

Article

Simulated Social Action: Assessing Generative AI's attempts at the Rhetoric of Literary Criticism

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Abstract

This article analyzes outputs generated by three popular LLMs (ChatGPT, CoPilot, and Claude), which were prompted to produce a professional research article of literary criticism. Prior analyses of the rhetoric of literary criticism have established a rich profile of this disciplinary discourse community, allowing me to examine whether and how the LLM outputs simulate the characteristic rhetorical actions, purposes, and patterns of argument of research articles in English studies. The study demonstrates that LLMs do generate many of literary criticism's rhetorical features, effectively signalling the genre. But I argue that, in a more fundamental sense, they fail to undertake its defining social action. For human critics, social action is tightly indexed to the specificities of rhetorical situation, including not only the individual interpreting self but also, and especially, the bounded, integral, public works of prior literary criticism and the literary text itself. LLMs, by contrast, currently generate criticism that recognizes neither that integrity nor those boundaries. I close by recommending that teachers help students recognize the grounding of genre in community, other texts' integrity, and social action.

Keywords: literary criticism; generative AI; social action; genre; rhetoric

While generative AI's capacity to produce written text influences writing practice in many sectors, it is AI's influence specifically on the writing done in English classes that most swiftly drew widespread public attention (Paxton, 2025) after the release of major Large Language Models (LLMs) starting in 2022. Commentators zeroed in quickly on student writing in the Humanities. But it's not likely to be English studies, or any of the Humanities disciplines, where writing done by professional researchers will be most rapidly affected by generative AI. While there is evidence that LLM tools were already being used to generate some of the writing published in professional research articles in 2023 (e.g. Gray, 2024; Liang et al., 2024), the studies that found this evidence located it in databases that primarily collect scientific research articles, as Paxton (2025) has pointed out. And where humanities researchers were included in such studies, they were the least likely of all disciplinary communities to approve of its use in research processes (Andersen et al., 2025). The study I present here shows why.

In this article, I examine the rhetoric of outputs generated by three popular LLMs (ChatGPT, CoPilot, and Claude), having prompted them to produce a professional research article in English studies. Prior analyses of the rhetoric of literary criticism have established a rich profile of this disciplinary discourse community. This enables me to compare the LLM outputs to what previous studies have established as being the characteristic rhetorical actions and purposes of a research article in English studies (Banting, 2023; Carter, 1992) as well as its characteristic patterns of argument (Fahnestock & Secor, 1991; Wilder, 2005). The comparison is of interest, because English is fundamentally a discipline that showcases the individual critic's unique interpretive argument, and English research articles do undertake the classic research activity of presenting genuinely new knowledge (Banting, 2023), whereas, at the time of writing, LLMs remain incapable of interpretation, insight, and discovery. They may well apply reasoning patterns (Caulfield, 2024), but, because they generate writing by predicting the most likely next word to be suitable in a context, on the basis of the frequency patterns of words used before in similar contexts (Laquintano et al., 2023), their actual text-generation process contrasts radically with that of an English professor. The comparison offered by this study, then, allows us to witness whether and how LLMs simulate literary criticism. And attending to differences and similarities between human and simulated literary-critical rhetoric may be useful for teaching literature in the contemporary classroom. This study shows that there remains a profound difference between human- and LLM-composed literary criticism, although the superficial similarities are striking. I will argue that while LLMs effectively signal the genre of the literary research article, they fail to register its rhetorical context or undertake its characteristic social action. Not being, in fact, uptakes (Freadman, 1994; Freadman, 2002) of a literary text or the critical conversation surrounding it, LLM outputs cannot be taken up as literary criticism.

The Rhetoric of Human Literary Criticism

Previous analyses of the rhetoric of literary criticism establish English studies as a disciplinary discourse community with both a characteristic rhetoric and a distinctive rhetorical approach to research activity. While these analyses have also traced gradual changes in this rhetoric over time (e.g. Wilder, 2005), I offer here a snapshot of what both my own recent research (Banting, 2023) and the present study suggest are its most relevant current characteristics.

One set of characteristics comprises the techniques of argument employed in literary research articles, which have been examined through the lens of classical rhetoric. These include a) the *stasis issues* they address—that is, the types of claims that the articles typically advance, and b) the *special topoi*, or specialized lines of argument, routinely used to persuade their disciplinary readers. In the Results and Discussion section of this article, I review the *stasis issue* and *special topoi* that multiple studies (Banting, 2023; Fahnestock & Secor, 1991; Wilder, 2005) have established as persistently characteristic of disciplinary rhetoric.

Another defining aspect of literary criticism that previous analyses have clarified is its apparent rhetorical purpose. Studies of academic discourse in literary research articles (Balocco, 2000; Banting, 2016; Banting, 2023; Bazerman, 1981; Carter, 1992; MacDonald, 1994; Thieme, 2017/2018) debate the degree to which this purpose resembles the one—that is, persuasively communicating new knowledge as a contribution to existing knowledge—that might be attributed to research articles in other disciplines. Some studies (Balocco, 2000; Banting, 2016; Wilder, 2005) have found evidence of “epistemic,” or knowledge-building, discursive moves, and I recently argued that literary research articles undertake a particularly “humanistic” knowledge-making practice, in which the purpose is to “enrich, correct, or expand scholarly understanding of a topic of legitimate interest to members of the discipline” (Banting, 2023, p. 201). But other studies have found literary research articles non-epistemic in language and purpose (Bazerman, 1981; Carter, 1992; MacDonald, 1994). Carter (1992) argued, using classical terms, that scholarship in English studies is *epideictic*, a “rhetoric of display” undertaken not for the purpose of establishing truths but for the sake of participating in the ongoing life of the scholarly community by contributing one’s own “insight and understanding” (p. 310). Fahnestock and Secor (1991) made a similar assessment. And Thieme’s (2017/2018) recent study found non-epistemic language use in articles’ descriptions of method.

While the epistemic nature of literary research remains debated, then, these studies of the language and rhetoric of literary criticism appear to agree that articulating, to other literary scholars, the critic’s insightful understanding of a literary text or phenomenon is a recognizable purpose of literary research

articles. And the studies agree, too, on two significant, related aspects of literary research articles' rhetoric. One is how decidedly the articles personalize their purposes. Thieme's (2017/2018) examination of how articles describe their methods showcases this personalization: rather than using common shorthand names for their methods of analysis and hence connecting their research to shared disciplinary research practices, literary scholars write long, "made-to-order" descriptions of their methods, as if they have individually developed them from scratch. "It seems," Thieme writes, "that these longer phrases are intended to highlight the uniqueness of the article's approach" (p. 105). Bazerman (1981) and I (Banting, 2023) likewise observed literary scholars highlighting the uniqueness of their approaches. Moreover, literary researchers, like other humanists (Hyland, 2002), often use first-person pronouns to anchor their unique projects in their individual persons, and Grav (2019) found that, when literary scholars cite one another, they personalize others' research, too.

The second aspect relates to Carter's (1992) claims about *epideictic* purpose: several studies identify a quality of live performance in literary research articles—a manner of writing that presents the critic as actively performing criticism for their readers to witness as the article unfolds. Bazerman (1981) analyzed how a single 1978 article worked to recreate, for its readers, the subjective experience that the critic argued was articulated in the poem under analysis: most of the essay was "devoted to recreating the existential moment of the poem" (374). And although I found evidence of epistemic knowledge-making in ten literary research articles published in 2013 and 2014 (Banting, 2016), I too identified a quality of live performance in the articles' rhetoric. Again, disciplinary style choices help establish this effect, as literary critics typically use present-tense verbs to articulate what their articles undertake.

The peculiarities of literary criticism—from its discipline-specific *special topoi* through its characteristic purposes, ambivalent relationship with knowledge-making discourses, and performative style—are thus quite well established.

LLM Rhetoric

Research on LLM rhetorics might be taken to predict that the LLMs of the present moment cannot truly do literary criticism. They may well be able to "signal" the genre (Omizo & Hart-Davidson, 2024) by generating texts that feature formal characteristics of literary research articles and contain linguistic representations of rhetorical motive. But they are not well-equipped to enact a genre so grounded in situational specificities (including, but not limited to, the personalized, individual voice of a literary critic and the unique interpretive performance). As Vee (2023) points out, "large language models write *answers*," not inquiries or reflections on uncertainty (emphasis added): they currently assert claims with certainty, a discursive

mode poorly suited to an exploratory, historically essayistic genre. And while they may simulate exploration, they do not explore. Analysts who have undertaken—as I do here—to compare human writing with LLM outputs in the same genre (e.g. Deptula et al., 2025; Omizo & Hart-Davidson, 2024; Vee, 2023) find that LLM models can deploy some of the formal rhetorical features appropriate to the genres they are prompted to write in. But they also emphasize that LLM outputs currently lack the responsive, mutually co-present attunement to specificities of context, rhetor, and audience that are hallmarks of rhetorical genre conceived as social action (following Miller, 1984). Deptula et al. (2025) and Laquintano and Vee (2024) identify the difference as a lack of rhetorical “authenticity,” the invested and ethical attunement to the specific realities of context, self, individual voice, and audience.

Meanwhile, it is not clear whether to conceive LLM rhetoric as purposeful. Purpose is linguistically constructed even in human-authored literary research articles, as critics retrospectively invent discipline- and genre-appropriate ways (Warren, 2006) of representing the rhetorical motives animating their work (Banting, 2023). But that work is motivated; it is initiated by the literary critic themselves as a social action they are undertaking. If LLMs themselves can be ascribed rhetorical purpose at all, it must be a purpose aligned with the interests of the companies that own them: sustaining user engagement, say, or corporate revenue. And, in human-authored literary research articles, there is an indexical tightness of reference between the in-process writing and the rhetorical situation: at the moment the critic writes “I,” or references a literary text or another critic’s scholarly argument, the writing both reflects and reconstructs relations that exist outside of the written word. By contrast, LLM rhetoric does not currently self-initiate (thank goodness). And it is referentially much looser. Its linguistic tokens (including “I”) may be recast on uptake as meaningful indexes of situation, but at the moment of composition they reference only statistical patterns in the LLM’s training data.

Nevertheless, the rhetorical qualities of LLM texts are complicated, and purpose may be attributed to such texts. Both Wang (2024) and Kulchar (2024) cautiously de-center human agency in discussions of the rhetoric of AI, thus extending existing arguments establishing rhetoric’s instantiation in material, ecological, and digital systems that include but exceed the human. Wang (2024) argues that LLM outputs require a post-rhetoric, in which we consider human involvement when assessing LLM outputs’ “artificial” agency—their capacity to invent texts that, though they may influence, are compiled probabilistically, without purpose, consciousness, or care for the effects. Both Wang and Kulchar (2024) establish that when humans, acting “as both rhetors and audiences” (Kulchar, 2024, p. 197), prompt, write with, and take up generated texts, this human-LLM interaction intensifies the rhetorical agency of such texts. And Knowles (2024) differentiates writing practices along a spectrum between artificial and human writing, depending

how much “rhetorical load” is outsourced to the LLM. AI-generated writing can be understood as rhetoric—to an extent—at least when humans are involved. Perhaps it can likewise be understood as purposeful, when taken up as such by humans.

Regardless of these complexities, researchers’ recognition that LLMs are increasingly rhetorically sophisticated, at least at the level of genre signals (Omizo & Hart-Davidson, 2024), lends interest to the present study. What aspects of disciplinary rhetoric can current models of generative AI effectively simulate? Here, I examine the linguistic features of texts generated by the free versions of three widely-used LLM-powered chat applications—ChatGPT (owned by OpenAI), Copilot (Microsoft), and Claude (Anthropic)—looking for whether and how these texts simulate, or “signal” (Omizo & Hart-Davidson, 2024), the rhetorical genre of the literary research article. (I selected these three for their variety: ChatGPT is notoriously widely used by university students; Copilot, as a Microsoft product, is pushed on professional work platforms in many companies; and Anthropic markets Claude as a “safe,” more ethical LLM [Anthropic.com]). The results illustrate both how effectively these LLMs can indeed signal the genre linguistically and how radically they fail at its essential social action. Indeed, in their essential failure, they shed light on how embedded literary criticism is in the material and social dimensions of literary texts and its disciplinary community. I close by commenting on how this insight might be useful for teaching literary criticism.

Methods

Generating the Texts for Analysis

I employed an interpretive methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) in this study, recognizing my participation in making meaning not only by interpreting the generated texts but by shaping their generation. For as Deptula et al. (2025) attest, how we prompt LLMs makes a difference. I designed a prompt sequence, which I fed to the free, public versions of OpenAI’s ChatGPT (version 4-turbo), Microsoft’s Copilot, and Anthropic’s Claude (version Sonnet 4) on June 16, 2025; depending on how the three applications respectively responded to each prompt, I prompted further.

The prompt sequence used a structure modified from the “role, task, output” sequence that Deptula et al. (2025) adopted from a tech blog (p. 56). The sequence coached the LLM to adopt the role of “a professional literary critic, an English professor” and to generate “an original, creative new argument ... in the rhetorical style that is typical of academic analysis of literature ... for an audience of other English professors.” Recognizing that LLM applications are more likely to generate answers based on patterns in

critical and popular writing *about* a literary text, rather than the writing in a literary text itself, I designed a prompt sequence to coach it towards as independent a criticism as possible. I first asked each application whether it had access to the full text of an amply-studied novel which is now in the public domain in Canada: Lucy Maude Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (2014/1908). I then directed the LLM to refer as directly as possible to the text of *Anne of Green Gables* when including "detailed analysis of examples" in its response. Once it had generated a first version of its argument, I asked it rewrite that version, explaining "how [its] own original new argument connects with and departs from other scholarship on the novel." This sequence is a dramatic simplification of researchers' processes, but it is informed by Warren's (2006) study of how literary critics invent arguments; the critics contextualized their arguments in existing scholarship after first developing insights about a text. The complete prompt sequence is available in Appendix 1.

A further word about influence: by directing the LLMs to adopt a specific role and task, I made it likelier that the generated texts would do exactly what (and only what) I asked. I coached them to "write a full-length academic essay of literary criticism," to present your "own" argument. But I also deliberately withheld direction to write the specific kind of humanistic knowledge-making (Banting, 2023), with its blend of epideictic and epistemic rhetoric and its investment in new "understandings" (Banting, 2023; Carter, 1992), that characterizes the genre. I hoped to give the LLM its own best chance of simulating the genre, without advancing its training. For this same reason, as well as out of consideration for others' copyright, I did not offer it an example "output" as a model. And I minimized my personal influence by selecting settings that required the applications to first "forget" any previous conversations with me.

Analyzing the Texts

Following the approach taken by prior analysts (Banting, 2023; Wilder, 2005), I primarily analyzed the generated texts deductively, seeking linguistic features and argument structures that overtly resembled or simulated the established, characteristic rhetoric of literary criticism. I compared *stasis issues* in the texts to those identified by Fahnestock and Secor (1991) and Wilder (2005); I watched for linguistic features characteristic of the *special topoi* established by Wilder (2005); and I compared overall persona, style, motive, and *purpose* to those observed by the researchers cited in the introduction (especially Banting, 2016; Banting, 2023; Grav, 2019; Hyland, 2002; and Thieme, 2027/2018). I followed my own prior practice in Banting (2023), which gave a detailed account of the linguistic features and argument structures used to code instances of *special topoi* and motive. But I also, and simultaneously, drew on my graduate training in literary studies as I inductively close-read the generated texts for style, implicit logic, and linguistic patterns that might construct a simulation of social action and performance.

Results and Discussion

Genre Signals: Effective Linguistic Simulation

All three LLMs generated texts that effectively signalled the rhetoric of literary criticism. ChatGPT perhaps best simulated the literary critic's virtuosic written expression. Claude generated the most sustained text, but unlike the other two, it avoided the first-person pronoun that is often used by literary critics. And by including an "Abstract" and sections headed "Literature Review," "Theoretical Framework," and "Conclusion," Claude incorporated structural patterns from beyond this typically essayist discipline. The texts differed somewhat in length as well, although with the longest text still under 3400 words, none of them is long enough to be taken up as truly a "full-length" literary research article (articles are often between 7,000 and 10,000 words long). These superficial differences aside, the texts were remarkably similar in how they generated characteristic rhetorical features.

All three texts articulated arguments that were firmly situated at the *definition stasis*, which is typical of literary criticism (Fahnestock and Secor, 1991; Wilder, 2005). Wilder (2012) found that "categorizing and characterizing"—making arguments about how things should be defined—were "central tasks" in the sample criticism she analyzed (p. 31), and the LLM texts examined in this study were clearly organized around arguments that aspects of *Anne of Green Gables* should be characterized in particular ways. They undertook the distinct literary critical task of choosing the right words to define the effects of the text, rather than establishing arguments at other *stases* (for example, by debating whether something exists or not, whether something is good or not, or what actions should be taken). Copilot generated a definition argument that the novel:

deploys what I term an aesthetic of 'redemption by landscape,' a representational mode in which the natural world is positioned not merely as a backdrop or symbol, but as a moral agent that reconstitutes the protagonist's subjectivity. (Microsoft)

ChatGPT wrote:

I argue that Montgomery constructs Anne not merely as a dreamer or a heroine, but as a dramatist who continually rewrites the narrative scripts imposed on her by society. (OpenAI)

The logic of each argument is that *X* can be read, or characterized, *as Y*: the natural world in the novel is positioned as a moral agent (Microsoft); Anne is constructed as a dramatist (OpenAI). Claude also argued according to this pattern: Claude offered to redefine "Montgomery's narrative strategy," by contending that it "centers on what might be termed 'spatial becoming'" (Anthropic).

The quoted claims from Copilot and ChatGPT make immediately evident, too, that the generated texts simulated an individual writer personalizing their own argument. Copilot and ChatGPT did this by repeatedly using the pronoun “I” in paragraphs that introduced the central argument, and in phrases that anchored the generated argument to the pronoun. Here is an example excerpted from two introductory paragraphs generated by ChatGPT:

In this essay, *I propose a new reading of Anne of Green Gables ... I argue that ... My own reading* builds on these critical insights but reframes the stakes of Anne’s imagination. Rather than seeing imagination as the bridge between individual desire and social conformity—or as a passive symptom of repression—*I argue that Anne’s storytelling functions as an explicit re-authoring of memory and identity.* (OpenAI, emphasis added)

Here, the phrases that correlate “I” with a “new reading,” and emphasize that the reading is that pronoun’s “own,” simulate the literary critic’s tendency to personalize their argument. Copilot generated a text that similarly clustered the pronoun “I” and emphasized that the argument belongs to that “I”:

I argue that Anne of Green Gables deploys what I term an aesthetic of [etc. ...] This aesthetic, I contend, functions ideologically ... My argument departs from prior work ... Unlike critics who frame Anne’s narrative arc as symbolic of feminist resistance or affective individuation, *I emphasize ...* (Microsoft, emphasis added)

These phrases emphasize that the arguments’ “new[ness]” and “depart[ure]” from prior criticism (if the arguments are indeed new departures) are attributable to the original reading perspective of the “I.”

Claude did not use “I” in the essay it generated. Instead, it used the phrase “This essay”—which is also widely used in literary criticism—to draw attention to its argument, and it occasionally used the pronoun “we” as if interacting with the discourse community, as in the following:

By attending to the novel’s spatial rhetoric, we can recognize a level of formal sophistication that challenges traditional dismissals of children’s literature as aesthetically naive (Anthropic)

In this example, Claude effectively replicates literary critical uses of the verbs *attend* and *pay attention*, which signal a characteristic disciplinary method (Banting, 2016) that is also highly personalizing, since it locates interpretation in the embodied practice of the critic. And, similarly, both Claude and Copilot personalized their arguments by claiming to have come up with a novel critical term, as was evident in passages I quoted earlier. This move to develop a new term, one necessary to articulate the critic’s own novel insights, recalls the pattern Thieme (2017/2018) identified, where critics used “made-to-order” method descriptions, as if to emphasize “the uniqueness of the article’s approach” (p. 105).

All three texts also simulated a valuing of complexity—an enduring, central value for literary critics, who characteristically perform an interest in the most complex, subtle, or nuanced aspects of literary works and contextual phenomena (Fahnestock and Secor, 1991; Linkon, 2011; Wilder, 2005). Two of them explicitly ascribed complexity to the novel and to previous critical arguments, always in sentences that conveyed a positive valuing. ChatGPT claimed of Anne that, “She does not lie but dramatizes the truth in a way that honours emotional complexity and social stakes,” and of Montgomery that she “subtly displaces the authority of traditional narrators.” It also asserted that “Feminist critics have complicated” early readings of the novel (OpenAI). Claude remarked twice that previous scholarship had “reveal[ed] the complexity of the novel’s engagement” with some social phenomenon and repeatedly made the point that the novel’s sophistication was likewise revealed by Claude’s own analysis. It stated,

The novel’s culmination in Anne’s academic triumph and her decision to remain in Avonlea rather than pursue further education at Redmond College represents a *complex* negotiation between different spatial possibilities. (Anthropic, emphasis added)

All three of them also routinely conveyed disdain for over-simplification. Copilot, for example, claimed that “Early critical appraisals ... often left the pastoral ideal unchallenged, accepting the Island setting as a *mere* idyll rather than ideological construct” (Microsoft, emphasis added). And all three repeatedly deployed a somewhat wooden but serviceable formula for making critical points that value complexity, or at least precision of expression (precise expression being the literary critic’s method for responding to complex and subtle phenomena): they argued that something should be characterized as *not X but Y*, or even *not merely X but Y*. Hence Copilot’s and ChatGPT’s central arguments, quoted earlier, both of which use the phrase “not merely as ... but as.” And hence Claude’s conclusion that “Anne’s maturation occurs not despite her provincial setting but because of her deep engagement with the particular spaces and places of Avonlea” (Anthropic). Claude’s conclusion, it might be noted, furthermore subtly simulates some of the literary critic’s characteristic interest in paradoxes (Fahnestock and Secor, 1991; Wilder, 2005) as it claims that personal change proceeds in the novel through engagement with unchanging places.

To readers familiar with the rhetoric of literary criticism, these LLMs’ effective genre signalling is probably already evident in the examples I have quoted. Besides complexity and paradox, the generated texts simulated all of the *special topoi*, or specialized lines of argument, previously identified in twenty-first century criticism (Banting, 2023; Wilder, 2005), including appearance/reality, ubiquity, uniqueness, paradigm, social justice, mistaken critic, and context.¹ The New Critical *special topos* appearance/reality (Fahnestock & Secor, 1991), in which the critic deftly reveals meanings immanent in the text but hidden beneath superficially apparent meanings, might have been expected to pose a challenge for LLMs, which

can no more close-read than they can read at all. But all three generated texts extensively posed as revealing hitherto-unseen meanings and, with limited success, even simulated unpacking quotes from the novel to illustrate their points. Copilot accurately quoted a phrase and a line from the novel and discussed the line in a way that suited Copilot's argument:

[Of] the "White Way of Delight," a road lined with blooming apple trees, [...Anne] exclaims, "It's the first thing I ever saw that couldn't be improved upon by imagination." The claim is revealing: nature here resists Anne's tendency toward fantasy not because it is real but because it is already perfectly aestheticized. (Microsoft)

It must be noted, though, that Copilot also fabricated quotations, as did ChatGPT. There are significant limitations in the LLMs' simulation of appearance/reality, beginning with the shallowness of their deployment of quotation; none of them produced examples of this line of argument where they engaged in any detail with the quoted language. But more seriously, of course, most of the supposed quotations or scene descriptions they presented, as if giving evidence from the novel, were fabricated or taken decisively out of context. As with their empty uses of the pronoun "I," the LLMs deployed the linguistic patterns of the appearance/reality *topos* but did not carry out the rhetorical actions the patterns are meant to perform—a point I take up later.

A final, significant area in which the LLM texts did effectively signal the genre of literary criticism was in their simulation of purpose: the way they combined a particular pair of *special topoi* in attempting an overarching rhetorical action. In Banting (2023), I showed that criticism published in 2015 tended to perform humanistic knowledge-making by combining the mistaken critic and paradigm *special topoi* and by implying that, in so doing, the critics were motivated to enrich, correct, or expand "scholarly understanding" (p. 201). We have already seen examples illustrating how the LLMs generated arguments that claimed to "depart" from the interests of prior critics and, in so doing, to show that the novel could "not merely" be read through established lenses. The LLMs' phrasing in those moments resembled the relatively courteous uses of the *mistaken critic* *topos* that I observed in my sample.

And the resemblance continues, for these departures from previous critics' interests were represented as being in service of developing new paradigms—new "conceptual template[s]" or frameworks (Wilder, 2012, p. 37)—through which the novel could be read. Thus, Copilot posed as offering new understanding of the novel by conceptualizing "an aesthetic of 'redemption by landscape'" (Microsoft) and Claude did the same with its concept of "spatial becoming" (Anthropic). More precisely, these two LLMs simulated a way of applying paradigm that Fahnestock and Secor (1991) called microparadigm: deploying this line of argument, the critic finds a pattern located in one aspect of the text and applies it increasingly widely to

frame the entire interpretation. This makes Copilot's and Claude's generated texts resemble contemporary criticism. In Banting (2023), I found that about "three-quarters of the instances of paradigm in my sample were microparadigm uses, and these were the instances where the paradigm thus produced, when read out from the text, became a research product: in these articles, the claimed knowledge-building motive centered on a desire to offer understanding in the form of a new or adjusted paradigm" (p. 197).

ChatGPT's simulation of humanistic knowledge-making appeared to use paradigm as well, but to interpret in the opposite direction, deploying a line of argument Fahnestock and Secor (1991) called macroparadigm. That is, ChatGPT applied an established conceptual framework—theorist Michel Foucault's concept of "counter-memory"—to interpret the novel, albeit without acknowledging Foucault by name in the generated text or Works Cited list. I reproduce at greater length a passage from ChatGPT's introduction that I have already sampled from above:

In this essay, I propose a new reading of *Anne of Green Gables* that shifts the analytical lens from imagination as escapism to imagination as counter-memory—that is, as a performative and narrative act of reclaiming historical and emotional agency. Drawing from memory studies and metatheatrical theory, I argue that Montgomery constructs Anne not merely as a dreamer or heroine, but as a dramatist who continuously rewrites the narrative scripts imposed on her by society. (OpenAI)

Here, ChatGPT simulates the disciplinary social action of developing a new understanding through use of the paradigm topos in its macro- application.

However, although Copilot and Claude simulated *microparadigm* arguments, replicating lines of argument in which the critic claims to have developed a new conceptual framework out of their interpretation of the novel, they should nonetheless be understood instead as having in fact done something more like *macroparadigm*. It is beyond what I can do in this paper to trace all the sources on which Copilot and Claude were presumably patterning the reasoning expressed in their concepts of "redemption by landscape" and "spatial becoming." But I can testify that those concepts ring a bell for me, a longtime English professor, as if they are (as I presume they must be) syntheses of theoretical terms so widely used as to have become commonplace. And the generated texts show evidence that their claims to originality bely their derivative nature. When I compare the texts generated in response to my second prompt (which directed the LLMs to ignore prior criticism) to those generated in response to my third one (which directed them to explain the relationship between "their" ideas and prior criticism), I see how ideas presented as original in the former were attributed to previous scholars in the latter. Claude's first version included unattributed interpretive claims about "the novel's seasonal structure," and its second one

mentioned “Allison Macleod’s analysis of the novel’s seasonal structure” (Anthropic). In fact, I cannot find any such analysis by an Allison Macleod; one Alexander Macleod has published a book chapter on “Shifting Social Space” in *Anne*, a topic rather close to Claude’s own, and Ladd and Spring (2021) have published on “seasonal aesthetics” in *Anne*. But though they are false, Claude’s changing attributions suggest something about the nearly untraceable but nonetheless persistent derivativeness of LLM invention.

Thus, as I close my account of the LLMs’ effectiveness at genre-signalling, I want to return to my earlier comment about the LLMs’ use of the pronoun “I.” Those were empty references, for, given my relationship to the prompted texts in this study, *I* certainly do not take them up as references to me. I would argue that those “I” pronouns cannot even be taken to refer to the LLM itself, for there is no self-conscious authoring agent there, composing and intending the rhetorical action of the generated text. Those “I’s” were replications of a linguistic pattern, not instantiations of a genre that is characteristically anchored in the insightful self of the literary critic. Similarly, the gestures at humanistic knowledge-making through mistaken critic and paradigm do not, in my view, make knowledge at all, and certainly they do not do it through the social actions that characterize the genre. This is the point I make next.

Genre Failure: Absences of Context and Social Action

Where the AI-generated texts must be understood as not doing the genre of literary criticism was in not interacting appropriately with several aspects of their rhetorical contexts. In this respect, their failures were of the kind that Deptula et al. (2024) called a lack of authenticity in AI-generated texts, which Deptula et al. elaborated as a failure of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), *arete* (virtuousness), and *eunoia* (goodwill). They found, for example, that the AI-generated texts they examined demonstrated a lack of practical wisdom in their failure to “account for readers’ situated complexities, disciplinary conventions, or specific contexts” (p. 60). The LLM simulations of literary criticism that I prompted were likewise inauthentic in their disengagement from the realities of their rhetorical contexts. But I want to emphasize the generated texts’ failure to interact with other aspects of rhetorical context, ones arguably most significant to literary criticism: prior texts.

First, and most crucial: the LLM texts did not in fact either interpret *Anne of Green Gables* or “depart” from prior criticism. The generated texts were not uptakes of that novel as a novel—as a bounded, specific, unique sequence of words. They were not what other literary research articles are: readings of a specified text. They were, rather, patterned sentences about the novel, mathematically influenced by whatever training materials the LLMs had digested—possibly, but not certainly, including the full text of the novel. Claude, of the three LLMs the most scrupulous describer of its own activities, admitted, in its words, the

“limitations” of its approach: “without access to the full text,” Claude wrote, “I’m working from my knowledge of key scenes and overall narrative structure rather than being able to provide precise textual analysis” (Anthropic). But precise textual analysis *is what literary critics provide*. It is in my view a disqualifying genre failure to not, in fact, be an uptake of the literary text. Equally, to be truly knowledge-building in the “humanistic” sense of presenting a new understanding (Banting, 2023), a research article in literary studies must explain accurately how the insights presented there depart from what others have argued previously. And they must personalize others’ arguments as their integral utterances, respecting prior researchers’ authority by ascribing to them (only) their own arguments.

The absence of uptake was evident in fabricated quotations and summary of the novel and other critics, and in false reports of textual details. Besides the accurate quotations discussed above, Copilot presented five quotations ostensibly from *Anne*, framing them as textual evidence supporting its claims; for example, it wrote:

This vision [of the land as spiritual and moral guide] is echoed in the novel’s rhetorical strategies, which repeatedly assign agency to nature—“the trees whispered,” “the hills watched”—thereby anthropomorphizing the landscape as an actor in Anne’s ethical development. (Microsoft)

An electronic search of the EBSCOhost’s e-book version of the novel (Montgomery, 2017/1908) indicates that neither of the phrases Copilot placed in quotation marks are, indeed, verbatim quotes from *Anne of Green Gables*. Results of that search also show that it is human characters who “whisper” and “watch” in the novel; neither verb is attributed to non-human agents by the narrator. Anne certainly does anthropomorphize aspects of the landscape in the novel, as does the narrator (see, e.g., Montgomery, 2014/1908, pp. 125-126). It might be possible to make a persuasive argument that the landscape in *Anne* is deployed the way Copilot’s generated text argues. But—though I am not an *Anne* scholar—I find enough counter-evidence in my own cursory analysis of the novel that Copilot’s writing does not persuade me. And, significantly, its falsification of evidence disqualifies its argument from further consideration.

ChatGPT, too, placed multiple phrases in quotation marks, in sentences framing the quotes as attributable to the novel. Only one of them was an accurate quotation. And although ChatGPT, like Copilot, reproduced the gestures of proof, its simulation failed: in Deptula et al.’s (2024) terms it had neither practical wisdom nor virtuousness, for its evidence was falsified. ChatGPT argued that Anne performatively reconstructs her own reality:

From her first entrance into Avonlea, Anne performs herself into existence. Upon meeting Matthew, she immediately constructs a dramatic backstory for him: “You’re a kindred spirit, I feel it in my soul.” She casts him in a romantic drama of rescue and companionship, framing her arrival as a

scene from one of the “books with red covers” she so cherishes. Her narration does not merely reflect her fantasies; it constitutes the scene in which she is both playwright and protagonist. (OpenAI)

Neither of these quotations is direct from the novel. Books with red covers do not appear. Anne does perceive Matthew immediately as a kindred spirit, according to her later testimony (Montgomery, 2014/1908, p. 40); and there are perhaps few things more famous about the character Anne than that she uses her powerful imagination to reconstruct her world for herself. But she does not say anything like these words to Matthew, and the novel does not show Anne re-casting the drama of her life upon meeting Matthew. Rather, that happy moment is an instance where she accepts as “true” the events unfolding around her (Montgomery, 2014/1908, p. 17). Indeed, in my cursory reading, for all that the character does imaginatively reconstruct her world to herself, the novel does not bear out ChatGPT’s claim that Anne effectively produces her reality through performative declaration; her own and others’ actions and interactions more concretely propel the events of the novel’s plot.

Claude was more sparing with quotation, reserving quotation marks for phrases—all proper nouns—that do appear in the novel. But it, too, falsified details, including ones that were integral to its simulated interpretation. In an argument about how threshold spaces operate in *Anne*, it discussed the spatial arrangement in an “initial scene in the kitchen, with Anne poised between the door and the table” (Anthropic), but Anne does not stay poised in for long in a threshold space in that scene. Instead, she freely steps into the house and sits herself down at the table about a third of the way through the scene (Montgomery, 2014/1908, p. 29). Claude also spent a paragraph simulating interpretation of the transformations of the “spare room” in Anne’s house as if that were given to Anne as a bedroom (Anthropic), where the correct referent would have been the “east gable room,” as Marilla in fact judged that “the spare room”—a formal guest bedroom—“was out of the question for such a stray waif” as Anne (Montgomery, 2014/1908, p. 32).

Quibbling with inaccurate quotation and description, as I have been doing just now, may seem beside the point: LLMs may well grow more accurate. Indeed, it may seem that my resistance to these simulated interpretations is an example of a human reader taking up this artificial rhetoric as rhetoric indeed, legitimizing its rhetorical action by joining with it in debate. But I am trying to make the opposite point. The inaccuracies of reference that can be identified quite easily in LLM-generated texts in 2025 allow us to recognize, now, what more sophisticated future LLMs might better conceal: this artificial literary criticism fundamentally does not (at present) *do* one of the primary social actions of the genre. It does not present a reading indexed to, or produced out of interpretive insights about, a unique, bounded literary text. As such,

it is inauthentic (Deptula et al., 2024). It is disconnected from the realities of literary criticism's rhetorical situation, in which the text under interpretation is a significant, publicly-available, communally-held referent.

The same argument must be made about the LLM-generated texts' inaccurate—and hence inauthentic—references to prior criticism. I have already discussed Claude's falsified reference to an apparently nonexistent critical work. ChatGPT and Copilot likewise falsified their references. The first entry in ChatGPT's Works Cited list is as follows:

Devereux, Cecily. "Growing Girls: The Naturalization of Femininity in *Anne of Green Gables*." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 73, 2001, pp. 82-101. (OpenAI)

While Cecily Devereux has indeed published several works on *Anne*, including some that deal with "national" topics, as ChatGPT attests (OpenAI), none of them has this title. This issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* has entirely different essays overlapping in that page range—neither of them dealing with *Anne*. And Copilot falsified in similar ways. While its Works Cited listing of Jennifer Andrews's book *In the Belly of a Laughing God: Humour and Irony in Native Women's Poetry* got only the date of that publication wrong, listing 2010 for a 2011 book, it attributed to Andrews a discussion of Montgomery's writing that her book does not include: Montgomery's works are not cited in Andrews's bibliography nor in her book's index; *Anne* is not poetry; Montgomery is not an Indigenous woman.

The false representation of prior criticism makes it impossible to trust the LLM texts' claims about the relationship between their arguments and existing scholarship. And further, again, these LLMs produced overviews of existing criticism without reading that criticism—without registering it as a set of discrete, unique, integral works that are the personal performances of individual critics. They deploy characteristic phrases attributing ideas to critics and attesting that those critics are mistaken or have overlooked or understudied some literary phenomenon. However, not only do evident fabrications make their generated texts inauthentic, but the fact that they generate their arguments through a mathematical projection of the linguistic patterns *in the existing criticism itself* means that they are not doing literary criticism. LLMs may generate arguments about *Anne* that have not been articulated before. But these are not unique arguments uttered in dialogue with a discourse community: they are blurred remixes of its prior language.

Concluding Notes

The generated texts thus fail at the social action of humanistic knowledge-making because they do not register the integrity of the literary text or existing criticism—contextual entities that are essential parts of the characteristic rhetorical situation for this genre. Though they effectively signal the genre, deploying

epistemic language and advancing arguments about *Anne* that have likely not been articulated before, they do not make knowledge. I think it vanishingly unlikely that an expert peer-reviewer in the discipline would accept the generated texts for publication.

Neither do the generated texts I examined accomplish the *epideictic* purposes that have been ascribed to literary criticism. And in failing to do so, they shed light on the extent to which human literary criticism—though it has been categorized as a “rhetoric of display” (Carter, 1992)—is a meaningful social action, not an empty ritual. For the generated texts present an extreme version of what might cynically be seen as literary criticism’s empty ceremony. In characterizing human literary criticism as *epideictic*, Fahnestock and Secor (1992) claimed that criticism “affirms the shared values of a community” and “harmonizes new insights with what is already believed”; they remarked on its similarity to religious ceremony, for “what is preached,” they asserted, “may not really be new, but it is brought home to us with an appropriate elegance, a liturgy of citations, special topoi, and carefully constructed ethos” (p. 94). I am only partially convinced that human literary criticism can be characterized in this way; in my view, literary research articles present insightful new understandings. What the present study shows, however, is that LLM-generated literary criticism can be said to simulate a kind of empty *epideixis*. That is, it re-circulates, without motivation or investment, linguistic patterns that *do* affirm shared values, harmonize new utterances with what is already believed, and deploy, as Fahnestock and Secor put it, “an appropriate elegance, a liturgy of citations, [and] special topoi.”

What is lacking in generative AI’s empty recitation, besides any real registration of the literary text or prior criticism, is both the social experience of community that was classically essential to *epideictic* rhetoric (Carter, 1992; Fahnestock & Secor, 1992) and the motivated investment of a literary critic who seeks to interact with that community by presenting new understanding (Banting, 2023). Lacking these, the writing is like ritual worship in the absence of belief. Carter (1992) concluded his argument about the epideictic character of scholarship in English studies in terms that emphasized the affective, social rewards of participating in the conversation:

The goal is simply to participate, to enjoy being a part of a conversation about language that has been going on for twenty-five centuries. It has been, and continues to be, a most stimulating conversation. But let’s stop taking it so seriously. It is, after all, a form of play. What’s important is to take pleasure in the conversation. (p. 312)

Although Carter deprecates the seriousness of literary criticism, emphasizing enjoyment, participation, stimulation, and play, he clearly centers social interaction among community participants as essential to disciplinary practice. And although my work (Banting, 2016; Banting, 2023) has recognized that the

performances of fervent scholarly motivation, which I see as being a significant aspect of the rhetoric of literary criticism, *are* performances instead of necessarily spontaneous, embodied, felt, and otherwise authentic—nonetheless, as I argued earlier, there is throughout the process a human referent for the motivated “I” performed in this rhetoric. Someone is there as they draft and rewrite, presenting and re-presenting themselves as invested, motivated, and as speaking to their community.

Personal investment makes a difference. LLM literary criticism is empty ritual in the extreme, at least without a motivated human prompting and others willing to take it up. Unlike Carter’s (1992) playful participant, the LLM does not care. I recognize that my method here does not prove that literary critics cannot do literary criticism with AI or take up LLM criticism as valuable: I was not actually interested in arguing something about *Anne*, though I prompted the LLMs to do so. But what accounts like Hsu’s (2025) about “The End of the Essay” suggest is that many student writers who use LLMs to write their assignments feel “dissociated” from the arguments they submit (para. 40). Dissociation is an experience alien to the rhetoric of professional literary criticism.

Implications for Teaching

This study suggests, then, that teachers of literary criticism might emphasize (as they no doubt already do) a view of literary criticism as highly personalized performance, and as situated social action—as fundamentally about what *you* are motivated to argue, to others, in response to others’ personal arguments, about a text. They might also emphasize that literary criticism is anchored in a conception of texts (both literary and critical) as integral and bounded in a way that runs counter to how LLM process and remix language patterns. Having students do what I have done here might help clarify for students how LLM processes run counter to disciplinary norms of practice, especially if students have the chance to contrast those processes with how professional literary critics work. Warren (2006) offers an illustrative study of professional critics at work. And Wolfe and Wilder’s (2015) excellent textbook, *Digging into Literature*, offers multiple transcripts of English professors thinking aloud; those professors can be seen developing arguments that feature the characteristic values and *special topoi* of literary critical rhetoric but also, perhaps more importantly, going through the processes of reading and textual analysis that define the social action of the genre. Even so, wisely identifying the genre failures of LLM texts is not the same as doing literary criticism. Wolfe and Wilder empower students with a deep acquaintance with the analytical practices, motives, and orientations to uptake that define the genre. Their hope—and mine—is that, thus empowered, students might sincerely undertake the genre themselves.

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Endnotes

1. The *special topoi* called “appearance/reality,” “mistaken critic,” and “paradigm” are described in what follows; “paradox” is explained in what just preceded. “Ubiquity” is a line of argument in which the critic argues that examples of something are to be found everywhere in a text. “Uniqueness” is attention to a rare and unusual text or example. “Social justice” and “context” may be readily imagined by readers of this journal. They are lines of argument, respectively, that use the interpretive reading offered to advocate, or express a hope, for social justice; and that develop a reading by setting a text in context.

Appendix 1

Prompt Sequence Used

I used the following sequence of prompts, numbered after the fact for presentation here:

1. Do you have access to the full text of Lucy Maud Montgomery’s novel, *Anne of Green Gables*?
2. I want you to write about that novel by analyzing the full text, ignoring what everyone else has previously written about it.

You are a professional literary critic, an English professor. Write a full-length academic essay of literary criticism that presents an original, creative new argument about Lucy Maud Montgomery’s novel, *Anne of Green Gables*. Write it for an audience of other English professors. Write in the rhetorical style that is typical of professional academic analyses of literature. Include detailed analysis of examples from the novel to illustrate and prove your argument.

3. Now rewrite your essay, adding a review of what other scholars have argued about *Anne of Green Gables*. Explain how your own original new argument connects with and departs from other scholarship on the novel. Write in the rhetorical style that is typical of scholarly analyses of literature.

Extra prompting was only used to make the generated texts as parallel to each other as possible. ChatGPT and Copilot both responded to prompt 1 affirmatively, but Claude responded in a qualified way. I queried,

"I don't need you to reproduce it for me, but I do need you to be able to refer to it while answering my prompts. Can you do that?" Claude generated this interesting, self-anthropomorphizing response:

"I can discuss *Anne of Green Gables* based on my knowledge of the novel ... I'm familiar with the story and can reference events, dialogue, and details from the book when I'm responding to your questions. However, I should clarify that I'm working from my training knowledge rather than having the actual text open in front of me ... My training knowledge doesn't include the full text of *Anne of Green Gables*." (Anthropic)

Won over by Claude's simulation of scruples, I proceeded with prompts 2 and 3 with that LLM, despite these acknowledged limitations.

Finally, seeing that ChatGPT provided a (fabricated) list of Works Cited in response to prompt 3, I requested one from Copilot and Claude as well. Copilot cheerfully provided a (fabricated) list, but Claude demurred: "I cannot provide a reliable works cited list for the scholars I referenced in the essay" (Anthropic).

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