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Observing Power, Unlearning Authority, and Resisting Anthropocentrism: A Critical Discourse and Socio-Cognitive Analysis of Emily Dickinson's "The Bird Came Down the Walk"

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson's poem "The Bird Came Down the Walk" is frequently viewed as a serene nature lyric focused on perceptual awareness and psychological insight. This analysis, however, reinterprets the poem as a nuanced yet continuous critique of anthropocentrism. Utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis through Fairclough's three-dimensional approach and van Dijk's sociocognitive framework, the examination investigates how metaphor of violence, surveillance, paternalism, and flight convey the conflicts between human control and nonhuman autonomy. A detailed, line-by-line analysis uncovers the speaker's shifting mental models, revealing the fragility of human-centered beliefs regarding authority, understanding, and moral superiority. The bird's defiance against domestication and scrutiny ultimately challenges the speaker's epistemic power, highlighting the ethical constraints of human perception. By combining CDA with close reading techniques, this analysis positions Dickinson's poem as not only an artistic work but also a venue for ideological struggle, thereby broadening the use of CDA within the field of literary discourse analysis.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Socio-Cognitive Model; Metaphor; Ideology; Anthropocentrism; Power; Paternalism;

1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) is widely regarded as one of the most analyzed poets in American literature, recognized for her concise language, rich metaphorical imagery, and profound psychological insight. Within her vast body of work, "The Bird Came Down the Walk" is commonly seen as a straightforward depiction of the natural world: a narrator observes a bird as it engages with its surroundings and contemplates its actions. Conventional interpretations often focus on the poem's reflective tone, underscoring Dickinson's keen eye for detail and her skill in portraying natural events with psychological awareness.

Yet, a more detailed examination uncovers a deeper ideological layer. The poem quietly questions anthropocentrism, the belief that humans are the primary, morally and intellectually superior species. Assumptions rooted in anthropocentrism are evident in the speaker's observations, moral judgments about

the bird's behavior, and efforts to intervene. The bird's independence, instinctual predation, and ultimate flight challenge the speaker's knowledge and authority, undermining human-centered viewpoints.

The ethical and epistemic ramifications of human perception in nature writing are acknowledged by the growing integration of ecological and post-anthropocentric frameworks in contemporary literary criticism. According to academics like Buell (2005) and Heise (2008), literary works are cultural texts that influence and reflect attitudes toward the nonhuman environment in addition to being aesthetic objects. This analysis highlights the conflict between knowledge and power, control and autonomy, and observation and intervention in Dickinson's poem.

To shed light on these conflicts, this study uses a dual methodology that combines socio-cognitive and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). While socio-cognitive analysis looks at how discourse reflects and shapes mental models, the cognitive structures people employ to understand reality, CDA studies how language creates and sustains power relations. This essay shows how Dickinson's poem is both an artistic expression and a nuanced critique of human-centered ideology by fusing these viewpoints.

2. Literature Review

Emily Dickinson's poetry has long been praised for its nuanced and insightful depictions of nature, which frequently reveal philosophical and psychological truths (Vendler, 2010). Poems such as "The Bird Came Down the Walk" have historically been read by critics as poetic observations that emphasize introspection and aesthetic enjoyment (Johnson, 1955; Wagenknecht, 1986). These readings highlight the speaker's thoughtful engagement with the bird's behavior, focusing on meticulous attention to detail and the interaction between the natural world and human perception.

Nonetheless, Dickinson's writings are increasingly being studied via ecological and post-anthropocentric frameworks in modern studies. Her nature poetry, according to critics, challenges human-centered power over nonhuman existence in addition to reflecting observation (Buell, 2005; Heise, 2008). For instance, the poem's birds' independent actions cast doubt on presumptions of human dominance and moral superiority, implying a nuanced criticism of anthropocentrism. Dickinson is positioned as an early voice challenging hierarchical human-nature connections in this ecological reading.

Despite this increasing interest, research on how Dickinson's poetry's language and cognitive techniques create these criticisms of anthropocentrism is noticeably lacking. Few studies integrate rigorous linguistic analysis with cognitive frameworks to show how human perception, moral judgment, and ideological presumptions are inscribed in her poetry; instead of focusing on thematic or symbolic readings.

The link between language, ideology, and power in a variety of textual forms has been extensively studied using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1998). In literary texts where ideology is deeply ingrained in poetic diction, syntax, and metaphor, CDA helps scholars understand how language produces authority, domination, and normative assumptions (Gee, 2011).

CDA has been used in literary studies to analyze social hierarchies and ideological conflict in texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). According to Dickinson, CDA can show how human-centered mental models and ethical presumptions are reflected in the speaker's account of the bird's activities, and how the bird's independent conduct challenges these presumptions. Nevertheless, there are still a few studies that combine linguistic, social, and cognitive viewpoints to methodically examine Dickinson's poetry, and CDA applications in Dickinson scholarship are still scarce.

The importance of mental models in influencing perception, interpretation, and discourse is highlighted by Van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework (van Dijk, 1998). Literary works convey latent ideological presumptions and offer insights into the mental models of both the speaker and the reader. Socio-cognitive study of

Dickinson can reveal how the speaker negotiates human power over nonhuman life, interprets the bird's actions, and encodes moral judgment (Zhou, 2018).

Previous studies demonstrate the value of socio-cognitive methods for comprehending metaphor and narrative in poetry (Kuhn, 2014). However, studies that combine CDA and socio-cognitive analysis with Dickinson's nature poetry are lacking, particularly in pieces like "The Bird Came Down the Walk," which contrasts ecological criticism, moral assessment, and observation. By filling this gap, we can see how her portrayal of human-nonhuman relations combines language, cognition, and ideology.

2.1. Gap in Literature

Dickinson's poetry has been studied in great detail for its ecological concerns, psychological depth, and thematic diversity, yet contemporary research often overlooks the relationship among language, ideology, and cognition.

In particular:

- Little research has been done on how Dickinson's poetry subverts anthropocentric presumptions through language choices (metaphor, syntax, and diction).
- Few studies examine changes in the speaker's mental models and the ideological ramifications of interactions with nature using integrated CDA and socio-cognitive frameworks. Without a thorough examination of how speech creates power and ethical conflicts, most ecological readings remain symbolic or thematic.

In order to fill in these gaps, this study combines socio-cognitive methods with Critical Discourse Analysis to offer a thorough line-by-line analysis of "The Bird Came Down the Walk," showing how Dickinson challenges human authority and moral dominance over animal life.

3. Theoretical Framework

Emily Dickinson's "The Bird Came Down the Walk" is analyzed using a dual theoretical approach that combines van Dijk's socio-cognitive model with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This combination enables a thorough analysis of the poem's language devices as well as the mental processes influencing ideology and human perception.

3.1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

A methodological approach called critical discourse analysis looks at the relationship between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1992). According to CDA, discourse simultaneously reflects and reproduces social structures and beliefs, making it non-neutral. A methodical approach to examining textual, discursive, and social levels of meaning is offered by Fairclough's threedimensional framework:

- **Textual Analysis:**

The language of the text itself, including vocabulary, syntax, metaphors, and rhetorical devices, is the center of this dimension. Textual analysis of Dickinson's poem enables us to recognize the ways in which language choices express moral judgment, authority, and surveillance. Verbs like "bit," "hopped," and "rowed," for example, include meanings of autonomy, resistance, and ethical relevance in addition to describing the bird's behaviors.

- **Discursive Practice:**

This component looks at the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of literature. Dickinson's poetry, which was composed in private letters and then released after her death, captures both her personal observations of nature and the prevailing cultural views of human dominance over the nonhuman world. The poem's ideological implications are highlighted by placing it within historical and social contexts through an understanding of discursive practice.

- **Social Practice:**

This dimension links discursive and textual elements to more general societal norms and institutions. The poem challenges presumptions about human moral and cognitive superiority and can be interpreted through social practice analysis as a critique of anthropocentric ideology. The bird's eventual escape and the speaker's attempts to change its behavior serve as a metaphor for the boundaries of human knowledge and power.

This study examines how Dickinson's poetry discourse creates, challenges, and negotiates power relations between humans and nonhumans using CDA, exposing the ideological foundations of ostensibly straightforward nature images.

3.2. Socio-Cognitive Model

According to Van Dijk's socio-cognitive paradigm, interpretation, discourse, and ideology are shaped by mental models, or internal cognitive representations of reality (van Dijk, 1998). People's perceptions of events, moral judgments, and social hierarchies are all influenced by mental models. Sociocognitive analysis in literature looks at how implicit ideas, expectations, and ideologies are reflected in a narrator's or speaker's mental models and how readers are encouraged to accept or reject these viewpoints.

The socio-cognitive model aids in the following analysis of Dickinson's poem:

- **Speaker's Mental Models:** At first, the speaker frames the bird's behavior in terms of human comprehension, morality, and possible intervention through an anthropocentric lens. The speaker's conviction in human dominance over the natural world is evident in these presumptions.
- **Shifts in Cognitive Representation:** The speaker's mental model must be reevaluated in light of the bird's autonomous behavior, predation, cautious movements, and eventual flight, which highlights the limitations of human moral and epistemic authority.
- **Ideological Implications:** The research highlights ethical and epistemological conflicts between human and nonhuman agency by tracking these cognitive changes and identifying implicit criticisms of human-centered knowledge and moral judgment.

By connecting language patterns to cognitive and ideological processes, the sociocognitive model thus enhances CDA by offering a deeper comprehension of how Dickinson's poetry encodes criticisms of anthropocentrism.

3.3. Integration of CDA and Socio-Cognitive Approaches

A multi-layered examination of Dickinson's poem is made possible by the combination of CDA and sociocognitive analysis. The socio-cognitive model describes how linguistic and discursive mechanisms of power and ideology create and reflect mental representations and belief systems, while CDA identifies these mechanisms. A thorough analysis of:

- 1) How does the speaker's language convey anthropocentric presumptions and moral judgments is made possible by this integration?
- 2) How the ethical and epistemic boundaries of human authority are reflected in cognitive changes in perception.
- 3) How the poem challenges prevailing ideas about human–nonhuman connections while serving as both a literary piece and a forum for ideological discussion.

By using this combined approach, the study offers a methodical examination of speech, cognition, and ideology in "The Bird Came Down the Walk," going beyond merely thematic or symbolic readings of Dickinson's writing. This method closes a vacuum in Dickinson's study that seldom examines the relationship between language form, cognitive representation, and ecological critique.

4. Methodology

Using an integrated framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, this study uses a qualitative, interpretive methodology to evaluate Emily Dickinson's "The Bird Came Down the Walk." The method enables a methodical analysis of the poem's linguistic, cognitive, and ideological structures, demonstrating how Dickinson challenges anthropocentric presumptions and human-centered epistemic authority.

4.1. Research Design

Textual examination and cognitive analysis were combined in a descriptive-interpretive design. This arrangement makes it easier to analyze the poem line by line, capturing both macro-level ideological and cognitive processes and micro-level language elements. In line with qualitative approaches in literary and discourse research, the study prioritizes meaning-making, perception, and ideology over quantitative measurements (Creswell, 2013). Because it enables the examination of:

- The complex interaction of diction, grammar, and metaphor in expressing human-nature dynamics, this design is especially appropriate for Dickinson's poetry.
- The text's discursive construction of paternalism, authority, and surveillance.
- The ethical and cognitive conflicts resulting from the speaker's mental models and how the bird's autonomy disrupts them.

4.2. Data Source

- Dickinson's poem "The Bird Came Down the Walk," included in Johnson's 1955 collection of all her poems, serves as the main text. The poem was chosen because it richly depicts the human-nonhuman connection.
- The ability to illustrate changes in perception and moral assessment, which is crucial for socio-cognitive analysis.
- The use of metaphors of violence, paternalism, and flight which are fundamental to investigating ideological critique.
- Scholarly publications on CDA, sociocognitive theory, eco-criticism, and Dickinson scholarship are examples of secondary sources that offer theoretical support and analytical instruments.

4.3. Analytical Procedures

CDA is in line with sociocognitive theory through the use of a four-stage integrative procedure in the analysis:

4.3.1. Textual Analysis (CDA)

- The poem is analyzed line by line using Fairclough's (1992) textual dimension to find:
- Lexical and syntactic elements that convey moral judgment and human-centered authority.
- The conflict between human control and nonhuman autonomy is indicated by metaphors of violence, surveillance, paternalism, and flight. Prosodic features and narrative structure also influence reader perception and reveal the speaker's evolving cognitive stance.
- This phase highlights how the poem's linguistic devices operationalize ideology.

4.3.2. Discursive and Social Analysis (CDA)

The book is placed in historical, cultural, and ideological settings by the discursive and social practice parts, which look at:

- 19th-century moral and epistemic presumptions about human dominance over nature.
- How the text reflects and slightly confronts anthropocentric discourses, illustrating the instability of human-centered epistemology.
- The speaker-bird relationship as a site of ideological negotiation and cognitive conflict.

4.3.3. Cognitive Analysis (Socio-Cognitive Model)

Using van Dijk's sociocognitive framework, the research reveals:

- The speaker's initial mental models, which encode human authority, moral assessment, and bird monitoring.
- Ideological ramifications of these changes, which illustrate the poem's criticism of anthropocentric presumptions and human-centered moral hierarchies.
- Cognitive changes brought about by the bird's independent activity, which reveal the boundaries of human understanding and ethical oversight.

4.3.4. Integrated CDA and Socio-Cognitive Analysis

The last phase combines knowledge from socio-cognitive theory and CDA to show:

- Links between language and cognition, demonstrating how discourse influences moral reasoning and perception.
- The poem's role as a place of ethical and cognitive negotiation, revealing the frailty of human-centered belief systems.
- Mechanisms of ideological critique, where metaphors, diction, and syntax undermine presumptions of human dominance.

5. Analysis and Findings

Using van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework (1998) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992), this section offers a critical, integrated analysis of Emily Dickinson's "The Bird Came Down the Walk." The objective is to shed light on how anthropocentric ideology is constructed, negotiated, and contested through language choices, narrative perspective, and cognitive representations. The analysis is structured as a close reading of each sentence, followed by an integrated discussion and thematic synthesis.

5.1. Line-by-Line Integrated Analysis

Line 1-2: "The Bird Came Down the Walk -/ He did not know I saw-"

- **CDA Analysis:** By presenting the speaker as an observer with presumptive moral and epistemic authority, these sentences create a discursive asymmetry. The dash marks the distinction between animal behavior and human intellect by creating a syntactic pause. From a linguistic perspective, the verb "came down" signals early anthropocentrism by imposing a quasi-human intentionality on the bird.
- **Socio-Cognitive Analysis:** Initially, the speaker's mental model represents a conviction in human dominance and superiority. A culturally mediated anthropocentric ideology is reflected in the idea of the bird as a knowable, surveilable being.
- **Interpretation:** Dickinson creates a conflict between observation and the bird's own agency by emphasizing human perception as interpretive and possibly invasive.
- Line 3-4: "He bit an angle-worm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw,"
- **CDA Analysis:** By comparing human moral demands with natural predation, the linguistic alternatives "bit" and "ate" convey violence. The humorous humanization of the worm as a "fellow" highlights the ideological projection of human morality onto nonhuman action, problematizing ethical judgment.
- **Socio-Cognitive Analysis:** The speaker's mental model reveals anthropocentric cognitive bias by interpreting predation as morally problematic. A minor cognitive dissonance is caused by the bird's actions, which operate outside of human moral limitations.

Interpretation: Dickinson exposes the shortcomings of anthropocentric thinking by criticizing the notion that human morality is superior.

Line 5-6: "He glanced with rapid eyes / That hurried all abroad--"

- **CDA Analysis:** Both the phrase "hurried all abroad" and the adverb "rapid" convey freedom and awareness. These lexical and syntactic components indicate the bird's autonomous agency by signifying alertness without submission.
- **Socio-Cognitive Analysis:** The speaker's mental model is put to the test when the bird's independent perceptual abilities are acknowledged. The bird demonstrates cognitive recalibration in reaction to nonhuman agency since it can no longer be fully understood through a human epistemic lens.

Interpretation: The anthropocentric belief that humans are capable of fully seeing, understanding, and controlling nature is undermined by the bird's alertness.

Line 7-10: "And he unrolled his feathers / And rowed him softer home -- / Than oars divide the ocean, / Too silver for a seam--"

- **CDA Analysis:** Rowing is a symbol for easy independence and graceful beauty. The bird's movement, which defies human observation and control, becomes a conceptual emblem of freedom. The images of "oars" and "ocean" highlight the difference between human imposition and nonhuman self-determination by contrasting natural, easy movement with human tools.
- **Socio-Cognitive Analysis:** By recognizing the bird's autonomous agency, the speaker's mental model gradually undergoes an epistemic transformation. The notion of human superiority is challenged by the cognitive knowledge that nature functions according to its own principles.

Interpretation: Dickinson illustrates the inadequacy of human-centered cognition in understanding nonhuman behavior by using metaphor to express ethical and epistemic humility.

Line 11-14: "And he did not know I saw--/Or if he knew; he did not care."

- **CDA Analysis:** The surveillance theme is repeated, emphasizing human-centered observation, while the bird's apathy subverts the dominance narrative. The speaker's changing view and cognitive confusion are highlighted by parallel syntactic patterns.
- **Socio-Cognitive Analysis:** By recognizing that nonhuman agency functions independently of human assessment, the speaker demonstrates epistemic humility. This is a complete restructuring of mental models in which control is no longer implied by observation.

Interpretation: The bird's apathy signifies the moral and intellectual boundaries of human-centered knowledge and represents opposition to anthropocentric ideology.

5.2. Thematic Synthesis

The line-by-line examination reveals several connected themes:

- **Anthropocentric Surveillance and Moral Judgment:** The speaker's ethical and cognitive frameworks presuming human dominance over nonhuman creatures are evident in the opening sentences.
- **Nature's Autonomous Agency:** The bird's flight and predatory actions symbolize nonhuman agency, undermining human epistemic authority.
- **Metaphors as Ideological Tools:** Dickinson negotiates the conflict between human control and nonhuman freedom by using metaphors of violence, paternalism, and flight.
- **Cognitive Transformation:** Van Dijk's concept of dynamic cognitive representations is demonstrated by the speaker's mental models, which go from dominance and moral assessment to recognition of autonomy.
- **Ideological Criticism of Anthropocentrism:** When taken as a whole, linguistic, discursive, and cognitive elements express a persistent criticism of human-centered ethical and epistemic presumptions.

5.3. Integrated CDA and Socio-Cognitive Insights

New insights are produced when CDA and sociocognitive analysis are combined:

- **Language encodes ideology:** Dickinson subverts anthropocentric presumptions through her diction, syntax, and metaphorical constructions.
- **Cognition mediates perception:** The speaker's mental models show how cognitive processes, such as the identification of ethical and epistemic boundaries, influence ideological comprehension.
- **Text as ideological negotiation:** The poem serves as a discursive and cognitive site of negotiation where nonhuman autonomy is affirmed, and human-centered authority is questioned.
- **Theoretical contribution:** This approach shows that literary works can be viewed as intricate discursive and cognitive systems that connect language, perception, and ideology.

5.4. Findings

Dickinson uses lexical, syntactic, and metaphorical techniques to create tension between human observation and nonhuman autonomy. The speaker's mental models indicate dynamic cognitive processes as they transition from anthropocentric authority to epistemic humility.

- The ethical and epistemological boundaries of human perception are articulated through violence, paternalism, and flight metaphors.
- A multifaceted explanation of literary ideology, cognition, and ecological critique is provided by integrating CDA and sociocognitive frameworks.
- The poem demonstrates how poetic form and language can challenge societal presumptions about human dominion over nature. It is an example of a subtle but persistent ideological critique.

6. Discussion

The results of this study show how Emily Dickinson's "The Bird Came Down the Walk" functions as an ideological critique as well as a literary artifact, exposing the relationship between language, cognition, and culture. The conversation discusses these observations in the context of van Dijk's socio-cognitive model and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), showing how Dickinson questions moral frameworks and human-centered epistemologies.

6.1. Conceptualizing Human–Nonhuman Relations

Dickinson's poetry consistently challenges anthropocentric presumptions, according to the research. First, in line with prevailing human-nature philosophies of the 19th century, the speaker's mental models present the bird as a knowable, surveillable thing (Buell, 2005). The poem highlights the bird's independent agency while exposing the limitations of human power through symbols of violence, paternalism, and flight.

From a sociocognitive standpoint, this change is an example of dynamic cognitive representation, in which prior mental representations are undermined by direct observation. The speaker and, thus, the reader are forced to reevaluate human epistemic and moral superiority due to the bird's predatory conduct and autonomous flying. This supports the claim made by van Dijk (1998) that mental models govern how social and natural phenomena are perceived and interpreted, emphasizing the ideological ramifications of cognition.

6.2. Linguistic Strategies and Ideological Critique

Dickinson uses metaphor, grammatical structure, and lexical choice to encode and challenge anthropocentric ideology, according to CDA. For example:

- The verbs "bit" and "ate" emphasize natural processes beyond human moral control and evoke violence.

- Repetition and parallel syntactic patterns highlight the speaker's changing view, suggesting epistemic negotiation; phrases like "rowed him softer home" and "too silver for a seam" communicate aesthetic autonomy, positioning the bird as an agency rather than an object of human study.

These linguistic techniques serve as both artistic and ideological mediation tools, demonstrating the interaction of language, cognition, and cultural presumptions (Fairclough, 1992).

6.3. Cognitive Dynamics and Shifting Mental Models

The analysis shows that Dickinson's poem is a prime example of cognitive negotiation. As the bird's actions demonstrate autonomy and self-directed agency, the speaker's original anthropocentric mental model progressively becomes unstable. This cognitive shift highlights the limitations of human knowledge and moral judgment by highlighting the need to acknowledge the distinct perceptual and behavioral frameworks of nonhuman beings to understand them.

Literature can serve as a mediator of ethical and cognitive reflection, according to the socio-cognitive approach, which demonstrates how poetic narrative forms encourage changes in mental models and subvert ingrained views. Dickinson skillfully blends aesthetic experience with ideological critique through her meticulous attention to metaphorical, syntactic, and prosodic detail, which enables readers to understand the epistemic limitations of human-centered perception.

6.4. Implications for Literary Discourse Analysis

This study broadens the field of literary analysis in several ways by combining CDA with socio-cognitive theory:

1. **Multi-layered Interpretation:** The approach shows how language, cognition, and ideology interact in literary texts, going beyond simply thematic or symbolic readings.
2. **Ideological Awareness:** The study shows that even seemingly straightforward nature poetry can include intricate criticisms of cultural presumptions, especially anthropocentrism.
3. **Cognitive Insight:** The socio-cognitive paradigm provides a framework for upcoming eco-critical and cognitive literary studies by highlighting the dynamic mental processes via which humans perceive and misinterpret nonhuman agency.
4. **Methodological Contribution:** By linking language analysis, perception, and ideology, the combined CDA + socio-cognitive approach provides a methodical way to analyze literary works as discursive and cognitive systems.

7. Conclusion

Instead of viewing Emily Dickinson's "The Bird Came Down the Walk" as solely a nature song, this study reinterprets it as a vital location of ideological, ethical, and cognitive struggle. The study shows how Dickinson:

- Exposes the limitations of anthropocentric cognition and moral judgment using an integrated CDA and socio-cognitive framework. □ Constructs a subtle yet ubiquitous critique of human dominance over animal existence through metaphor, grammar, and diction.
- Shows how human perception and ethical reasoning are constantly mediated by interactions with autonomous nonhuman creatures, demonstrating the dynamic nature of mental models.

The study contributes to literary scholarship by:

- a) Adding poetic and eco-critical analysis to CDA applications.
- b) Showcasing the importance of sociocognitive methods for deciphering literary ideological negotiation and mental models.
- c) Emphasizing how literary works can provide insights pertinent to environmental humanities by mediating ethical inquiry on human-nature connections.

Future studies could examine how discourse, ideology, and cognition interact across genres, eras, and cultural settings by using this integrated paradigm to other Dickinson poems or comparative eco-literature. By doing this, academics can keep shedding light on how literature serves as a medium for critical analysis of human epistemic, moral, and ideological presumptions.

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