

Cross-cultural Reader Response and Relevance in Dickens and James: A Synergistic Analysis of RT and RRT

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Abstract - The aim of the present study is to explore cross-cultural reader response through a human intelligence (HI) and artificial intelligence (AI) cognitive-driven approach. The study employs a qualitative textual analysis research method, using a systematic sampling method. Eight participants from different cultural settings were brought together. The study focuses on six selected fictional works (e.g., *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *The Golden Bowl*) authored by Charles Dickens and Henry James, adopting the combination of Relevance Theory (RT) and Reader Response Theory (RRT). Findings reveal that human intelligence (HI) and artificial intelligence (AI) cognitive-driven tools facilitate readers' meaning-making. Additionally, interpreting and appreciating literary works allow readers to enhance their cognitive abilities and how readers grasp the meaning of textual narratives and shape their responses to these texts. Future research could explore how this trend impacts cross-cultural reader response to Dickens's and James's works, which would add more depth to the current study.

Key Words: artificial intelligence (AI), human intelligence (HI), cross-cultural reader response, Relevance Theory (RT), Reader Response Theory (RRT)

1. Introduction

In the realm of literary studies, comprehending how readers from diverse cultural backgrounds engage with classic works is indispensable for appreciating their enduring relevance. This study examines how modern cognitive tools—human and artificial ones—help readers construct meaning of the narratives towards reader-driven interpretation. This approach enables us to uncover new insights into how classic novels are interpreted and valued through human and artificial lenses. Human intelligence (HI) is crucial for examining how readers grasp the meaning of textual narratives and shape their responses to these texts. Nowadays, artificial intelligence (AI) is attempting to directly replace human cognitive abilities. This study is grounded in the dual framework of Relevance Theory (RT) and Reader Response Theory (RRT). RT provides readers with ostensive-referential cues from the authors, such as lexical words (colloquial words, dialects, etc.) and grammatical strategies (linguistic transitivity, rhetorical devices, etc.), to construct the meaning of the literary works. Reader Response Theory (RRT) allows readers to use their active role to interpret these works by leveraging their cultural and educational backgrounds without emphasizing authors' linguistic cues such as metaphors, similes, etc. RT favors readers' contextual engagement, whether they comprehend the whole texts. RRT offers readers an active role to interpret the literary texts without reflecting authorial intent. The current study investigates how human intelligence (HI) and artificial intelligence (AI) serve as cognitive indicators in readers' meaning-making process. The

empirical study allows readers to interpret the meaning of narrative texts in dual ways. They are able to take the help of AI in interpreting the meaning of the literary works. This study addresses the gaps in prior research that has neglected culturally diverse or reader cultural responses in literary studies. The study generates insights aligning with the aim and objectives, and follow-up research questions.

Aim and Objectives

Aim

To investigate how human intelligence (HI) and artificial intelligence (AI) driven cognitive tools aid the readers in interpreting literary texts, which influences emotional reactions to social inequality in Dickens's and James's fictions.

Objectives

1. To examine how readers' cultural backgrounds, their active reading, and context-driven processing influence emotional reactions to social inequality in selected fictions
2. To analyze how culture, reader initiative, and context-based interpretation affect emotional ties to social inequality themes in selected fictions

Questions

1. How do readers' cultural backgrounds, their active reading, and context-driven processing influence emotional reactions to social inequality in Dickens's and James's fictions?
2. In what ways do culture, reader initiative, and context-based interpretation affect emotional ties to social inequality themes in Dickens's and James's fictions?

2. Literature Review

Relevance Theory (RT), introduced by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986, has been a cornerstone of pragmatic studies since the 1980s. It was later refined in 1995. RT emerged as a revolutionary framework that challenged the entrenched notions of communication prevalent at the time. RT introduced a cognitive perspective by highlighting the active role of the listener or reader in meaning construction, especially in literature, in a more detailed and engaging manner. For instance, when a poet uses imagery in a poem, it is not simply to convey a range of emotions and associations in the reader. The reader, in turn, must utilize contextual clues such as imagery, metaphors, similes, alliterations, and their own cognitive abilities to infer the deeper meaning behind the imagery. This is a classic example of RT in action in literary communication. This is a classic example of RT in action in literary communication.

Relevance Theory (RT) demonstrates that communication is an ostensive-inferential process where the speaker ostensively signals their intention to convey information, and the listener infers the speaker's intended meaning based on contextual cues. This process adheres to the principle of achieving optimal cognitive effects with minimal processing effort by highlighting the dynamic interaction between cognition and context.

Reader Response Theory (RRT) is a literary theory that underscores the active role of readers in constructing the meaning of a text. It shifts the focus from the author's intentions and the text itself to the individual and collective reactions of those engaging with the text. RRT primarily focuses on how a text is understood, felt, and interpreted by the reader, while traditional approaches to literature might highlight the intentions of the author (Intentional Fallacy) or the intrinsic meaning of the text (Formalism). The central premise of Reader Response Theory is that meaning is not just embedded within the text but is actively created in the interaction between the text and the reader. Thus, textual meaning is dynamic and can vary depending on the reader, the time of reading, and the reader's social and cultural backgrounds.

Reader Response Theory has revolutionized the field of literary studies by placing readers at the center of the meaning-making process. It has challenged the traditional author-centric and text-centric approaches, offering a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of literature. The theory's emphasis on the diversity of reader responses has opened up new research avenues, allowing scholars to explore how different social, cultural, and historical factors influence reading experiences. Moreover, in the digital age, where reader participation and interaction are more prominent than ever, RRT provides a valuable framework for analyzing the complex relationships between texts, readers, and digital platforms. As literature continues to evolve, Reader Response Theory will undoubtedly remain a crucial lens through which readers can understand and appreciate the rich and multifaceted nature of literary works.

2.2 Preliminary studies in Reader Cognition and Emotional Responses through RT and RRT

Reader Cognition through RT

Relevance Theory (RT) posits that readers prioritize interpretations that maximize cognitive rewards while minimizing processing effort. This framework, originally applied to translation studies to emphasize preserving optimal relevance (Gutt, 2000), extends to literary analysis, where readers decode linguistic devices such as irony, metaphor, and symbolism to construct meaning. The "poetic effort" invested in interpreting literary texts often yields aesthetic pleasure, aligning with RT's principle that heightened cognitive effort correlates with richer interpretive rewards (Pilkington, 2000). Experimental designs manipulating textual relevance (e.g., texts aligned with reader interests vs. unrelated texts) demonstrate that cognitive load significantly influences reading comprehension. Relevant texts, congruent with readers' interests or prior knowledge, result in shorter reading times and reduced cognitive load, as evidenced by fewer fixations and regressions (Wang & Liu, 2017). RT also explains how readers resolve ambiguities. Implicit information perceived as highly relevant aligned with readers' background knowledge or goals requires fewer inferences and less mental effort, facilitating faster comprehension (Chiu & Lin, 2023). Ambiguities embedded in relevant contexts are resolved more efficiently, with readers prioritizing goal-relevant uncertainties over less pertinent ones (Palmer & Tran, 2024).

Emotional Responses through RRT

Readers' emotional and psychological states influence their interpretations. Readers project their psychological structures onto texts, a process that underscores the subjective, emotional, and psychological dimensions of interpretation, which is a cornerstone of RRT. Readers actively participate in meaning-making rather than passively receiving it. Readers' personal

experiences and emotions dominate their interpretations, confirming that meaning arises from readers' backgrounds rather than the text itself. Meaning emerges from the interactions between readers and texts, arising more from classroom responses than from authorial intent or intrinsic textual meaning. This highlights the communal aspect of Reader-Response Theory (RRT) by demonstrating how shared criteria and group identity influence interpretation (Norman Holland, 1968; Wolfgang Iser & David Bleich, 1978; Stanley Fish, 1980).

Readers' cultural context significantly shapes how they engage with the texts. Readers from different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds often interpret stories based on their personal experiences and values. Personal experiences, including trauma and life history, influence readers to interpret texts with similar themes. Personal experiences related to the themes of the text (e.g., loss or trauma) lead readers to engage with the text on a deeper emotional level. Multilingual and multicultural readers interpret literary narratives, applying RRT in contexts involving their different language proficiency and cultural backgrounds. Readers' interpretations vary based on their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, suggesting a need for more cross-cultural studies in RRT (Lee, 2026; Simmons & Turner, 2022; Patel and Gomez, 2023).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach. The primary goal of this study is to investigate how human intelligence (HI) and artificial intelligence (AI) driven cognitive tools aid the readers in interpreting literary texts which influences emotional reactions to social inequality in Dickens's and James's fictions. The study uses a systemic sampling method. Eight participants with different linguistic and educational backgrounds are selected. Participants are asked to answer twenty-four text-based and rhetorical questions. Readers have the autonomy to answer these questions based on their own knowledge, personal interests, and linguistic backgrounds. Six literary corpora: three selected fictions by Dickens and another three selected works by James encompassing *The Wings of the Dove* are used as the primary data source. Data were collected and analyzed using a scientific coding scheme. In addition, we will explore how AI can be integrated into the analysis process to compare and complement human-driven interpretation.

4. Findings and Discussion

Cultural backgrounds, Active reading, and Context-driven processing influencing Emotional reactions

(RQ 1: How do cultural backgrounds, active reading, and context-driven processing influence emotional reactions to social inequality in Dickens's and James's fictions?)

Through the synergy of Relevance Theory and Reader Response Theory, examining how cultural backgrounds, active reading and context-driven processing impact emotional reactions to social inequality in Dickens's and James's fictions reveals profound insights. Active readers of *A Christmas Carol* gain a deeper understanding of Scrooge, through researching Victorian England's socio-economic ills.

In line with RRT's emphasis on the reader's role in meaning-making, this active engagement helps them perceive his transformation more fully, his initial miserliness as more abhorrent, and his redemption as hopeful, enhancing emotional power. RT is evident as readers use new knowledge to find relevance in the story. In the Turn of the Screw, knowledge of 19th century norms changes readers' view of the governess, making her more understandable and evoking different emotions aids by analyzing text clues and emotions, deepening the emotional connection.

Culture, Reader initiative, and Context-based interpretation affect emotional ties to social inequality

(RQ2: In what ways do culture, reader initiative, and context-based interpretation affect emotional ties to social inequality themes in Dickens's and James's works?

From the perspective of RT and RRT, culture, reader initiative, and context-based interpretation significantly affect emotional ties to social inequality themes in Dickens's and James's works. Collectivist-culture readers see social struggles as shared community issues, valuing collective elements, which aligns with RRT's view of readers focus on individual resilience, shaping their unique emotional response. Reader initiative, such as personal experiences of racial discrimination, creates strong emotional bonds within social exclusion themes, following RRT's idea of readers' experiences influencing interpretation. Context-based interpretation through discussions and sharing in depth exploration. AI, by analyzing reviews and suggesting passages, helps readers find relevance in the text, providing a comprehensive understanding in line with RT.

3. Discussion on cultural backgrounds, active reading, and context-driven processing influence emotional reactions to social inequality in Dickens's and James's fictions

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Readers actively participate in meaning-making rather than passively receiving it. Their personal experiences and emotions dominate their interpretations, confirming that meaning arises from readers' backgrounds rather than the text itself. Meaning emerges from the interactions between readers and texts, arising more from classroom responses than from authorial intent or intrinsic textual meaning (Norman Holland, 1968; Wolfgang Iser & David Bleich, 1978; Stanley Fish, 1980). The use of reader response activities fosters a more interactive and personalized approach to literature (McRae, R., & Johnson, 2019; Zhang, 2021).

Multilingual and multicultural readers interpret literary narratives, applying RRT in contexts involving their different language proficiency and cultural backgrounds. Readers' interpretations vary based on their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, suggesting a need for more cross-cultural studies in RRT (Lee, 2026; Simmons & Turner, 2022; Patel and Gomez, 2023).

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5. Conclusion

This study, firmly grounded in Relevance (RT) and Reader Response Theory (RRT), has comprehensively investigated how modern cognitive tools both human and artificial shape literary interpretation. Focusing on six selected works by Dickens and James, it has generated several noteworthy findings. Cultural backgrounds, active reading, and context-driven processing significantly impact emotional reactions to social inequality themes in literature. Different cultural settings lead readers to approach these themes from unique perspectives, influencing their emotional engagement. Active reading, where readers engage deeply with the text, allows for a more nuanced understanding of social inequality. Collectivist and individualist cultures foster distinct responses, while personal experiences can forge strong connections with relevant themes. Context-based interpretations through group activities enables in-depth exploration. AI, as a cognitive tool, aids in identifying relevant text segments, enhancing meaning-finding and understanding. These findings offer new insights and have practical applications for the development of reading skill, and future research on reader-response engagement involving Human Intelligence (HI) and AI.

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BIOGRAPHIES



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