactic practice, a transnational perspective requires students to analyze phenomena such as poetic hybridity and plurilingualism, which are characteristic of this type of literature. Students are guided to observe how meaning transforms when moving between languages and cultures, thereby directly stimulating their analytical thinking. The expressive system developed by František Miko can provide a methodological framework for this process. For instance, through the category of iconicity, students may examine how the use of a foreign language within a text creates a

specific image of the world, while the category of conceptuality allows them to analyze how logical relationships within the text shift depend on the cultural context in which they are interpreted.

Such texts create a specific interpretative “in-between space” in which meaning does not appear as a finished piece of information but emerges through a dynamic dialogue between text and reader against the background of diverse cultural traditions. For higher education, this approach is particularly valuable because it requires students to engage in metacognitive reflection. They must become aware of the cultural assumptions and interpretative strategies through which they arrive at an understanding of a text that transcends a single national tradition. In this way, transnational literature teaches students to work with ambiguity and to perceive cultural identity as a complex process shaped by globalization.

In migrant literature, this interpretative space becomes especially visible at the thematic level, where attention focuses on how migration shapes the personal development of individuals and their social relationships. Migrant narratives often depict how relocation affects characters’ ability to establish and maintain relationships, how their position changes within the social systems they enter, and whether they experience equality, integration, discrimination, or social exclusion. Interpretation, therefore, focuses on the tension between the need to adapt and the effort to maintain a relationship with the original environment while simultaneously forming a connection with the host environment. Students are encouraged to observe how these factors influence the actions and decisions of characters. The experience of migration is frequently expressed through fear, nostalgia, uprootedness, and alienation, as well as anger, frustration, or helplessness – often connected to language barriers, cultural differences, or rejection by the surrounding society. These emotional experiences play a direct role in shaping the identities of characters, which in migrant literature often appear as dynamic, unstable, and continuously evolving. Interpretation, therefore, naturally leads students to reflect on how such emotional experiences influence whether and how a character becomes integrated into a new environment—and what attitude the reader themselves adopts toward these processes.

The narrative structure of such texts often reflects the fragmented and discontinuous nature of the migration experience. Fragmentary composition, shifting temporal perspectives, and multiple narrative voices depict lives unfolding across different cultural and social spaces. The internal monologue often emphasizes the subjective experiences of characters and conveys migration in an immediate, introspective form. Language itself plays a particularly important role in migrant literature, mediating the tension between the original and the host environment. At the same time, it reflects literary and social traditions, emotional experience, and the tension between what can be expressed and what remains inexpressible.

As intercultural psychology demonstrates, the ability to understand otherness and recognize one’s own value frameworks is essential for functioning in a globalized society (Průcha, 2004). Literary interpretation creates a space in which these abilities can be further developed. In practice, the didactic application consists of analyzing the formal and expressive qualities of texts according to Miko’s system. On this basis, students formulate interpretative hypotheses and subsequently subject them to metacognitive reflection. The teacher’s role lies in formulating analytical and reflective questions that guide students toward awareness of their own interpretative procedures and toward justifying their interpretations based on textual evidence. At the same time, the teacher provides methodological guidance for argumentation, situates the text within broader social contexts – including media discourse on migration, political implications, and ethical considerations – and encourages respect for differing viewpoints. In this way, literary texts function as a distinctive pedagogical tool that allows these processes to unfold within a safe educational environment while promoting an understanding of cultural diversity as a universal value.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to show that literary interpretation within humanistic education represents not only a didactic tool for developing critical and creative thinking but also a space for the formation of personality. In the context of digitalization and the rise of artificial intelligence, the interpretation of literary texts can be viewed as a model situation in which students actively engage with ambiguity, multiplicity of meaning, and the plurality of cultural perspectives – features that characterize contemporary globalized society.

From an epistemological perspective, literature creates a cognitive environment in which meaning does not appear as ready-made information but arises through dialogue between text and reader. Interpretation, therefore, represents a process of constructing meaning that requires analysis, evaluation, and reflection on one’s own assumptions and interpretative strategies. It is precisely this processual nature of knowledge that distinguishes literary reading from the mechanical processing of information and confirms its importance within humanistic education.

The pedagogical dimension of interpretation manifests itself not only in the development of cognitive and analytical abilities but also at the ethical and value-based level. Migration currently occupies a significant place in public discourse, the media, and social networks, where it is often reduced to simplified or polarized narratives. Literary texts provide an opportunity to address this topic within a safe and reflective environment that encourages empathy, the ability to understand otherness, and critical reflection on stereotypical representations. For contemporary students, who frequently encounter mobility through study programs, Erasmus exchanges, or professional opportunities, the experience of migration does not represent a distant issue but a potential aspect of their own lives. Migrant literature – and, in a broader sense, transnational literature – therefore emerges as an appropriate starting point, as it explores the search for identity, the tension between belonging and otherness, and the necessity of adapting to new cultural environments. These elements enable students not only to analyze literary texts but also to reflect on their own identity and their place in the contemporary world.

If humanistic education is to respond meaningfully to the challenges of the present, it should not abandon interpretation as the core of its practice. It is precisely through interpretation that meaning is understood not as a finished piece of information but as the result of active engagement and understanding. Within this process, the ability to form independent judgments grounded in value-based self-awareness is developed together with authenticity as the outcome of the comprehensive development of personality in the conditions of contemporary social and cultural plurality.

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