

When Algorithms Read Folklore: AI, Simulated Reception, and Cross-Cultural Studies of Literary Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

As artificial intelligence increasingly enters literary classrooms and digital humanities research, the question is no longer whether AI can produce interpretations, but whether it can meaningfully “read” culturally embedded texts. This study addresses a critical gap in AI-literature scholarship: limited attention has been given to AI-generated interpretation as a form of simulated reception, particularly in cross-cultural folklore contexts where meaning depends on emotion, moral judgment, and cultural situatedness. Grounded in reader-response and reception theory, this qualitative comparative study examines human and AI responses to four folktales: *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, *Timun Mas*, *Cinderella*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Data were drawn from 30 undergraduate students’ reader responses and AI-generated interpretations using the same interpretive prompts. The analysis focused on three dimensions: intellectual, emotional, and cultural interpretation. The findings show that human readers produced varied, affective, morally evaluative, and culturally grounded responses, while AI generated structurally coherent but consistently affirmative interpretations. AI responses displayed algorithmic positivity, emotional flattening, and cultural abstraction, especially when confronting moral ambiguity, gendered agency, suffering, punishment, and cross-cultural value conflict. The originality of this study lies in conceptualizing AI as a simulated reader rather than an interpretive subject and in showing how folklore exposes the cultural limits of algorithmic interpretation. The study contributes to literary education, reception theory, folklore studies, and digital humanities by positioning AI not as a replacement for human interpretation, but as a comparative artifact for developing critical AI literacy and culturally responsive literary pedagogy.

1. Introduction

What happens when a machine begins to “read” a story that was born from human memory, moral struggle, and cultural inheritance? This question has become increasingly urgent as artificial intelligence (AI), particularly large language models, becomes embedded in literary studies, digital humanities, education, and knowledge production. AI is now widely used to summarize texts, identify themes, generate interpretive commentary, support writing, and assist classroom-based literary analysis. In the humanities, this development has encouraged scholars to rethink the boundaries between computational analysis and humanistic interpretation. While AI offers speed, fluency, pattern recognition, and large-scale textual processing, its growing role also raises serious epistemological and ethical questions about what counts as interpretation, who or what may be considered a reader, and whether algorithmic outputs

can meaningfully participate in literary meaning-making (Bender et al., 2021; Birhane et al., 2021; McQuillan, 2022). These questions are especially significant in literary education, where reading is not only a cognitive act but also an affective, ethical, and culturally situated practice. Recent studies on AI in education further show that generative AI can support learning, feedback, and text engagement, but they also warn that its outputs must be critically evaluated rather than accepted as neutral or authoritative knowledge (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Holmes et al., 2019).

Folklore is not simply read but received through the histories, identities, emotions, and cultural assumptions that readers bring to a narrative. From reader-response and reception perspectives, literary meaning does not reside entirely within a text but emerges through a transaction between text and reader, mediated by experience, memory, culture, and history (Alghanem, 2020; Hansen, 2023; Soosaar, 2020).

Rosenblatt's transactional view describes literary meaning as a co-production arising from the lived encounter between reader and text, while Iser's implied reader emphasizes the active role of readers in filling textual gaps through imagination and inference (Alghanem, 2020; Nóbrega & Azerêdo, 2019). Reception theory similarly maintains that readers approach texts through historically and culturally shaped horizons, making interpretation plural and context dependent (Hansen, 2023; Nóbrega & Azerêdo, 2019; Soosaar, 2020). Interpretation therefore involves more than linguistic coherence; it requires affective engagement, moral evaluation, cultural knowledge, and sensitivity to ambiguity. AI-generated interpretation, in contrast, is produced without embodied experience, personal memory, emotional consciousness, or membership in the cultural communities from which folklore emerges. Even when AI generates fluent commentary, its output may simulate reception rather than enact it, as readers continue to distinguish human and AI-generated narratives in terms of agency, creativity, and interpretive depth (Reed et al., 2025).

Scholarship on AI in literary and cultural studies has expanded rapidly, yet much of it emphasizes computational affordances rather than the epistemological and cultural limits of algorithmic interpretation. Digital humanities research has employed stylometry, authorship attribution, sentiment analysis, topic modelling, and large-scale textual analysis to identify patterns that may not be readily visible through conventional close reading (Herrmann et al., 2022; Iwai & Okada, 2025; Omar, 2021). These methods support distant reading and can enrich close interpretation when their assumptions and limitations are critically considered (Eve, 2022). Applications to Arabic lyrics, Mallarmé's poetry, Hadith-related texts, and other literary materials demonstrate both their analytical versatility and their dependence on careful decisions regarding data, modelling, and interpretive scope (Iwai & Okada, 2025; Omar, 2021; Zadeh, 2023). More recent studies have examined generative AI and large language models for producing summaries, thematic explanations, critical responses, and pedagogical materials (McQuillan, 2022). Nevertheless, reproducing recognizable patterns of literary criticism does not necessarily demonstrate interpretive understanding. Large language models generate responses through statistical relationships in training data rather than consciousness, intention, cultural participation, or lived experience (Bender et al., 2021; Birhane et al., 2021). Their outputs may also reproduce dominant assumptions, stereotypes, and normative values embedded in datasets, annotation practices, and alignment procedures (Blodgett et al., 2020; Messner et al., 2025). Existing studies thus provide substantial evidence of AI's analytical fluency but less insight into how it handles texts whose meanings depend on culturally specific emotions, ethical tensions, and collective memories.

This limitation becomes especially visible in folklore, which functions not merely as entertainment but as a cultural archive transmitting moral expectations, social identities, collective memories, and assumptions about justice, gender, family, authority, and belonging (Danandjaja, 2007; Dundes, 2007). Folktales such as *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, *Timun Mas*, *Cinderella*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk* contain recognizable narrative structures, yet their moral meanings are neither neutral nor universal. Readers may interpret patience as moral strength or troubling passivity, punishment as justice or excessive cruelty, and heroic action as courage or ethically questionable violence. Such responses depend on cultural familiarity, emotional investment, personal experience, and readers' willingness to accept, resist, or renegotiate textual values (Felski, 2020). AI may instead convert these tensions into generalized lessons about kindness, perseverance, resilience, justice, or courage, reducing moral contradiction and cultural difference to stable conclusions. Emerging research indicates that language models can encode cultural practices while reproducing bias and homogenizing narrative interpretations (Liu et al., 2026; Supardjo et al., 2020; Wandera, 2024). Studies of AI-generated children's stories have identified culturally skewed tropes, while folklore research emphasizes the need for theory-driven evaluation of the moral and cultural values embedded in traditional narratives (Supardjo et al., 2020; Wandera, 2024). Ethical governance scholarship also warns that algorithmic systems may displace human responsibility when their outputs are presented as objective judgments (Radanliev, 2026). The central gap, therefore, is not whether AI can produce coherent interpretations of folklore, but whether its output can represent culturally situated reception involving emotional vulnerability, moral uncertainty, cultural belonging, and interpretive accountability.

Addressing this interdisciplinary gap, the present study positions AI not as an equivalent human reader but as a simulated reader whose outputs can be compared with human responses to reveal the cultural and epistemological boundaries of algorithmic interpretation. Its novelty lies in integrating reader-response theory, reception theory, folklore studies, critical AI scholarship, and literary education within one comparative framework. Rather than evaluating AI primarily through accuracy, efficiency, or linguistic fluency, the study treats divergence between human and AI responses as theoretically significant evidence about how literary meaning is produced. It also develops the concept of algorithmic positivity, defined as AI's tendency to generate affirmative, harmonious, morally generalized, and conflict-minimizing interpretations even when narratives involve violence, suffering, injustice, gendered constraints, or culturally contested punishment. This tendency is considered alongside emotional flattening and cultural abstraction, through which ethically complex experiences may be

converted into conventional moral lessons. These concepts extend broader critiques of normative smoothing, representational bias, cultural homogenization, and value alignment in large language models (Bender et al., 2021; Birhane et al., 2021; Blodgett et al., 2020). The study's niche therefore lies in examining how AI responds to folklore that requires not only structural recognition but also emotional resonance, moral evaluation, historical awareness, and cultural belonging.

The study is theoretically, culturally, and pedagogically significant. Theoretically, it extends reader-response and reception scholarship by examining whether readership can be meaningfully attributed to an algorithmic system lacking consciousness, embodiment, memory, and cultural membership. Culturally, it demonstrates why folklore provides a demanding context for evaluating AI interpretation, as folktales preserve local values, collective memories, inherited symbols, and contested social relationships. Pedagogically, it clarifies how AI-generated interpretations may function as comparative materials without replacing human judgment or obscuring culturally grounded responses. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the linguistic, emotional, moral, and cultural limits of AI as a simulated reader of culturally embedded folklore. It compares responses from 30 undergraduate students with AI-generated interpretations of two Indonesian folktales, *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* and *Timun Mas*, and two English folktales, *Cinderella* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Through this comparison, the study investigates how intellectual evaluation, emotional engagement, moral judgment, and cultural situatedness shape different forms of literary reception.

Guided by these aims, the study investigates how human readers and AI-generated responses differ in their intellectual, emotional, and cultural interpretations of the selected Indonesian and English folktales. It also examines the patterns of algorithmic positivity, emotional flattening, and cultural abstraction that characterize AI interpretations when narratives present moral ambiguity, suffering, punishment, gendered agency, or cross-cultural value conflict. A further question concerns how human readers' moral judgments, emotional reactions, educational experiences, and cultural backgrounds influence their acceptance, resistance, or reinterpretation of the values embedded in the stories.

Finally, the study considers what divergences between human and AI responses reveal about the limitations of conceptualizing AI as a reader in literary studies and education. These questions move beyond comparing output quality to examine the foundations of interpretive agency. The intellectual dimension addresses narrative logic, plot coherence, thematic clarity, character development, and moral consistency; the emotional dimension considers empathy, discomfort, enjoyment, frustration, sadness, and moral

unease; and the cultural dimension explores familiarity, value recognition, resistance, and negotiation of culturally specific assumptions.

Ultimately, this study contributes to cultural and literary scholarship by conceptualizing AI-generated interpretation as a textual and computational artifact rather than an autonomous form of culturally grounded reading. Although AI can identify narrative structures, summarize themes, and generate comparisons, it cannot fully reproduce the emotional, historical, ethical, and cultural conditions through which humans experience folklore. In multicultural and EFL classrooms, comparing human and AI responses can help students question seemingly neutral interpretations, identify moral and cultural simplifications, and develop culturally situated readings. Such practices may strengthen critical AI literacy, intercultural awareness, ethical reasoning, and culturally responsive literary pedagogy. For folklore studies, the findings show how algorithmic interpretation reshapes culturally specific narratives through dominant linguistic and moral conventions. For reception theory, they clarify the distinction between generating interpretive language and participating in lived literary reception. AI should therefore be used in cultural and literary inquiry as a comparative and reflective tool whose limitations reaffirm the importance of human experience, emotion, memory, and cultural belonging in meaning-making.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reader-Response, Reception Theory, and the Human Conditions of Interpretation

Reader-response and reception theories view reading as an active, situated process rather than the mechanical extraction of meaning. Literary meaning emerges through interaction between text and reader, shaped by memory, experience, emotion, culture, and history (Alghanem, 2020; Hansen, 2023; Soosaar, 2020). From a transactional perspective, meaning is co-produced through the reader's lived engagement, while the implied reader emphasizes imagination and inference in filling textual gaps (Alghanem, 2020; Nóbrega & Azerêdo, 2019).

Reception theory likewise argues that readers approach literary works through historically and culturally shaped horizons, making interpretation plural, contingent, and context dependent (Hansen, 2023; Nóbrega & Azerêdo, 2019; Soosaar, 2020). Reading therefore combines intellectual understanding with emotional engagement, ethical evaluation, and culturally situated judgment.

The affective and moral dimensions of reading are central because readers do more than identify plots, characters, and themes. They may empathize with characters, experience pleasure or discomfort, reject resolutions, question moral lessons, or resist unfamiliar values. Felski's (2020) concept of attachment shows

that literary experience involves emotional and ethical relationships that formal analysis alone cannot fully explain. Studies of narrative engagement and moral cognition similarly demonstrate that readers respond through empathy, perspective-taking, affective involvement, and ethical reasoning (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Such variation confirms that literary meaning is neither fixed nor universal but develops through the interaction between textual structures and lived experience.

This diversity is especially visible in folklore, which communicates culturally embedded ideas about justice, punishment, reward, gender roles, family obligations, hierarchy, and communal responsibility. Readers may regard one resolution as morally satisfying but interpret another as unjust, outdated, or culturally unfamiliar. Reception aesthetics explains these differences through the horizon of expectations, in which literary judgments arise from historically and culturally formed norms rather than universal standards (Czarnowus & Rabsztyn, 2021; Ghifari et al., 2021; Singh & Pratima, 2022; Tjin, 2022). This horizon mediates the encounter between reader and text, revealing literature's social and ethical functions when textual meanings interact with readers' experiences (Asna & Amin, 2022; Czarnowus & Rabsztyn, 2021; Singh & Pratima, 2022; Tjin, 2022). Research across biblical, Quranic, and literary contexts shows that readers' backgrounds produce diverse interpretations and distinct messages concerning feminism, inner beauty, morality, and education (Asna & Amin, 2022; Ghifari et al., 2021; Singh & Pratima, 2022; Tjin, 2022). These findings reflect Jauss's horizon of expectations within the Konstanz School and the broader tradition of reception aesthetics (Asna & Amin, 2022; Czarnowus & Rabsztyn, 2021; Ghifari et al., 2021; Singh & Pratima, 2022; Tjin, 2022).

Generative AI complicates these human-centered accounts of interpretation. Current scholarship increasingly treats AI-generated texts as part of an expanding interpretive ecosystem, raising questions about authorship, creativity, meaning, and engagement across human- and machine-produced works (Baumbach & Kuhn, 2024; Jebaselvi et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025). AI can analyze large literary corpora, identify recurring themes, and detect linguistic or narrative patterns that individual readers may overlook (Jebaselvi et al., 2024). It also creates new possibilities for literary production and experimentation, although its use introduces ethical concerns and requires responsible integration (Zhang, 2025). In novel writing, AI may reshape character construction, narrative development, authorship, and readers' experiences, altering the established roles of writers and interpreters (Setiawan et al., 2024; Li, 2024; Vishalinromiya, 2023). Literature mediated by intelligent systems may therefore be understood as a dialogue among text, human reader, algorithm, and culture (Baumbach & Kuhn, 2024; Zhang, 2025).

However, AI's ability to identify themes, summarize plots, and produce coherent commentary should not be equated with culturally grounded understanding. Large language models generate responses through statistical relationships in training data rather than consciousness, emotional embodiment, personal memory, communicative intention, or cultural participation (Bender et al., 2021; Birhane et al., 2021). Their interpretations may appear fluent and persuasive while reproducing dominant assumptions or reducing culturally specific conflicts to generalized moral abstractions. Human readers, by contrast, continue to distinguish human- and AI-generated narratives in agency, creativity, emotional authenticity, and interpretive depth (Reed et al., 2025). These differences matter because reader-response and reception theories traditionally assume readers capable of affective experience, ethical judgment, cultural belonging, and interpretive responsibility.

The central question is whether AI can meaningfully be considered a reader. Although AI-generated responses are valuable textual artifacts that imitate interpretive language and structure, they do not necessarily constitute reception in the humanistic sense. This study therefore positions AI as a *simulated reader* rather than an autonomous interpretive subject. Applying reader-response and reception theories to human and algorithmic responses extends these frameworks beyond their conventional human-centered scope. Their differences reveal the emotional, moral, and cultural conditions distinguishing literary interpretation from coherent language production. AI's theoretical value lies not in replicating human readership, but in exposing the limits of algorithmic participation in culturally situated meaning-making.

2.2 Artificial Intelligence, Literary Interpretation, and the Problem of Algorithmic Positivity

Artificial intelligence has become increasingly influential in literary and cultural studies through digital humanities methods such as text mining and sentiment analysis (Qu, 2024). These methods enable researchers to process large literary corpora and identify thematic, stylistic, and emotional patterns that may be less visible through close reading alone (Nordstrom et al., 2025; Qu, 2024). Studies of English and American literature show that thematic and sentiment-based models can illuminate motifs and affective tendencies, particularly when multimodal features are included (Qu, 2024). Text mining has also been applied to user-generated content and organizational documents, demonstrating its broader analytical value (Coners & Matthies, 2022; Li et al., 2022). When combined with qualitative interpretation and human coding, computational analysis can produce more contextualized and reliable findings through methodological triangulation (Hujala et al., 2020; Nordstrom et al., 2025).

Large language models have intensified debates about AI's role in knowledge production within fields traditionally grounded in humanistic interpretation (McQuillan, 2022). They can generate plot summaries, thematic explanations, character comparisons, symbolic analyses, and moral evaluations, while supporting metaphor interpretation, text generation, feedback, scaffolding, writing assistance, and personalized learning (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Holmes et al., 2019; Kasneci et al., 2023). However, linguistic fluency and structural coherence do not necessarily indicate genuine understanding. Large language models predict patterns without grounding meaning in embodied experience or communicative intention, and their outputs may reproduce assumptions, values, and stereotypes embedded in training data and system design (Bender et al., 2021; Birhane et al., 2021).

A major concern is AI's tendency toward generalization, normativity, cultural flattening, and unwarranted certainty. These systems may reproduce bias, misinformation, and stereotypes rooted in broader social power relations within datasets, annotation practices, and evaluation systems (Blodgett et al., 2020). They may also align more closely with dominant cultural values, particularly those associated with English-speaking and economically competitive contexts, than with diverse global perspectives (Messner et al., 2025). Such limitations are especially important in folklore, where meaning depends on local symbols, moral systems, cultural values, and emotional responses.

The present study conceptualizes this tendency as *algorithmic positivity*, defined as AI's inclination to produce affirmative, harmonious, morally simplified, and conflict-minimizing interpretations. Rather than merely expressing positive sentiment, algorithmic positivity transforms ambiguity, ethical discomfort, cultural conflict, and moral contradiction into general lessons about courage, kindness, justice, resilience, or perseverance. AI may therefore present *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Cinderella*, and culturally specific folktales as equally inspirational despite their distinct tensions involving theft, violence, passivity, gender constraints, obedience, and punishment. This tendency reflects closure and stabilization, through which established assumptions become normalized within technological practice (Aliyev, 2020; Eslit, 2023; Jeong, 2024; Jesussek, 2023; Rashed & Al-Sharqi, 2020). It may also produce narrative fixing by assigning characters stable roles and converting probabilistic outputs into definitive moral judgments, thereby reducing interpretive plurality (Pandiani et al., 2026). Scholars therefore emphasize resisting premature closure and maintaining ethical reflexivity and openness to multiple perspectives in AI-supported systems (Qadir et al., 2025). In literary interpretation, excessive moral guidance may likewise weaken aesthetic complexity,

whereas anti-symbols preserve moral ambiguity rather than resolve it (MILE, 2023).

The distinction between coherent commentary and literary interpretation is therefore essential. AI can reproduce conventional academic explanations, but interpretive depth requires engagement with ambiguity, contradiction, affect, and cultural specificity. Treating AI output as neutral may conceal the political and ethical conditions underlying its production (McQuillan, 2022). Moreover, algorithmic systems lack intentionality, moral agency, and accountability, even when their responses resemble human reasoning (Bender et al., 2021; Birhane et al., 2021). This limitation is particularly relevant to literary education, where uncritical reliance on AI may expose students to interpretations that are fluent but culturally shallow, ethically softened, or overly generalized. Although AI can serve as a comparative pedagogical tool, it should not be treated as an authoritative reader.

Existing studies have extensively examined AI in education, writing, creativity, and textual analysis, yet few have investigated AI-generated literary interpretation through reader-response and reception theories. Even fewer have focused on culturally embedded folklore, where emotion, moral judgment, and cultural belonging are central to meaning-making. This study addresses that gap by conceptualizing AI as a *simulated reader* whose differences from human responses reveal the cultural and epistemological limits of algorithmic interpretation.

2.3 Folklore, Cultural Situatedness, and Cross-Cultural Interpretive Conflict

Folklore provides a valuable context for examining the limits of AI interpretation because folktales are embedded in collective memory, cultural values, moral instruction, and social identity. Danandjaja (2007) defines folklore as oral tradition transmitted across generations, while Dundes (2007) views it as a symbolic system through which communities preserve and negotiate values. Bronner (2022) further describes folklore as a dynamic cultural practice whose meanings change across historical, educational, and cultural contexts. Stories such as *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, *Timun Mas*, *Cinderella*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk* present familiar conflicts involving good and evil, obedience, cruelty, poverty, and supernatural intervention. Yet these conflicts do not carry universal meanings because readers interpret them through culturally shaped understandings of identity, memory, and heritage (Bakrač, 2019; Savolainen & Potinkara, 2021).

Research on Montenegro travelogues, Ukrainian intertextual discourse, museum heritage, and Indonesian folklore in Arabic-language teaching shows how traditional narratives connect past and present through cultural memory and identity formation (Bakrač, 2019; Lavriv, 2023; Savolainen & Potinkara,

2021; Farisi et al., 2024). Museum studies further demonstrate that “points of memory” activate tradition in the present and make cultural meaning context dependent (Savolainen & Potinkara, 2021). Collectively, these findings challenge universalist readings and establish folklore as a reservoir of meaning through which communities interpret narrative conflicts according to their social and cultural categories (Bakrač, 2019; Lavriv, 2023; Savolainen & Potinkara, 2021).

Cross-cultural reading intensifies interpretive conflict because a morally satisfying resolution in one culture may appear problematic in another. Readers familiar with Indonesian traditions may interpret *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* through patience, humility, filial duty, and karmic justice, whereas others may question the protagonist’s passivity or the severity of punishment. Likewise, *Jack and the Beanstalk* may signify courage and opportunity or an ethically troubling narrative involving theft, violence, and unjustified reward. Such differences support Jauss’s (2014) view that interpretation is shaped by readers’ horizons of expectations and Felski’s (2020) claim that literary engagement involves affective and ethical attachment. In literary and EFL classrooms, students therefore do not merely absorb fixed moral lessons but compare values, question characters, and reinterpret stories through their emotions, experiences, and cultural identities. Folklore can consequently strengthen critical literacy and intercultural learning when its ambiguities are not reduced to universal moral conclusions.

Research on cultural bias and alignment indicates that large language models may privilege dominant values over diverse cultural perspectives (Mitchell et al., 2024; Messner et al., 2025). Although generative AI can support individual creativity, it may also reduce collective diversity through increasingly homogeneous outputs (Doshi & Hauser, 2024). This concern is especially important for narratives shaped by memory, values, and cultural context, where machine interpretation may not align with human sense-making (Bellot & Gutiérrez-Colón, 2025; Coeckelbergh, 2021). Further, Coeckelbergh (2021) conceptualizes AI as narrative, time, and process, suggesting that its relationship with human lifeworlds shapes normative outcomes. Similarly, an analysis of 205 publicly funded AI projects in Chile identified dominant narratives of productivity, transformation, literacy, smart surveillance, and creative inquiry, showing how institutions use stories to align technological and social interests (López et al., 2026). In classrooms and clinical settings, AI as a co-author or narrative interlocutor can reshape interpretation, authority, and engagement, although its benefits vary across languages and modalities (Bellot & Gutiérrez-Colón, 2025; Chan, 2024; Wang et al., 2026). These findings underscore the need for context-aware and literacy-informed AI systems that respect local meanings and emotional

resonances while avoiding moral simplification and cultural homogenization (Bellot & Gutiérrez-Colón, 2025; Chan, 2024; Coeckelbergh, 2021; López et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2026).

The literature therefore reveals a clear interdisciplinary gap. Reader-response theory establishes that interpretation is experiential, affective, moral, and culturally situated; AI research shows that language models can produce fluent yet biased and generalized readings; and folklore studies demonstrate that folktales gain meaning through culture, memory, identity, and moral negotiation. However, these perspectives have rarely been integrated to examine AI as a simulated reader of folklore. By comparing human and AI responses to Indonesian and English folktales and foregrounding divergence rather than similarity, this study tests reader-response assumptions against non-human interpretation, exposes the limits of universalist algorithmic readings, conceptualizes AI output as simulated reception, and positions AI as a comparative pedagogical artifact rather than an interpretive authority.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative comparative design grounded in reader-response and reception theory to examine interpretive differences between human readers and artificial intelligence (AI) when responding to culturally embedded folklore. The design focused on how meaning develops through intellectual evaluation, emotional engagement, moral judgment, and cultural situatedness rather than statistical measurement. Consistent with reader-response theory, literary meaning emerges from the interaction between text and reader and is shaped by experience, emotion, and sociocultural background (Rosenblatt, 1978; Iser, 1978; Jauss, 2014). This approach was therefore appropriate for comparing human and AI-generated interpretations across intellectual, emotional, and cultural dimensions.

A synchronic reception approach was used to compare contemporary human responses with AI-generated interpretations produced within the same interpretive context. AI was treated not as an equivalent human participant but as a non-human interpretive entity whose outputs were analyzed as textual data. This distinction is important because AI lacks consciousness, lived experience, emotional embodiment, intentionality, and cultural belonging. The comparison therefore aimed not to determine whether AI was better or worse than human readers, but to examine how divergences between human and algorithmic responses reveal the limits of AI as a simulated reader.

The participants were 30 undergraduate students enrolled in English literature or related courses. They were selected purposively because they had experience reading, discussing, and responding to literary texts

and could provide reflective interpretations of folklore. Rather than representing a statistical population, their responses were treated as culturally situated readings shaped by educational background, reading experience, moral reasoning, and cultural familiarity.

3.2 Data Collection

The data consisted of two sources: human reader responses and AI-generated responses. Human responses were collected through a structured reader-response instrument containing both close-ended and open-ended questions. The close-ended questions used a Likert-scale format to identify general evaluative tendencies, while the open-ended questions allowed participants to explain their intellectual, emotional, and cultural responses in their own words. This combination was used to strengthen the data by capturing both broad response patterns and deeper interpretive reasoning.

Four folktales were selected as reading materials: *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, *Timun Mas*, *Cinderella*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. These narratives were chosen because they represent Indonesian and English folklore traditions and are widely recognized in literary and educational contexts. Their selection was theoretically justified because folklore carries cultural values, moral instruction, collective memory, and local worldview assumptions (Danandjaja, 2007; Dundes, 2007; Bronner, 2022). The Indonesian folktales were used to represent culturally familiar narratives, while the English folktales provided cross-cultural comparison and potential interpretive tension. This selection enabled the study to explore how readers accept, question, negotiate, or resist the values embedded in narratives drawn from different cultural traditions.

AI-generated responses were collected by submitting the same interpretive prompts presented to the human participants to a large language model, ensuring consistency in the questions and comparability across both sets of responses. The prompts addressed three dimensions: intellectual, emotional, and cultural interpretation. The outputs were treated as textual artifacts rather than conscious or intentional responses. To ensure replicability, the final manuscript or appendix should report the AI model, access date, exact prompts, and number of generated responses, as outputs may vary by model version, prompt design, and generation settings.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically using a multidimensional reception framework. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility in identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns across qualitative data through both theory-driven and data-driven coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis was deductive because it began with three predetermined dimensions: intellectual, emotional, and

cultural interpretation. It was also inductive because subthemes emerged from the participants' and AI-generated responses.

The intellectual dimension covered plot coherence, character development, thematic clarity, narrative logic, plausibility, and moral consistency. The emotional dimension included empathy, enjoyment, discomfort, frustration, admiration, sadness, emotional distance, and moral unease. The cultural dimension addressed cultural familiarity, local values, moral norms, family roles, gender expectations, obedience, justice, and resistance to unfamiliar values. In the AI data, these dimensions were identified through the language of the generated outputs and interpreted cautiously because AI can describe emotions and cultural experiences without experiencing them.

The analysis proceeded in five stages. First, all human and AI responses were compiled and organized by folktale and response type. Second, human participants were anonymized as H01 to H30, while AI responses were coded by folktale. Third, the responses were read repeatedly to identify recurring interpretive patterns. Fourth, the codes were grouped into broader themes, including structural coherence, moral discomfort, emotional engagement, cultural familiarity, cultural resistance, moral generalization, emotional flattening, and algorithmic positivity. Finally, human and AI responses were compared across the three dimensions to identify similarities, differences, and theoretically significant divergences.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Methodological Limitations

Ethical considerations were applied to both human and AI-generated data. The 30 student participants joined the study voluntarily and were informed about the purpose of the research. Their identities were anonymized, and their responses were used only for research purposes. Participation did not affect their academic grades or classroom evaluation. The AI-generated responses were also handled ethically by treating them as algorithmic outputs rather than as the views of a conscious or morally responsible agent. This distinction was necessary to avoid anthropomorphizing AI and to maintain theoretical clarity.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the participants represented a specific educational, cultural, and generational context, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, the AI responses depended on the model version, prompt design, and generation conditions. Third, the inclusion of only four folktales means the findings are exploratory rather than exhaustive. These limitations align with the study's qualitative, reception-based aims, which were not to generalize across all readers or AI systems, but to examine how interpretive divergence reveals the cultural and epistemological limits of AI as a simulated reader.

4. Result

This section compares human and AI responses to four folktales: *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, *Timun Mas*, *Cinderella*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. The analysis examines three dimensions: intellectual, emotional, and cultural interpretation. The findings reveal differences not only in language and style but also in interpretive logic. Human readers offered varied, affective, morally evaluative, and culturally situated responses, whereas AI outputs were structurally coherent, consistently positive, and culturally generalized. Across the 30 student responses, three dominant patterns emerged. First, human readers evaluated the folktales not only by identifying themes and plot structures, but also by questioning narrative logic, character motivation, and moral fairness. Second, human readers showed a wide emotional range, including empathy, admiration, discomfort, frustration, and resistance. Third, cultural familiarity strongly shaped interpretation: Indonesian folktales were often read through local moral values, while English folktales produced more critical responses when their

moral logic conflicted with the readers' ethical expectations. By contrast, AI-generated responses tended to present all four folktales as coherent, meaningful, emotionally engaging, and morally valuable. This contrast reveals a major pattern in the data: human interpretation was situated and evaluative, whereas AI interpretation was stable and harmonizing.

4.1 Overview of Human–AI Interpretive Patterns

The initial analysis compared general response patterns across the three interpretive dimensions. Human readers displayed diverse interpretations of all four folktales, particularly regarding moral conflict, character behavior, and cultural values. In contrast, AI responses were more consistent across the stories. Although this consistency supported clear summaries of narrative structure, it also produced a flattening effect by reducing ambiguity, contradiction, and cultural tension to positive moral lessons. Table 1 summarizes the dominant interpretive tendencies in the human and AI responses.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Human and AI Interpretive Patterns

Interpretive Dimension	Dominant Human Reader Pattern	Dominant AI Pattern	Key Contrast	Interpretive Meaning
Intellectual interpretation	Varied evaluation of plot, character logic, and moral coherence	Consistent emphasis on plot structure, theme, and narrative coherence	Human readers questioned; AI organized	Humans read critically; AI stabilizes meaning
Emotional interpretation	Mixed emotional responses: empathy, discomfort, frustration, admiration, resistance	Uniformly positive emotional framing: inspiring, engaging, uplifting	Humans displayed affective range; AI produced emotional smoothness	Human reading is affective; AI simulates affect
Cultural interpretation	Strong attention to cultural familiarity, local values, gender roles, obedience, justice, and moral conflict	Generalized lessons such as kindness, courage, perseverance, and justice	Humans situated meaning; AI universalized meaning	Folklore becomes culturally specific for humans but abstract for AI
Moral evaluation	Readers accepted some values and resisted others	AI converted moral ambiguity into positive lessons	Humans judged; AI harmonized	AI showed algorithmic positivity
Cross-cultural response	Indonesian tales felt familiar; English tales triggered more questioning	All tales were treated as equally relevant and morally instructive	Human interpretation varied by cultural proximity; AI minimized difference	AI reduced cultural distance

The table indicates that the key difference lies not only in what human readers and AI noticed, but in how they interpreted what they noticed. Human readers often entered into negotiation with the story. They agreed, disagreed, questioned, resisted, or emotionally reacted. AI responses, however, generally resolved narrative tensions into balanced and affirmative interpretations. This pattern became especially visible in the analysis of intellectual, emotional, and cultural responses.

4.2 Intellectual Interpretation: Human Critique and AI Structural Coherence

In the intellectual dimension, both human readers and AI were able to identify major themes, character roles, and narrative structures. However, they differed in the depth and direction of evaluation. Human readers frequently moved beyond identifying themes to questioning whether the story was logically convincing, morally consistent, or narratively satisfying. AI-

generated responses, in contrast, tended to frame the stories as structurally complete and thematically coherent.

In responses to *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* and *Timun Mas*, many human readers recognized familiar moral patterns: goodness is tested, evil is punished, patience is rewarded, and courage leads to survival. However, they did not always accept these patterns passively. Some readers questioned why virtuous characters had to suffer for so long or why punishment was represented in extreme forms. In responses to *Cinderella* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the critical tendency became more visible. Several readers critically questioned Cinderella's passive role in shaping her own fate, while others challenged Jack's moral position as a protagonist who steals from the giant yet is ultimately rewarded for his actions.

AI responses, by contrast, consistently interpreted the four folktales as coherent narratives with clear moral direction. The AI outputs emphasized the function of conflict, the symbolic value of characters, and the clarity of moral lessons. Even when a story contained ethically questionable behavior, the AI tended to interpret it as part of the protagonist's growth or as a symbolic movement toward justice.

Excerpt 1: Human intellectual critique

H07, responding to *Jack and the Beanstalk*:

"I understand that Jack is supposed to be brave, but I also feel the story is strange because he steals from the giant and still becomes the hero. For me, the ending

is not fully fair because the story rewards him without seriously questioning what he did."

This excerpt shows that the reader did not merely identify the plot. The student evaluated the moral logic of the plot and challenged the heroic framing of the protagonist. The phrase "not fully fair" is important because it signals a movement from comprehension to judgment. The reader recognized the traditional interpretation of Jack as brave but resisted accepting bravery as sufficient moral justification. This response demonstrates that human interpretation involves ethical reasoning as part of intellectual evaluation.

Excerpt 2: AI intellectual response

AI response to *Jack and the Beanstalk*:

"The story presents Jack as a courageous and resourceful character who overcomes hardship through bravery and determination. The beanstalk functions as a symbol of opportunity, while the giant represents the obstacles that must be defeated for justice and prosperity to be restored."

The AI response is structurally coherent, but it resolves ambiguity too quickly. Jack's theft is not treated as a moral problem; instead, it is absorbed into a heroic structure of courage, opportunity, and justice. The AI identifies symbolic meaning but avoids ethical conflict. This reveals a central finding of the study: AI interpretation privileges narrative order and thematic harmony, while human readers are more likely to pause at contradiction. The intellectual contrast can be summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Intellectual Interpretation Across the Four Folktales

Folktale	Human Reader Intellectual Pattern	AI Intellectual Pattern	Dominant Divergence
<i>Bawang Merah Bawang Putih</i>	Recognized moral clarity but questioned suffering and punishment	Emphasized kindness, patience, and moral justice	Human readers noticed harshness; AI emphasized moral balance
<i>Timun Mas</i>	Viewed the plot as adventurous and culturally familiar; some questioned supernatural problem-solving	Framed the story as courage, strategy, and triumph over danger	Humans evaluated plausibility; AI emphasized heroic structure
<i>Cinderella</i>	Questioned passivity, gender roles, and dependence on rescue	Emphasized hope, kindness, transformation, and justice	Human readers critiqued gendered agency; AI highlighted moral reward
<i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i>	Criticized theft, violence, and moral inconsistency	Framed Jack as brave, resourceful, and deserving	Human readers saw ethical ambiguity; AI produced heroic coherence

The findings show that AI's intellectual interpretation is not necessarily wrong, but it is incomplete. It produces a stable reading by emphasizing coherence and symbolic order. Human

readers, however, frequently approached the stories as moral and cultural problems, not only as narrative structures.

4.3 Emotional Interpretation: Human Affective Range and AI Emotional Flattening

The emotional dimension produced the strongest contrast between human and AI responses. Human readers expressed a broad range of emotions, including sympathy, admiration, discomfort, irritation, sadness, fear, and moral unease. Their emotional responses were often tied to character treatment, perceived injustice, gender expectations, or the severity of punishment. AI responses, however, generally described the folktales as inspiring, engaging, hopeful, motivational, or emotionally satisfying.

In Indonesian folktales, many readers expressed empathy toward vulnerable protagonists. *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* generated sympathy for the mistreated protagonist and anger toward the cruel stepfamily. *Timun Mas* generated excitement and tension because the protagonist actively struggles to survive. However, even in these familiar tales, emotional responses were not uniformly positive. Some readers felt uncomfortable with the repeated suffering of innocent characters or the extreme consequences faced by antagonists.

Responses to the English folktales were more divided. *Cinderella* elicited sympathy and frustration because of the protagonist's passivity, while *Jack and the Beanstalk* generated excitement and discomfort due to Jack's questionable actions. This shows that emotional engagement is shaped by both moral and cultural judgment.

Excerpt 3: Human emotional response

H14, responding to *Cinderella*:

"I feel sorry for Cinderella, but at the same time I feel annoyed because she waits too much. I wanted her to fight for herself, not only wait for magic or a prince. The story is beautiful, but emotionally I do not feel completely satisfied."

This excerpt demonstrates emotional complexity. The reader feels sympathy and irritation at the same time. The response is not a simple positive or negative reaction; it is ambivalent. The student's emotional dissatisfaction is connected to a judgment about agency. The phrase "I wanted her to fight for herself" shows that the reader evaluates the story through contemporary expectations of self-determination. This is an example of how emotion, ethics, and cultural values interact in human reception.

Excerpt 4: AI emotional response

AI response to *Cinderella*:

"The story creates an emotionally uplifting experience by showing that kindness, patience, and inner goodness are eventually rewarded. Cinderella's suffering invites sympathy, while the ending provides hope and emotional satisfaction."

The AI response recognizes sympathy and suffering, but it converts them into an uplifting emotional arc. The response does not register frustration with passivity or discomfort with dependence on external rescue. Its emotional interpretation is smooth, balanced, and affirmative. This pattern was repeated across the AI outputs: the AI frequently described emotional effects but rarely produced emotional contradiction. Table 3 presents the emotional patterns identified across the stories.

Table 3. Emotional Response Patterns in Human and AI Interpretations

Emotional Category	Human Reader Evidence	AI Evidence	Interpretation
Empathy	Strong sympathy for Cinderella, Bawang Putih, and Timun Mas	Frequently stated that the stories invite sympathy	Shared recognition of suffering
Discomfort	Present in responses to Jack's theft, Cinderella's passivity, and severe punishments	Rare or absent	AI minimized negative affect
Frustration	Directed toward passive characters or unfair situations	Rare or absent	Human readers linked emotion with agency
Admiration	Directed toward Timun Mas's courage and Bawang Putih's patience	Commonly attributed to all protagonists	AI generalized admiration
Moral unease	Strongest in <i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i>	Reframed as courage and justice	Human readers questioned; AI harmonized
Emotional satisfaction	Mixed; some endings felt satisfying, others problematic	Consistently described endings as satisfying	AI produced emotional closure

The emotional findings in the table 3 reveals what may be called emotional flattening in AI interpretation. AI can name emotions, but it does not experience emotional tension. As a result, its responses tend to present affect as orderly and resolved. Human readers, on the other hand, often experienced unresolved emotional responses, especially when stories contained ethical ambiguity or culturally contested values.

4.4 Cultural Interpretation: Situated Human Reading and AI Cultural Abstraction

The cultural dimension showed that human readers interpreted folklore through cultural familiarity, local moral values, and contemporary social expectations. Indonesian folktales were generally received as culturally familiar. Readers often associated *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* with values such as patience, humility, respect within the family, and moral justice. *Timun Mas* was often interpreted through ideas of bravery, cleverness, maternal protection, and survival against danger. However, cultural familiarity did not eliminate critical reflection. Some readers still

questioned whether patience should always be idealized or whether punishment should be so severe.

The English folktales generated more visible cross-cultural evaluation. *Cinderella* was often read through gender and agency. Some readers appreciated the moral lesson of kindness, but others questioned the idea that the protagonist's happiness depends on beauty, magic, and marriage. *Jack and the Beanstalk* generated the strongest moral resistance because several readers interpreted Jack's actions as conflicting with values of honesty, responsibility, and fairness.

AI responses, in contrast, treated all four folktales as broadly universal. It interpreted each story as a vehicle for general values such as perseverance, courage, justice, hope, kindness, and resilience. While these values are not inaccurate, they reduce cultural specificity. AI rarely distinguished between Indonesian and English moral frameworks, nor did it show awareness of cross-cultural discomfort. In this sense, AI interpretation demonstrated *cultural abstraction*: the transformation of culturally embedded narratives into universal moral statements.

Table 4. Cultural Interpretation and Cross-Cultural Tension

Folktale	Cultural Values Identified by Human Readers	Cultural Friction or Resistance	AI Cultural Framing	Key Finding
<i>Bawang Merah Bawang Putih</i>	Patience, humility, kindness, family morality, reward and punishment	Some discomfort with prolonged suffering and harsh punishment	Universal kindness and justice	AI reduced local moral texture
<i>Timun Mas</i>	Courage, maternal protection, cleverness, survival, local supernatural belief	Some questioned magical resolution	Universal bravery and determination	AI framed cultural elements as general adventure
<i>Cinderella</i>	Kindness, endurance, beauty, social mobility, marriage	Critique of passivity and dependence on rescue	Hope, kindness, inner goodness rewarded	AI softened gender critique
<i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i>	Courage, risk-taking, ambition	Strong critique of theft, violence, and unfair reward	Bravery, opportunity, overcoming obstacles	AI transformed moral ambiguity into heroism

The table 4 shows that human readers often interpreted the stories through culturally specific and ethically active frameworks. They did not simply extract universal lessons; they negotiated values. AI, however, tended to move from narrative event to generalized moral conclusion. This pattern supports the finding that cultural interpretation requires more than recognizing cultural content. It requires the ability to experience cultural nearness, distance, discomfort, or resistance.

4.5 Algorithmic Positivity as a Pattern of AI Interpretation

The most important pattern emerging from the AI responses was algorithmic positivity. This refers to the tendency of AI to produce affirmative, balanced, morally harmonious, and conflict-minimizing interpretations. Across all four folktales, AI responses consistently highlighted positive values and minimized narrative contradictions. It interpreted suffering as a path to reward, danger as a test of courage, passivity as patience, theft as resourcefulness, and conflict as moral restoration.

Human readers moved from story events toward situated judgment. They asked whether the story felt fair, familiar, troubling, inspiring, outdated, or morally acceptable. AI moved from story events toward thematic stabilization. It organized the tale into coherent lessons and positive meanings. This does not mean that AI failed to understand the basic plot. Rather, it shows that AI's interpretive strength lies in structural and thematic organization, while its limitation lies in affective, moral, and cultural depth. The results reveal five key findings.

First, AI and human readers both identified major themes and narrative structures, but they differed in evaluative depth. AI emphasized coherence, while human readers questioned logic, fairness, and character motivation.

Second, human readers produced emotionally varied responses, including empathy, frustration, discomfort, admiration, and moral unease. AI responses, in contrast, were emotionally stable and consistently positive.

Third, cultural familiarity shaped human interpretation. Indonesian folktales were often read through local values, while English folktales generated stronger moral and cultural questioning. AI minimized these differences by presenting all folktales through universal values.

Fourth, AI demonstrated algorithmic positivity. It tended to smooth conflict, simplify moral ambiguity, and produce uplifting interpretations even when the narratives contained ethically contested elements.

Fifth, the divergence between human and AI responses shows that folklore interpretation is not only intellectual but also affective, moral, and cultural. Human readers interpreted folklore as situated subjects, while AI generated simulated interpretations that were coherent but culturally abstract.

Overall, the findings show that AI can function as a useful tool for identifying narrative structures and producing accessible summaries, but it does not respond to folklore as an experiential reader. Its interpretations are fluent and orderly, but they lack the emotional tension, moral hesitation, and cultural negotiation that characterize human reception. This distinction becomes especially visible in folklore because folktales do not merely tell stories; they carry values, memories, and moral worlds that require culturally situated interpretation.

5. Discussion

5.1 Human–AI Interpretive Divergence and the Status of AI as a Simulated Reader

The findings of this study demonstrate that human readers and artificial intelligence (AI) do not merely differ in interpretive style; they operate through fundamentally different modes of reception. Human

readers interpreted the selected Indonesian and English folktales through intellectual evaluation, emotional response, moral judgment, and cultural situatedness. AI-generated responses, by contrast, were structurally coherent, linguistically fluent, and thematically organized, but they tended to minimize ambiguity, cultural conflict, emotional discomfort, and ethical contradiction. This finding directly addresses the first research question concerning how human readers and AI-generated responses differ across intellectual, emotional, and cultural dimensions. The central difference lies in the fact that human interpretation is experiential and evaluative, while AI interpretation is simulated and stabilizing.

From the perspective of reader-response theory, this divergence is theoretically significant because meaning emerges from reader–text interaction embedded in social and historical contexts (Atasoy, 2020; Singh & Pratima, 2022). Rosenblatt's transactional theory describes reading as a transaction in which meaning is generated through the lived encounter between reader and text (Alghanem, 2020; Atasoy, 2020). Iser's notion of textual gaps centers on readers' active participation to fill indeterminate spaces with imagination and anticipation (Hamad & Kabha, 2020; Ndlovu, 2022). Jauss's reception theory locates interpretation within historically and culturally shaped horizons of expectation, which shift as reception unfolds (Alghanem, 2020; Ndlovu, 2022; Singh & Pratima, 2022). A nuance across sources is that Hamad & Kabha foreground a “system of gaps” that alerts readers to author intentions (supporting the textual-gap idea) while some scholars note Iser denies fixed textual gaps, stressing the reader's role in creating meaning (Hamad & Kabha, 2020). The present findings reaffirm these assumptions by showing that human readers did not simply decode plot, theme, and character. They negotiated the stories through their own moral expectations, emotional reactions, and cultural experiences. For instance, human responses to *Jack and the Beanstalk* frequently questioned the ethical status of Jack's actions, while responses to *Cinderella* often connected emotional dissatisfaction with concerns about passivity and gendered agency. These interpretations were shaped by lived ethical and cultural frameworks, not by narrative structure alone.

AI-generated responses, however, displayed what may be described as *simulated reception*. The AI outputs resembled literary interpretation because they identified themes, evaluated characters, and explained moral lessons. Yet they lacked the experiential grounding that reader-response theory associates with genuine interpretation. This also aligns with Bender et al.'s (2021) caution that large language models generate language through statistical patterning rather than lived understanding. In this sense, AI can imitate the discourse of literary interpretation, but it does not experience attachment, discomfort, resistance, or moral accountability. Therefore, the study strengthens the

argument that AI should be conceptualized not as an interpretive subject, but as a *simulated reader* whose outputs can be useful for comparison but not equivalent to human reception.

This finding addresses a theoretical gap in reception-theory scholarship on AI-generated interpretation (Baumbach & Kuhn, 2024). Baumbach & Kuhn argue literature and culture can be viewed as intelligent systems, outlining the potential and limits for AI-mediated interpretation (Baumbach & Kuhn, 2024). Bajohr emphasizes the social dimension of authorship via deixis and co-social recognition, suggesting machines may be recognized as art only within a community of judgment (Bajohr, 2024). Hermeneutics is being revived as a framework for digital texts, enabling analysis of authorial intention and reader response in AI contexts (Henrickson & Meroño-Peñuela, 2022). A Transhumanist Narrative Intelligence Framework (TNIF) proposes integrating literary theory, AI systems, and metaverse dynamics to understand AI-generated narratives while preserving human interpretive engagement (Henrickson & Meroño-Peñuela, 2022; Rudolph, 2024). Debates on human ingenuity versus generative AI underscore the need for robust theoretical grounding in education and culture (Rudolph, 2024). Collectively, these strands point to a multi-framework reception theory that foregrounds co-authorship, deixis, hermeneutics, and reader agency in AI-generated literature (Bajohr, 2024; Baumbach & Kuhn, 2024).

The novelty of the present study lies in treating the divergence between human and AI responses as meaningful evidence rather than as performance difference. By doing so, the study extends reader-response theory into the age of algorithmic mediation and clarifies that “reading” cannot be reduced to fluent textual response.

5.2 Algorithmic Positivity, Moral Smoothing, and Emotional Flattening

The second major finding concerns the pattern identified in this study as *algorithmic positivity*. Across the four folktales, AI-generated responses consistently emphasized affirmative themes such as courage, kindness, perseverance, justice, hope, and moral reward. This finding addresses the second research question concerning the patterns that characterize AI-generated interpretations of folklore. Algorithmic positivity refers to AI’s tendency to produce harmonious, conflict-minimizing, morally generalized, and emotionally resolved interpretations. It is different from ordinary positive sentiment because it functions as an interpretive mechanism: it reorganizes ambiguity, discomfort, or ethical contradiction into stable moral lessons.

This pattern was especially visible in AI responses to morally ambiguous narratives. In *Jack and the Beanstalk*, AI framed Jack as courageous and

resourceful, while human readers questioned the morality of theft and violence. In *Cinderella*, AI highlighted patience, inner goodness, and hope, while human readers expressed frustration with the protagonist’s passivity and dependence on external rescue. In *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, AI emphasized moral justice and kindness, while some human readers noticed the emotional harshness of suffering and punishment. These contrasts show that AI interpretation often moves quickly from conflict to resolution. It recognizes narrative tension but tends to dissolve that tension into positive closure.

This finding is consistent with broader research on AI bias, alignment, and normative smoothing, which argue that language models carry social and ethical risks, including overconfident, biased, or normatively shaped outputs. Blodgett et al. (2020) emphasize that bias in language technology is not merely a technical issue but a reflection of power relations, data selection, and representational assumptions. Gallegos et al. (2024) similarly explain that large language models can learn, reproduce, and amplify social biases. In the context of this study, algorithmic positivity may be understood as a form of interpretive bias: the model tends to produce safe, polite, and widely acceptable readings that reduce moral conflict. This does not necessarily make the interpretation false, but it makes it incomplete because folklore often derives meaning from precisely those conflicts that AI smooths over.

Algorithmic positivity also relates to the way large language models are trained and aligned to produce helpful, harmless, and agreeable responses. Such alignment may encourage outputs that avoid strong critique, moral discomfort, or culturally sensitive conflict. McQuillan (2022) warns that the apparent neutrality or benevolence of AI may conceal the political and ethical assumptions embedded in algorithmic systems. Mitchell et al. (2024) further show that large language models often display cultural bias and may align more closely with dominant cultural patterns than with the plurality of global values. Messner et al. (2025) similarly argue that LLMs may reflect cultural self-perceptions aligned with English-speaking and economically dominant contexts. These studies help explain why AI-generated folklore interpretations may prefer universal values over culturally situated tensions.

The concept of algorithmic positivity is therefore one of the main theoretical contributions of the present study. It identifies a specific interpretive pattern in AI-generated literary responses: not merely bias in representation, but bias in the direction of moral harmony and emotional closure. This concept shows that even coherent, pedagogically useful AI interpretations can flatten literary ambiguity. It also extends reader-response theory by positioning emotional discomfort and moral hesitation as key features of situated reading.

5.3 Cultural Situatedness, Folklore Reception, and Cross-Cultural Interpretation

The third major finding concerns the role of cultural situatedness in folklore interpretation. Human readers responded differently to Indonesian and English folktales because they interpreted the stories through culturally shaped moral expectations. Indonesian folktales such as *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* and *Timun Mas* were often perceived as culturally familiar and morally recognizable, although not always uncritically accepted. English folktales such as *Cinderella* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* generated more visible interpretive tension, especially regarding gender, agency, fairness, and moral reward. This finding directly addresses the third research question concerning how human readers' moral judgments, emotional responses, and cultural backgrounds shape their reception of culturally embedded folktales.

Folklore is a particularly important site for this kind of analysis because it carries collective memory, cultural identity, moral instruction, and local worldview assumptions. [Danandjaja \(2007\)](#) emphasizes that folklore is transmitted across generations as part of collective culture. [Dundes \(2007\)](#) similarly views folklore as a symbolic system through which communities preserve and negotiate meaning. [Bronner \(2022\)](#) argues that tradition is not static but continually reinterpreted in modern contexts. expectation, and contemporary social awareness.

The contrast with AI-generated responses is significant. AI tended to universalize the moral meanings of the folktales. It interpreted culturally specific narratives through broad values such as kindness, courage, perseverance, and justice. While these values may be present in the stories, the AI's tendency to generalize them reduced the cultural texture of the narratives. This pattern can be described as *cultural abstraction*: the transformation of culturally embedded meanings into generalized moral claims. Cultural abstraction is not the same as cultural ignorance. AI may mention cultural values or identify local elements, but it often lacks the capacity to feel cultural proximity, distance, discomfort, or accountability. This is why its interpretations appear balanced but not deeply situated.

This finding aligns with recent studies showing that AI systems may homogenize cultural difference. Recent analyses of AI-generated narratives indicate a tilt toward stability and harmonization, with alignment mechanisms and normative framing softening conflict and reframing controversy into an aesthetically calm mood ([Pilipets, 2025](#)). Ambient amplification and repetition-with-variation produce recognizable, easily shareable outputs that lean on familiar clichés to maintain generic framings ([Pilipets, 2025](#)). This pattern is reflected in cross-media studies of machine-vision representations in culture; [Rettberg et al.](#) document 500 works 77 digital games, 190 digital artworks, and 233

movies, novels, and other narratives with 874 central machine-vision situations, illustrating broad, recurring patterns rather than culture-specific depictions ([Rettberg et al., 2022](#)). Complementary climate-fiction work shows AI as a co-author and co-designer of climate narratives and imagery, exemplifying collaborative modes of storytelling that integrate machine intelligence into narrative design ([Sánchez-Querubín & Niederer, 2022](#)). [Rooein et al. \(2025\)](#) also demonstrate that children's stories generated by language models may contain cultural and topic bias. These findings are relevant to folklore reception because folktales are precisely the kind of narrative forms in which local values, symbols, conflicts, and moral worlds matter. If AI interprets them through generalized moral abstractions, it risks weakening their cultural and pedagogical richness.

The novelty of this study lies in demonstrating that folklore exposes the limits of algorithmic interpretation more clearly than more structurally neutral texts might. Because folklore requires moral and cultural negotiation, it reveals what AI tends to miss: discomfort, contradiction, local value conflict, and affective attachment. This contributes to folklore studies by showing that contemporary folklore reception cannot be separated from digital mediation. It also contributes to cross-cultural literary education by showing that students' disagreements, discomforts, and culturally grounded critiques are not interpretive errors; they are valuable evidence of active reception.

5.4 Implications for Literary Education, Digital Humanities, and Research Ethics

The findings have important implications for literary pedagogy. AI can be useful in literature classrooms because it can summarize stories, identify themes, organize character analysis, and provide comparative interpretations. In this sense, AI may support reading activities, especially for students who need scaffolding in literary analysis. Research on AI in education suggests that generative AI can support feedback, individualized learning, writing assistance, and academic productivity ([Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019](#); [Holmes et al., 2019](#); [Yusuf et al., 2024](#)). However, the findings of the present study show that AI should not be positioned as an authoritative interpreter of literary texts, especially culturally embedded texts such as folklore.

Instead, AI-generated interpretations should be used as comparative artifacts. Teachers can ask students to compare their own responses with AI-generated readings, identify what AI notices, what it ignores, what it simplifies, and how it frames moral or cultural conflict. This approach can strengthen critical AI literacy and literary interpretation at the same time. Students can learn that AI fluency does not equal interpretive depth and that human reading involves affect, culture, ethics, and disagreement. This is particularly important in English literature and EFL

contexts, where students may use AI to generate literary responses without critically examining the assumptions behind them.

The findings also have implications for digital humanities. Digital humanities has long explored computational approaches to literary and cultural analysis, but the rise of generative AI requires a renewed distinction between computational pattern recognition and humanistic interpretation. Digital humanities scholarship argues that computational methods can enrich literary studies but require careful methodological framing (Gagarina, 2023). The AI-in-humanities debate also highlights interpretive challenges, with arguments about whether automation can substitute for human reasoning and the value of maintaining distinct roles for structure versus meaning (Francesconi, 2022; Gagarina, 2023). The present study aligns with this view by showing that AI-generated responses are valuable not as substitutes for human interpretation but as instruments that reveal the boundary between structural coherence and culturally grounded meaning-making, consistent with semantic and generative AI phases described in the DH literature (Gagarina, 2023).

Foundational figures in this space McCarty and Underwood are identified as central to digital humanities modelling foundations (Gagarina, 2023), and McCarty's AI definition is captured in AI literature (Durmaz & Kilic, 2023). There are also research ethics implications. Treating AI outputs as neutral or objective interpretations may obscure the biases and assumptions embedded in model training, alignment, and data representation. Bender et al. (2021), Birhane et al. (2021), Blodgett et al. (2020), Weidinger et al. (2022), and Gallegos et al. (2024) all caution that AI systems may reproduce social, cultural, and epistemic biases. In literary research, this means that AI-generated interpretations should be transparently documented, including the model used, access date, prompts, number of runs, and output selection procedure. Researchers should avoid anthropomorphizing AI as a conscious reader and should instead define AI outputs as algorithmically generated textual artifacts.

The study therefore responds to the fourth research question by clarifying the limits of conceptualizing AI as a reader in literary studies and literary education. AI may be considered a reader only in a limited metaphorical sense. It can simulate interpretive discourse, but it does not participate in reception as a human subject does. It lacks affective vulnerability, cultural belonging, moral accountability, and lived historical experience. The implication is not that AI should be excluded from literary studies, but that its role must be carefully limited and theoretically defined. AI is best understood as a supplementary analytical companion, a comparative artifact, or a prompt for critical discussion rather than as an interpretive authority.

5.5 Gaps, Novelty, and Theoretical Contribution

This study addresses several gaps in the existing literature. First, while reader-response theory has extensively examined the role of human readers in producing meaning, it has rarely been extended to non-human algorithmic systems. Second, while AI studies have investigated bias, fairness, creativity, and educational use, fewer studies have examined the interpretive status of AI-generated literary responses through reception theory. Third, while folklore studies have emphasized cultural memory, moral instruction, and identity, limited research has investigated how AI interprets folklore in comparison with culturally situated human readers.

The novelty of the study lies in connecting these three areas. It brings reader-response theory, AI criticism, and folklore reception into a single comparative framework. It introduces *algorithmic positivity* as a concept for explaining AI's tendency to produce affirmative, emotionally smooth, and morally generalized interpretations. It also identifies *cultural abstraction* as a pattern through which AI reduces culturally embedded narratives into universal moral lessons. These concepts help explain why AI-generated interpretations may appear useful but remain limited in literary and educational contexts.

Theoretically, the study contributes to reader-response theory by testing its assumptions in relation to AI. If meaning emerges through a transaction between text and reader, then AI raises the question of whether a system without consciousness, memory, emotion, or cultural identity can participate in such a transaction. The findings suggest that AI can simulate the language of response but cannot fully enact the conditions of reception. This distinction refines the concept of "reader" in contemporary literary studies. It also contributes to digital humanities by arguing that AI should be analyzed not only in terms of performance but also in terms of epistemological limitation.

The study also contributes to folklore reception by showing that cultural narratives reveal the limits of algorithmic interpretation. Folklore is not merely a useful dataset for testing AI comprehension; folklore is culturally dense, requiring sensitivity to value conflict, moral ambiguity, and collective memory. When AI reduces these complexities to universal lessons, it highlights the need for human judgment. This is especially relevant to literary education, where folklore can strengthen intercultural awareness, moral reasoning, and critical AI literacy.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved 30 undergraduate students from a specific educational and cultural context, so the findings cannot be generalized to all readers. The study

also focused on four folktales from Indonesian and English traditions, which means that other folklore traditions may generate different interpretive patterns. In addition, the AI responses were dependent on a particular model, prompt design, access date, and output conditions. Different models, multilingual prompts, or culturally specific prompting strategies may produce different results. These limitations do not weaken the study's theoretical contribution, but they clarify the scope of its claims.

Future research should expand this work in several directions. First, future studies could compare multiple AI models, including GPT-based systems, Gemini, Claude, Llama, and locally developed language models, to examine whether algorithmic positivity and cultural abstraction appear across systems. Second, researchers could include participants from diverse cultural, linguistic, and generational backgrounds to examine how cultural proximity shapes folklore reception. Third, future studies could use multilingual prompts and original-language folktales to investigate whether AI interpretation changes when folklore is not mediated through English. Fourth, larger folklore corpora from Southeast Asian, African, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, and Latin American traditions could be used to test whether AI interpretations reproduce dominant global cultural frames. Finally, future research should examine classroom-based interventions in which students compare their own interpretations with AI outputs, thereby developing both literary competence and critical AI literacy. Such studies would extend the present research from textual comparison to pedagogical practice and would further clarify how AI can be responsibly integrated into literary and cultural education.

6. Conclusions

This study concludes that artificial intelligence can generate fluent, coherent, and structurally organized interpretations of folklore, but it cannot fully function as an experiential reader because literary reception depends on emotional engagement, moral judgment, cultural memory, and situated human experience. By comparing human readers' and AI-generated responses to *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, *Timun Mas*, *Cinderella*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the study found that human readers produced more varied, affective, critical, and culturally grounded interpretations, while AI responses tended to display structural consistency, emotional flattening, moral smoothing, and cultural abstraction. The key novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing AI as a *simulated reader* rather than an interpretive subject and in identifying *algorithmic positivity* as a recurring pattern in AI-generated literary interpretation, where ambiguity, discomfort, and cultural tension are transformed into generalized moral lessons.

These findings contribute to reader-response theory, reception studies, folklore scholarship, digital humanities, and literary education by showing that the value of AI lies not in replacing human interpretation but in making visible the distinctive qualities of human reading: affective depth, ethical hesitation, cultural negotiation, and interpretive plurality. Pedagogically, the study implies that AI should be used as a comparative artifact or critical learning tool rather than as an authoritative interpreter, especially when teaching culturally embedded narratives. However, because this study involved a limited group of undergraduate readers, four selected folktales, and one AI-generated response context, future research should compare multiple AI models, include more culturally and linguistically diverse participants, use multilingual and original-language folklore texts, and examine broader narrative traditions such as Southeast Asian, Indigenous, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American folklore to further test the cultural limits of algorithmic interpretation.

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