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Intertextual Intelligence: A Content Analysis of ChatGPT's Literary References in the Interpretation of Classic Poems for EFL Literature Education

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Abstract: This study examines how ChatGPT uses references to other literary works when interpreting classic poems and assesses its usefulness in teaching English literature to students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Using a qualitative method called directed content analysis, the research analyzed ChatGPT's responses to three well-known poems: Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Robert Frost's The Road Not Taken, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's Ozymandias. The analysis focused on four main areas: (1) identifying poetic elements like imagery, word choice, structure, and symbolism; (2) exploring connections to other texts through references, imitations, or changes; (3) evaluating how ChatGPT's responses could help in EFL classrooms by providing interactive feedback and encouraging discussion; and (4) considering the limitations of ChatGPT's interpretations. The findings show that ChatGPT effectively identifies key poetic features and draws meaningful connections to other literary works. Its responses can serve as helpful examples for close reading and support literature discussions in EFL settings, aiding students in developing critical thinking and expanding their literary vocabulary. However, ChatGPT often presents a single, fixed interpretation, highlighting the need for teachers to guide students toward considering multiple perspectives. In conclusion, ChatGPT has significant potential as a teaching tool for EFL literature classes, especially in supporting the analysis of literary connections, provided that educators facilitate critical discussions and encourage diverse interpretations.

Keywords: *intertextuality; artificial intelligence (ai); chatgpt; classic poetry*

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Introduction

Poetry plays a unique role in literature education because it introduces learners to rich, concentrated language and invites them to explore deeper meanings behind words and images. When students engage with verse, they practice interpreting metaphors, rhythms, and sound patterns, which can enhance their overall language proficiency (Mermelstein, 2022). Moreover, poetry often presents complex ideas in a compact form, making it an effective genre for developing critical thinking skills in EFL contexts (Mermelstein, 2022).

A central concept in poetry is intertextuality, which refers to the ways in which texts reference, echo, or transform other texts. As Simpson (2017) explains, intertextuality creates a "dialogue" between

works, allowing readers to see how themes, motifs, or phrases travel across time and authors. Jones (2019) further argues that teaching students to recognize these connections deepens their interpretive skills by helping them understand a poem not just on its own terms, but as part of a larger literary conversation.

Teachers frequently choose canonical poems like Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, and Shelley's *Ozymandias* for their rich imagery and profound thematic depth. Brown (2020) notes that classic works tend to contain numerous allusions and intertextual echoes, which make them ideal for classroom comparison and discussion. In EFL classrooms, guiding students through these intertextual threads can boost both their vocabulary and their confidence in engaging with challenging literature (Brown, 2020).

In recent years, educators have begun exploring artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT as virtual aids in literature study. Lee (2023) highlights that AI is capable of providing immediate feedback on literary devices such as metaphor, symbolism, and structure, and it can even suggest parallels to other texts. Alhammad (2024) found that ChatGPT's interactive prompts helped Saudi EFL learners engage more actively with poetry, though the study did not examine how the AI's suggestions drew on intertextual connections. These findings hint at AI's pedagogical promise but leave open questions about the depth and nature of its literary awareness.

Despite growing interest in AI-assisted reading, we still lack a clear picture of how ChatGPT actually uses intertextual references when interpreting poetry. Does it recognize the same literary allusions that human teachers emphasize? Can its intertextual insights support EFL learners in developing nuanced interpretations? To address these questions, the present study applies a directed content analysis to ChatGPT's responses to three canonical poems, aiming to map its intertextual referencing strategies and evaluate their potential for enhancing literature education in EFL settings.

Research Method

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using directed content analysis to examine how ChatGPT interprets classic poems through intertextual references and how such interpretations can be applied in EFL literature education (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analysis was guided by intertextuality theory (Genette, 1997) and literary interpretation frameworks relevant to EFL contexts.

2. Participants

The primary data source was ChatGPT (GPT 4 version), accessed via OpenAI's official platform. To enrich pedagogical evaluation, a small group of English literature undergraduates reviewed ChatGPT's outputs and provided written reflections. Their involvement aligns with participatory action research principles, where stakeholders contribute to interpreting and validating findings (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

3. Instruments

A standardized set of prompts was developed to elicit ChatGPT's interpretations of three canonical poems: Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, and Shelley's *Ozymandias*. The prompts focused on three core areas: (a) identification of poetic elements—imagery, diction, structure, and symbolism—guided by traditional close reading frameworks (Iser, 1978); (b) intertextual connections—such as allusions, imitations, or transformations; and (c) potential classroom applications

in line with communicative language teaching, which values authentic, meaningful interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

4. Data Collection

Data were collected in February 2025. ChatGPT was prompted sequentially with the pre-designed questions for each poem, and the resulting outputs were saved as text files. To prevent bias from previous interactions, each session was reset before prompting a new poem. In addition, participating students were instructed to use the same prompts to engage with ChatGPT and record their interpretations and intertextual findings. Their responses and reflections were collected through written summaries and brief feedback forms to understand how ChatGPT influenced their ability to identify literary references.

5. Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed ChatGPT's responses through close reading and thematic reflection (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Iser, 1978). Key elements were identified based on their relevance to the study's focus: how poetic techniques were interpreted, how intertextual links were constructed, and how the content could be integrated into EFL teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The students' feedback was used to support and complement the researcher's interpretation, helping to assess the strengths and limitations of ChatGPT's literary responses from both a theoretical and user perspective.

Results & Discussion

This research identifies key poetic elements, including imagery that engages the senses, word choice rich in connotation, formal structure and meter that shape the poem's rhythm, and symbolism that conveys deeper meanings; it then traces intertextual connections through references, imitations, or adaptations of themes and images from earlier works; next, it evaluates how ChatGPT's responses can support EFL classrooms by offering interactive feedback that prompts discussion and heightens students' critical awareness of poetic craft; and finally, it considers the limitations of ChatGPT's interpretations, such as their occasional omission of cultural or historical nuance and their tendency toward surface-level readings, to present a balanced perspective on AI-assisted literary analysis and language teaching.

1. Poetic elements

In this study, data were generated through targeted queries to ChatGPT. The initial analysis concentrated on the identification of poetic elements, including imagery, diction, structure, and symbolism, within three canonical poems: Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias*. The findings demonstrate that ChatGPT can identify these elements with both accuracy and interpretive depth.

2. Imagery

Imagery is the use of language that evokes sensory impressions in the minds of readers—including visual (sight), auditory (hearing), tactile (touch), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), and kinesthetic or organic (movement or internal sensations)—and it enables readers to see or feel what is being expressed in the poem (Perrine, 1992). In analyzing one of the poems to identify imagery in Sonnet 18, ChatGPT stated:

Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 opens with vivid natural imagery, comparing the beloved to a summer's day. The speaker evokes the warmth and brightness of summer—"Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May" and "Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines"—to paint a picture of a fleeting season. This seasonal imagery sets up a contrast between nature's impermanence and the enduring beauty of the subject. The poet's descriptions create a sensory experience that allows readers to feel the instability of natural beauty, while implying the subject's loveliness surpasses and outlasts nature. The final image, "eternal lines to time," transforms the lover's beauty into something timeless, immortalized through verse.

Drawing from the results above, ChatGPT effectively captures the sensory richness of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18: by foregrounding the "brightness of summer" alongside other vivid natural details, the model recreates how the poem evokes both visual and tactile sensations. This demonstration of ChatGPT's capacity to recognize imagery that allows readers to experience the transience of nature supports the argument that AI can accurately map sensory language onto poetic intent.

3. Diction

Diction or word choice refers to the poet's selection and arrangement of words to establish tone, mood, and meaning, encompassing register such as formal versus informal language, connotation or emotional associations, and the degree of simplicity or complexity (Abrams, 1999; Perrine, 1992). In its analysis of *The Road Not Taken* to identify diction, ChatGPT stated:

Frost's diction is simple, colloquial, and reflective, lending the poem a conversational tone. Words like "traveler," "looked down," and "perhaps" contribute to the introspective mood, while phrases such as "way leads on to way" suggest an almost resigned tone regarding the permanence of decisions. The use of words like "difference" and "sigh" in the final stanza hints at ambiguity—whether that difference is positive or regretful remains unclear. Frost's choice of everyday vocabulary allows the poem to resonate broadly while subtly carrying philosophical depth.

As indicated by the above results, in Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, ChatGPT notes Frost's use of simple colloquial vocabulary such as "traveler," "looked down," and "perhaps" to create a reflective conversational tone. The model also highlights the layered connotations of words like "difference" and "sigh," showing how ordinary language conveys nuanced emotional resonance. This demonstrates its sensitivity to register and connotation and its potential to illustrate how word choice shapes mood and meaning in poetry.

4. Structure

Structure in poetry refers to the way a poet arranges formal elements such as the number of lines, rhyme scheme, meter, stanza division, and narrative or framing techniques. Structure shapes the poem's progression, reinforces its themes, and guides the reader's emotional response through the patterns and expectations it establishes (Abrams, 1999; Cuddon, 2013). In analyzing one of the poems to identify structure in *Ozymandias*, ChatGPT stated:

The poem is a 14-line sonnet, but it doesn't strictly follow either the Petrarchan or Shakespearean form. Instead, it blends them with a rhyme scheme of ABABACDCEDEFEF. This hybrid form may reflect the poem's thematic tension between order (human-made structures, like sonnets and statues) and chaos (the decay of time). Shelley frames the story as a narrative within a narrative: a speaker recounts the tale told by a traveler, which adds to the sense of temporal and geographic distance. The compact

form mirrors the compressed irony of the poem, encapsulating vast themes—impermanence, power, and time—within a tightly structured piece.

Based on the results presented above, in its analysis of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias*, ChatGPT observes that the poem employs a sonnet form combining Petrarchan and Shakespearean rhyme schemes in the pattern ABABACDCEDFEF and uses a narrative framing device in which a traveler recounts what he has seen. These formal features create both temporal and spatial distance and underscore the thematic concerns of impermanence and the transient nature of power.

5. Symbolism

The final element is symbolism, which requires ChatGPT to interpret each poem holistically and determine the symbols it employs. Symbolism is a literary technique in which objects, characters, or events represent broader meanings, often related to abstract concepts, values, or universal themes (Abrams, 1999). In its analysis, ChatGPT identifies the following symbols in each work. For Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*, it observes that "Summer serves as a central symbol in *Sonnet 18*, representing natural beauty, vibrancy, and the transient nature of life." In Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, it notes that "the diverging roads symbolize life choices; though set in a literal forest, the 'two roads' represent the metaphorical forks we face throughout life." In Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias*, it states that "the statue of *Ozymandias* symbolizes the transient nature of political power and human pride." These interpretations align closely with each poem's thematic concerns and formal structure, supporting an academically sound analysis of symbolism (Cuddon, 2012).

In conclusion, ChatGPT's symbolic readings of these three canonical poems reveal how each work uses concrete imagery to convey universal truths: in *Sonnet 18*, summer's fleeting warmth embodies the ephemerality of beauty; in *The Road Not Taken*, the forked paths stand for life's pivotal decisions; and in *Ozymandias*, the ruined statue encapsulates the inevitable decay of power and hubris. By situating these symbols within their respective formal frameworks—such as the sonnet's structured rhyme in Shakespeare, the conversational meter in Frost's lines, and the framed narrative in Shelley—ChatGPT demonstrates how symbolism and structure jointly reinforce each poem's thematic message. This integrative approach highlights the importance of close reading in revealing the layered meanings embedded in poetic craft.

6. Intertextual Analysis of *Sonnet 18*, *The Road Not Taken*, and *Ozymandias*

This study adopts the concept of intertextuality to explore how meaning in a literary work is shaped by its relationships with other texts. Building on Julia Kristeva's assertion that every text is a mosaic of quotations and remains inherently dialogic (Kristeva, 1980), Roland Barthes's portrayal of the text as a cultural archive of "tissue of quotations" (Barthes, 1977), and Gérard Genette's extension of these ideas into the comprehensive notion of transtextuality (Genette, 1997), we examine three canonical poems—Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* (1609), Frost's *The Road Not Taken* (1916), and Shelley's *Ozymandias* (1818)—as sites of ongoing dialogue through shared motifs and thematic resonances.

After providing ChatGPT with a prompt to identify intertextual connections in these poems, the analysis generated three principal themes. The first theme, *Time and Immortality*, considers how each poem confronts human efforts to transcend temporal limits. The second theme, *Memory and Identity*, highlights the ways in which recollection and selfhood are interwoven. The third theme, *Nature and Structural Resonance*, underscores the formal echoes each poem registers through its depiction of the

natural world. These findings suggest that, even without explicit quotation, the three works engage in a rich intertextual conversation.

7. Time and Immortality

At the start of its analysis, ChatGPT stated that in Sonnet 18 Shakespeare's speaker directly challenges nature's fleeting beauty by granting poetic immortality to the beloved. The poem's final line, "So long lives this, and this gives life to thee," declares that the verse itself will preserve the beloved forever. ChatGPT then illustrated this point with other lines from the sonnet. In contrast, it noted that in Shelley's *Ozymandias* time becomes a force of total destruction. The inscription "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" is immediately undercut by the surrounding ruin: "Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare." Finally, ChatGPT observed that Frost's *The Road Not Taken* offers a more balanced view, showing how our choices leave a lasting mark. In the closing stanza the speaker admits, "I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence," and concludes "I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference." The phrase "ages and ages hence" highlights the speaker's anticipation of his own future memory.

In its summary, ChatGPT concluded that these three poems create a conversational network: Shakespeare celebrates poetry's power to overcome time, Shelley portrays time's unrelenting decay, and Frost explores how life choices shape personal meaning across the years. By citing specific lines, ChatGPT demonstrates its ability to trace these intertextual connections and support each thematic point with direct evidence.

8. Memory and Identity

In this theme, ChatGPT notes that all three poems explore how memory shapes identity. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, the speaker preserves the beloved's identity through verse, promising that the subject will live on forever in the poem. In Shelley's *Ozymandias*, there is a powerful irony: the king declares "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings," yet today he is known only because Shelley's poem remains while the empire he boasted of has vanished. In Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, identity is linked to the choices we make. The line "I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference" shows that our self image is formed and remembered through key decisions. Just as with the time and immortality theme, ChatGPT first offers a general overview of how memory and identity operate across the three poems. It then supports each point with direct evidence from the lines of the texts.

The analysis of memory and identity reveals a shared concern among the poets with how art and personal choice preserve who we are. Shakespeare uses poetry itself as a vessel for remembrance, Shelley warns that without a story all power fades into obscurity, and Frost illustrates how our decisions define and recall our sense of self. This intertextual reading shows that memory and identity are deeply linked in literary tradition, offering a rich field for further study.

9. Nature and Structural Resonance

In identifying nature, ChatGPT noted that the natural imagery in all three poems highlights their shared themes. In Sonnet 18, Shakespeare's summer's day stands for fleeting beauty set against the permanence of poetry. In *The Road Not Taken*, Frost places his reflection in a yellow wood to symbolize life's crossroads and the shift of seasons. In *Ozymandias*, Shelley's description of a boundless and bare desert evokes decay and the ruin of human greatness. These natural scenes create a continuous thread: the cycles of life in Shakespeare and Frost contrasted with Shelley's empty landscape of decline.

For structure, ChatGPT explained that Sonnet 18 and Ozymandias use the sonnet form with tight rhyme schemes and concentrated philosophical statements. Frost's poem, by contrast, unfolds in a more relaxed narrative stanza pattern that highlights personal reflection and the passage of time. This difference in form underlines how each poem approaches its ideas—Shakespeare and Shelley deliver powerful monologue declarations, while Frost offers an intimate account of choice and memory.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that nature and structure serve as intertextual links among these three works. The poems share images of natural cycles and contrasting landscapes to explore themes of beauty, choice, and decay. Their varied forms—from dramatic monologue to reflective narrative—reinforce each poem's unique perspective while also binding them together in a larger poetic conversation.

10. EFL classroom' Feedback and Discussion

In the EFL classroom, students were first given a clear, step-by-step prompt to use ChatGPT for an intertextual analysis of three canonical poems—Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Frost's The Road Not Taken, and Shelley's Ozymandias. After working individually to generate and refine their analyses with the AI tool, they formed small groups to share and compare their findings. In these group discussions, each student presented whether they could follow ChatGPT's explanations, how accessible the generated insights felt, and what they perceived as the main advantages and limitations of relying on an AI for literary interpretation.

Overall, learners reported that ChatGPT's intertextual mapping was highly intelligible and scaffolded their understanding of complex poetic themes. Many noted that having concrete examples of shared motifs—such as time, memory, and life choices—made it easier to see the “conversation” between poems. At the same time, students pointed out that AI-generated analyses sometimes missed subtler poetic devices (for instance, meter and rhyme scheme) or offered overly generalized interpretations. These observations led to rich discussions: groups debated where human close reading still adds value, and where ChatGPT served best as a brainstorming partner rather than a definitive critic.

Several learners commented on their personal experience of integrating ChatGPT into this task:

“At first, I thought finding connections between different poems was very difficult. But when I used ChatGPT to help me understand intertextuality, it became much clearer. I learned that Sonnet 18, The Road Not Taken, and Ozymandias are actually connected because they all talk about time, memory, and life choices. ChatGPT explained the ideas in a way that was easy to follow and helped me see how poems can ‘talk’ to each other. I enjoyed discussing it with my friends because we found new meanings together and ChatGPT helped answer our questions quickly.”

and the second opinion:

“Using ChatGPT to study poems really helped me. Sometimes I find it hard to understand poems on my own, but ChatGPT gave me simple explanations and helped me compare the poems. I learned that Shakespeare wanted his love to live forever in his poem, but Shelley showed that power and great works can disappear with time. Frost taught me that our life choices are important. ChatGPT made it easier for me and my classmates to see how these poems are connected, and we had more interesting group discussions because of it.”

Through this exercise, feedback indicated that ChatGPT can effectively jump-start literary conversation and support collaborative learning. Yet students also recognized the necessity of teacher-led, nuanced analysis to address poetic subtleties that AI might overlook.

11. The Limitation of ChatGPT's Interpretations

While ChatGPT proved adept at identifying major poetic elements and tracing intertextual links among Sonnet 18, The Road Not Taken, and Ozymandias several important limitations emerged that must be acknowledged to maintain a balanced perspective on AI-assisted literary analysis:

12. Omission of Cultural and Historical Nuance

ChatGPT's analyses, though accurate in thematic mapping, sometimes overlooked the specific cultural or historical contexts that inform each poem's deeper resonance. For instance, its discussion of Sonnet 18 focused on universal images of nature and immortality but did not engage with early modern conventions of Petrarchan love poetry or the socio-political significance of patronage in Shakespeare's time (Greenblatt, 2012). Similarly, its reading of Ozymandias emphasized the universal theme of impermanence without fully addressing Shelley's critique of British imperialism and Romantic notions of individual ambition (Curran, 1993).

13. Tendency Toward Surface-Level Readings

The model often generated clear, generalized summaries of symbolism and diction but lacked the granularity of close reading that attends to subtle shifts in meter, enjambment, or wordplay. In Frost's The Road Not Taken, for example, ChatGPT noted the symbolic "diverging roads" but did not explore how Frost's use of anapestic meter or the poem's ambiguous punctuation contributes to its interpretive tension (Pritchard, 1994).

14. Overgeneralization and Risk of Hallucination

At times, ChatGPT filled gaps in its knowledge with plausible-sounding but unsupported claims—for example, attributing secondary allusions or hidden authorial intents that are not substantiated by the text or by established scholarship. Such overgeneralizations can mislead learners if not carefully checked against primary sources or instructor guidance (Bender et al., 2021; Marcus & Davis, 2020).

15. Dependence on Prompt Quality

The depth and accuracy of ChatGPT's output strongly correlated with how specific and well-structured the prompts were. Vague or overly broad queries yielded more generic responses, whereas precise, scaffolded prompts elicited richer analyses. This underscores the necessity of teaching students effective prompt design as part of AI literacy (Zou et al., 2023; Wing, 2021).

16. Limited Affective and Embodied Understanding

Finally, while ChatGPT can articulate thematic insights, it cannot replicate the embodied experience of reading poetry, such as the emotional rhythms, personal associations, and performative aspects that human readers bring to interpretation. Its feedback may therefore lack the affective dimension crucial for fully engaging with poetic texts (Nussbaum, 1997; Hayles, 2012).

Taken together, these limitations suggest that ChatGPT functions best as a supplementary tool in the EFL classroom—one that can generate initial ideas and scaffold discussion, but which ultimately requires teacher-led, nuanced close reading and contextual expertise to achieve a comprehensive literary analysis.

Conclusion

In sum, this study shows that ChatGPT is highly proficient at identifying core poetic elements—imagery, diction, structure, and symbolism—and at tracing meaningful intertextual connections among Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18, Robert Frost’s *The Road Not Taken*, and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Ozymandias*. It’s clear, scaffolded analyses of shared themes such as time, memory, and the natural world can effectively support close-reading activities in the EFL classroom. Students reported that AI-generated prompts made complex poetic ideas more accessible and enriched their peer discussions.

However, the AI’s focus on surface-level readings and occasional oversight of cultural, historical, and metrical details highlights the need for teacher guidance. Instructors should help learners design precise prompts, verify ChatGPT’s outputs against the original texts, and pursue deeper, affective interpretations that AI alone cannot provide. With this structured support, ChatGPT becomes a valuable auxiliary tool that enhances students’ critical thinking and literary vocabulary while preserving the human insight essential for nuanced analysis.

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