

# RECOLLECTION IN TRANQUILLITY: LITERATURE, ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

## RECOLLECTION IN TRANQUILLITY: LETTERATURA, AMBIENTE E APPRENDIMENTO TRASFORMATIVO

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### ABSTRACT

The article investigates the relationship between literature, the environment and transformative education. Poetic language, presented through a diachronic analysis, emerges as a pedagogical device that fosters critical reflection and language awareness. The analysis of literary texts related to the environment, as presented in an ongoing educational practice, show how aesthetic experience, integrated with digital languages and e-tivities, can enhance, rather than diminish, the potential of education.

### Italiano

L'articolo indaga la relazione tra letteratura, ambiente ed educazione trasformativa. Il linguaggio poetico, analizzato in prospettiva diacronica, emerge come un dispositivo pedagogico capace di promuovere la riflessione critica e la consapevolezza linguistica (language awareness). L'analisi di testi letterari legati al tema dell'ambiente, condotta nell'ambito di una pratica educativa in corso, mostra come l'esperienza estetica, integrata con i linguaggi digitali e con le *e-tivities*, possa potenziare il valore trasformativo dell'educazione.

### KEYWORDS

Inglese : Transformative education; literary analysis; experiential learning; language awareness; critical reflection.

Italiano: educazione trasformativa; analisi letteraria, language awareness; riflessione critica;

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## Introduction

Starting from an analysis of the relationship between literature and the environment, this contribution aims to explore the formative potential of aesthetic experience, understood as an opportunity for both personal and collective transformation. In this perspective, literature does not merely represent the natural world but establishes a dialogue with the self, engaging emotions and imagination, thus fostering a process of language and critical awareness. Accordingly, the environment is intended not only as a narrative setting but as an educational space capable of generating shared visions and transformative experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Maturana & Varela, 1987).

Through a chronological approach to literary texts, and a selection of passages and authors, the proposed analysis progressively leads to the present scenario, enhancing an understanding of the complex challenges of the contemporary world, shaped by the paradigm of complexity (Morin, 1999; Ceruti, 2018). The same perspective of complexity invites to overcome rigid disciplinary boundaries, legitimating an integrated approach between different languages, such as literature and pedagogy, that enables to involve different dimensions of learning, emotional and cognitive, integrating sensory experience towards critical reflection. Within this framework, the literary examples examined—though situated in specific historical and cultural contexts—assume a paradigmatic value, as they offer fertile insights for rethinking the relationship between aesthetic experience and transformative educational processes (Dewey, 1934; Nussbaum, 2010).

The aim of this contribution is, thus, to present a direction for educational research and practice that stands on two principles. On the one hand, it reaffirms the transformative role of education, understood as a practice capable of combining aesthetic sensitivity with ethical responsibility and cognition (Dewey, 1934; Giroux, 2023). On the other hand, it emphasizes the importance of literary and linguistic education, recognising both literature formative potential, and language - which is the medium of literature - as a tool to achieve awareness; that is, of metalinguistic, cultural, and critical consciousness, essential for constructing pathways of growth and critical formation (Fairclough, 1992; James & Garrett, 1992; Angelini & Savoia, 2019).

Within this theoretical framework, the article presents an ongoing educational research which is being conducted within Doctoral courses at Pegaso Telematic University.

The initiative aims to test how the literary language, through the expert re-elaboration of experience, guided in interactive classes, can foster educational processes leading to self-awareness. Drawing on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and the epistemology of the embodied mind (Maturana & Varela, 1987; Gomez Paloma, 2017), the practice highlights the pedagogical value of literary experience as an embodied, reflective, and relational (Tarantino et al. 2023).

The methodological framework articulates through collective reading, interpretative dialogue, and digital *e-tivities* specifically designed to integrate traditional and technological languages (Salmon, 2013; Dipace et al., 2025a). It presents as an explorative research model, with a qualitative approach.

Data are gathered through sentiment analysis approach and formative assessment is achieved with self-reflective tools, such as digital e-portfolio.

The activities start from a shared lecture of selected and meaningful literary passages, dealing with the relationship with nature, and chosen as *stimuli* for their power to awaken students' imagination and reflection. Extracts are presented in a diachronic way, starting significantly from the end of XVIII century and progressively approaching the present. Thematically, they all present the relationship of human beings with nature. Students are thus encouraged to re-elaborate personal emotions and lived experiences within a shared, reflective context. The model aim is to understand how literature can become a laboratory for transformative and embodied learning, combining aesthetic sensitivity and leading to critical thought. For the experimentation in progress, it has been decided to deal with texts coming from the British literature. However, all literary traditions may represent a valid territory to confront with.

## **1. Literature and the Environment: From Representation to Experience**

The relationship between literature and the environment constitutes one of the most fruitful areas for exploring the educational function of aesthetic experience. Literature, in fact, does not merely describe or represent nature, but engages with it as an active interlocutor in the creative process and as a generative space of meaning. The environment is not a neutral setting, but a force that stimulates imagination, nurtures sensitivity, provokes critical reflection and, when mediated through education, gives way to a profound transformation (Tarantino et al., 2023; Vacchelli, 2021). At the same time, contact with literature offers an opportunity to

develop language awareness, enabling learners to grasp the profound relationship between language, experience, and the interpretation of the world (Giroux, 2023; Fairclough, 1992; James & Garrett, 1992). In this intersection, aesthetic experience and linguistic awareness converge, activating both the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning.

In the history of modern culture, awareness of the transformative potential of the environment emerges end of the XVIII centuries, when the exclusive primacy of reason, pursued by the Enlightenment, was deeply questioned. Rousseau's critique of artificial civilisation and his call for a return to nature—understood not as an escape from the human world, but as an authentic condition of formation—laid the foundations for an education based on the harmonious development of the inner faculties and the environment. Nature becomes an educational resource capable of guiding imagination and moral growth, stimulating a type of knowledge rooted in lived experience and mediated by language.

The rejection of the unilateralism of reason and the revaluation of imagination and sensibility opened to a new concept of knowledge and education that marked the XIX century European culture (Daiches, 1961; Trevelyan, 1944). These transformations coincided with decisive development in pedagogical and political thought. Remarkably, the emergence of national education systems in Europe (De Landsheere, 1986) was not merely a response to social or industrial needs but also the result of a broader cultural conviction: that education should cultivate not only utilitarian competencies but also imaginative, moral, and aesthetic faculties. In Britain, for instance, the cultural debate on education inspired early public policies: in 1833, the Parliament allocated state funds to support elementary schools, and in 1834, the *Committee of Council on Education* was established, marking the beginning of a national education system.

Within this historical horizon, for the first time the indissoluble link between lived experience, emotion, and education began to take shape. Poetry became a privileged space for expressing subjective emotion rather than conforming to stylistic conventions dictated by tradition. It is within the Romantic literary production that this transformation finds full expression. Authors, such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, considered the fathers of the Romantic temperament, conceive poetry as a formative force that educates perception, memory, interiority, and language itself. Romantic poetry anticipates the dual

nature of learning as experience: on the one hand, emotional intensity; on the other, reflective distance. Such intuition foreruns pedagogical models, based on experiential learning and the epistemology of the embodied mind (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Gomez Paloma, 2017). The transformation of literary language in the Romantic era therefore carries a powerful pedagogical and emancipatory potential.

For these reasons, in the pedagogical framework that is here being presented, the encounter between students and literature begins precisely from this historical moment—where language, nature, and education intertwine—before extending to modern and contemporary texts. This trajectory enables learners to trace the evolution of aesthetic sensibility and to recognise, in literary experience, an ongoing opportunity for critical, embodied, and transformative education.

## **2. The Transformative dimension of literary language**

Poetry represents one of the privileged domains in which the relationship between literature, the environment, and transformative educational processes manifests most vividly. By the beginning of the XIX century, poetry is no longer conceived as a genre bound by formal conventions, but as a linguistic space in which inner experience meets the external world, translating into images and rhythms capable of generating awareness. This transformation marked a decisive shift in the history of Western thought: knowledge was no longer confined to rational abstraction but rediscovered its affective, sensory, and imaginative roots.

A tangible sign of the emancipation of literature from conventions is the abandonment of complex metrical forms, such as the *heroic couplet*, belonging to the classic tradition, and representative of a normative and universalistic conception of knowledge. The emancipation of poetry from rigid metrical structures symbolised the rejection of a universalistic and normative conception of knowledge. The adoption of blank verse, closer to spoken language, reflected a broader epistemological and pedagogical shift: the recognition that language can follow the rhythm of thought and emotion, expressing the dynamic unity between perception and reflection.

In the *Preface* to (1800) *Lyrical Ballads* - commonly regarded as the manifesto of Romanticism - Wordsworth offered what remains the most influential definition of Romantic poetry: "*Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes*

*its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.*” This statement reveals the dual nature of the poetic process: the immediacy of emotion arising from contact with the world and the reflective distance that transforms experience into meaning. Poetry thus embodies a pedagogical dynamic—it teaches how to perceive, internalise, and rearticulate experience through language. He foreruns the pedagogical models above presented.

In Wordsworth’s poetics, nature is a source of harmony, contemplation, and moral growth. Poetry, in this sense, becomes a discipline of attention: it educates the gaze to recognise the beauty of the ordinary and to discover the foundations of human sensitivity and thought. In contrast, Coleridge’s verse presents a more unsettling image of nature—mysterious, sublime, and disquieting—revealing the limits of human comprehension and the necessity of wonder. This dialectic between harmony and disturbance defines Romantic poetry as a pedagogical device that cultivates imagination, sensitivity, and linguistic awareness, positioning the aesthetic experience at the core of transformative education.

Significantly, Coleridge attributes to poetry the power to “awaken the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom, and direct it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us” (Coleridge, 1817/1983, ch. XIV). This passage is strikingly modern in its educational resonance: poetry, for Coleridge, is the means through which perception is renewed and habitual indifference is overcome.

In these examples, literature anticipates the principles of experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and the epistemology of the embodied mind (Maturana & Varela, 1987; Gomez Paloma, 2017), as it transforms sensory impressions into cognitive and emotional understanding.

Wordsworth’s *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* (1798) exemplifies this process. The encounter with nature is first lived as an immediate sensory event, but later re-emerges in memory as a renewed source of joy and awareness. Moving from perception to recollection, experience is transformed into a permanent form of knowledge based on the integration of reason and senses.

*For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye*

*Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.*

(Wordsworth, 1800)

With the transition to the XX century, reflection on the relationship between poetic language and the perception of reality deepens and, inevitably, fractures. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is used to vehicle the new social and cultural scenario of modernity. There, nature no longer appears as a regenerative force but as a symbol of fragmentation and desolation. The famous opening line - "*April is the cruellest month*"- overturns the lyrical tradition of spring as a symbol of vital renewal, transforming it into an image of sterility and disenchantment. Poetic language becomes a means both to express and to counter this fragmentation. Eliot's "objective correlative" translates inner desolation into external images, constructing a mosaic of voices and symbols that mirrors the cultural and existential disorder of the age. The literary *stimulus* offers the opportunity to engage in a reflection, starting on the complexity of the contemporary world.

The passage, though briefly outlined here, between Romanticism and Modernism highlights the chronological dimension of our teaching model, as it is presented in educational contexts: learning is achieved through a process that starting from the aesthetic experience, enables emotional reactions which are guided into a deeper and responsible attitude. Literature emerges as a *complex system of meaning*, as a laboratory of critical consciousness, capable of understanding the complexity of the contemporary world, while becoming actively and critically involved in it. Reading literature, in this sense, means engaging in a pedagogical practice that teaches how to inhabit complexity, to connect, interpret, and transform experience into action.

### **3. The Embodied Dimension of Aesthetic Learning**

Reading literature is, first and foremost, a formative experience. It engages perception, emotion, and reflection in a unified process of understanding, in which the reader learns to inhabit language as a space of encounter with the world. The act of reading is not a mere decoding of meaning but a lived experience that transforms perception into awareness. In this sense, literature represents one of

the most powerful forms of experiential learning, capable of combining the immediacy of experience with the distance of reflection.

John Dewey (1934) described aesthetic experience as the most complete form of learning, because it unites action and meaning. Following an approach based on the analysis of literature extracts about nature, this dynamic becomes tangible: the reader actively reconstructs meaning through words, images, and the interplay of emotion and interpretation. The experience of reading is therefore a process of inquiry—an exploration of the world and of oneself—that transforms sensation into knowledge and knowledge into awareness. The aesthetic experience, when mediated through reflection, thus becomes an educational event.

This view resonates with Kolb's experiential learning model (1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005), according to which learning is not the accumulation of information, but a cyclical process composed of interrelated phases that start with concrete experience, and through reflective observation get to abstract conceptualisation and creative re-elaboration. The proposed methodology of the project aims to respond to this model: the encounter with a text represents the concrete experience; interpretation corresponds to reflective observation; the formulation of meaning involves conceptualisation; and the creative re-elaboration—through discussion, writing, or artistic response—constitutes active experimentation. Through literature, students learn not only to analyse but also to experience, reflect, and create. The literary experience becomes a laboratory to enhance a reflective and transformative education.

Reading also activates the bodily and emotional structures of cognition. The epistemology of the embodied mind (Maturana & Varela, 1987) highlights that knowledge emerges from the living organism's sensorimotor interaction with its environment: cognition is not the passive reception of data but an enactive process, in which perception, movement, and emotion co-construct meaning. The mind is shaped by the body's perceptual and affective engagement with the world. Within this framework, literature functions as an *enactive medium*: its rhythm, sound, and imagery trigger sensorimotor patterns that link linguistic comprehension with sensory and emotional participation. The reader does not simply interpret the text but *lives* it through imagination and embodied resonance.

This embodied perspective expands Dewey's and Kolb's experiential theories by locating the source of learning within the body itself. Embodied approaches to education foster a deeper awareness of the self through the integration of sensorimotor and emotional experiences with cognitive reflection (Gomez Paloma, 2017; Tarantino et al. 2023). Reading aloud, dramatizing literary passages, or writing in response to sensory imagery allows learners to perceive language as a living environment that unites body and mind.

If education implies a reconstruction of experience (Dewey, 1934; Mezirow, 1991; Gomez Paloma, 2017; Tarantino et al. 2023), reading and writing are practices that connect individual experience with collective meaning. When these practises are introduced into educational contexts, they promote transformative processes, enabling learners to actively and critically re-interpret reality.

In this light, the methodological framework aims to translate aesthetic and linguistic experience into awareness. Learning is effective when it involves the whole person (Kolb and Kolb, 2005; Maturana & Varela, 1987) and literature achieves this integration.

The educational value of poetic language lies in its ability to awaken sensible attention, and encourage critical re-evaluation of one's relationship with the world. Coleridge's invitation to "direct the mind's attention to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us" captures this formative function: overcoming the blindness produced by habit. Likewise, Wordsworth's *recollection in tranquillity* shows how remembering and reflecting on lived emotions constitutes a genuine exercise in reflective awareness. In a different historical context, Eliot's poetry transforms alienation into an act of recognition, urging readers not to look away but to re-encounter the world through language.

The trajectory here traced—from the intuitions of Wordsworth and Coleridge to the recollected pedagogical models—shows how literature can function as a formative laboratory, where experience, reflection, and transformation intertwine.

#### **4. Transformative practices in a digital environment**

The integration of digital methodologies within literary education represents a decisive step in rethinking the aesthetic experience. Translating the lesson offered

by literary sources into contemporary educational practices means recognising literature as a comprehensive formative experience. Digital tools, when employed within a pedagogical framework, do not replace traditional codes but amplify them, allowing participants to transform individual reading into a multilayered dialogic experience.

Within this perspective lies the ongoing experimentation in PhD courses aimed at testing the effectiveness of literature as a tool for transformative learning. Drawing on Salmon's (2013) model of e-tivities, as revised in the Italian context by Dipace et al. (2025a), the project structures learning as a sequence of blended activities. Collaborative platforms enable learning experience as in a community of learners, where, accordingly, the digital environments provide an extended space for embodied and reflective learning. Online discussions, asynchronous reflections, and multimodal reinterpretations of texts foster a knowledge that is respectful of individual spaces but, also, is generated through participation. On one side, participants are encouraged to pause, to return to the text, to re-read and to re-think; on the other, the collaborative structure of e-tivities nurtures a collaborative dimension of learning. The shared digital environment acts as a dialogic space where knowledge is negotiated and meaning is co-created, empowering learners to assume interpretative responsibility (Giroux, 2023). This approach reinforces aesthetic experience through digital languages, avoiding the reduction of reading to a mechanical exercise and instead promoting a participatory and reflective engagement.

The research adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach, focusing on the observation of how literary language functions as a medium of reflection and transformation within digital learning contexts. Data are collected through tools for sentiment analysis, applied to students' written reflections, to investigate the emotional challenges and engagement. A digital e-portfolio is also designed, intended as self-reflective tools to trace the evolution of awareness and critical understanding. It enables learners to document their progression through the experiential cycle—recording initial perceptions, interpretative insights, and creative responses—thus making visible the process of reflective transformation (Dipace et al., 2025b).

While the methodological framework and the project design have been completed, the experimentation is being piloted on a group of students within Pegaso

university Doctoral courses. The first feed backs received from the participants, collected through reflective writings and interactive session, through digital tools, have been encouraging. Further data and information will be collected and presented in future contributions.

## Conclusions

Digital tools, when employed within a pedagogical framework grounded in embodiment and reflection, do not replace the traditional encounter with literature but extend it—allowing students to transform individual reading into a dialogic and multilayered experience. This extension symbolises the central idea underpinning the research: that literature, in its encounter with nature and the environment, is a living practice of meaning-making.

From the Romantic notion of emotion recollected in tranquillity to the modern fragmentation, literary education is a means for transformative education.

The trajectory traced throughout this work aims to indicate how the literary experience constitutes a unique space for embodied and transformative learning. Drawing on Dewey's aesthetics of experience, Kolb's experiential learning cycle, and Maturana and Varela's theory of the embodied mind, literature emerges as a field where knowledge is not transmitted but enacted.

Reading and writing mobilise sensory, emotional, and cognitive processes that integrate individual reflection with collective understanding. Within this dynamic, the aesthetic act becomes an ethical act: it cultivates attentiveness, empathy, and critical responsibility. In this sense, it also educates to complexity, preparing learners to reinterpret and inhabit the world with awareness and participation.

The integration of e-tivities enables an educational process that far from opposing embodiment, can sustain and amplify it. Through literature, education reaffirms its humanistic vocation: to form individuals capable of reading not only texts, but also themselves and the world, bringing up language and critical awareness.

Literary experience thus becomes a formative laboratory in which tradition and innovation converge. In this way, education is directed towards the formation of conscious citizenship and a renewed sensitivity towards both the environment and the complexity of the contemporary world.

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