

# **LITERARY WORKS PERCEPTION IN HIGH SCHOOLS IN VIETNAM: APPROACH ON THE BASIS OF HOLISTIC PRINCIPLE**

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## **Abstract**

A literary work is a verbal artwork created by an individual or a collective to express and convey generalities about life and people; convey the message of thought, feeling, attitude, etc., of the subject against reality reflected through artistic images. Literary works have long been considered artistically holistic and played a central part in the literary life, activities and processes. When it comes to literature or a literary period, a literary movement as well as a literary author, the first and also the last to be concerned is still the literary work. Literary works, accordingly, are one of the three factors that help form and establish a writer's place in the era and in the history of national literature. Based on the holistic approach principle, this report will present some orientations in perceiving literary works in today's high schools.

**Keywords:** *perceiving; literary works; high schools; system; holistic.*

## **Introduction**

Literary researchers and theorists have long recognized that any literary work is artistically holistic. From even a poem or a prose work to a drama or from shortest writings (with 2 verses only, for example) to wordy works (thousand of pages), they are all understood and will be "fairly" approached as an independent artistic perfect whole which contains all the semantics that need to be extracted, analyzed and evaluated so that after all these activities and operations, researchers and teachers shall return the wholeness to that holistic artwork. Two important actions when approaching a holistic artwork are analysis and synthesis. The synthesis must rely on the basis of analysis and analysis must eventually come to a general synthesis so that readers can perceive the beauty in all aspects of the art world in the artwork as well as the real beauty from within, and then realize the ideological values and messages entrusted by the writer. These valuable aspects of a holistic artwork never "stay still", they will generate "movements" so that for each period or epoch, the reader may find a new meaning that lies within (of course, without distorting or straying too far from the initial idea of the creator), especially for great artworks or works with rich, multifaceted and multidimensional ideological content.

The wholeness of a literary work has long been considered mainly through the relationship between its content and form. The content of a literary work is often based on the close relationship between literature and reality (real-life and ideological reality), including aspects of objective factors of life and subjective factors of the author along with his evaluations and feelings towards that reality. The content of a literary work can be examined within two levels: (1) The specific content (direct content) level, which includes a specific scope of life reality along with its progression of emotions or events, the representation of images, symbols, activities, and relationships among the characters, etc.; (2) The general content level, in which, from those specific contents, literary works pose and solve those issues following a certain ideological trend.

On such levels of meaning, the content of a literary work can be examined from several aspects which are smaller levels, within which are the ideological themes, topics and inspirations. The form of a literary work is a system of means and methods aimed at representing, conveying and expressing the content. The form of the work is formed from many elements such as genre, structure, plot, characterization, materials as well as means and methods used for expressing emotions, images, symbols, etc. All of them aim to present the most vivid, attractive, and persuasive content meanings that the originator desires to convey to the readers. In principle, it is necessary to understand a literary work as a holistic system. That holistic artwork consists of parts. The largest part can temporarily be called content and form as we just mentioned above; the smaller parts are things that lie within the content or the form; up to this point, even the small parts that lie within the content and the form are constructed from smaller ones, etc. However, of course, when approaching and dissecting an artwork, we need to stay "wary" of the density, the uniformity or unevenness among the parts of that perfect whole, or between the smaller parts of the small parts, etc., in order to avoid equating and bringing this artwork to a common level compared to others that lead to fading the creative personality as well as the uniqueness of each historical period, of each trend, of each author, and especially of each particular artwork.

## **2. Content of the study**

### ***2.1. The process of perceiving and conveying: harmony between reason and emotion***

As ordinary readers, people may pick a literary work following their "taste"; the artwork may be introduced through different "channels"; they may read throughout or only parts of it; they may remember or forget that artwork immediately after reading, etc. This is a process of freely choosing and perceiving as they are not governed by any "pressure" when reading that work. But for a literature teacher, it's a different story. He/she possesses no such freedom to choose and freedom to read. The reading process of a literature teacher must be oriented to the curriculum and textbooks. And all the elements, as well as knowledge outside the curriculum or outside the textbook, are only worth using for "background" and reference to support his/her better reading and perceiving process. In fact, a Literature teacher in high schools, from primary high schools to secondary high schools has to come into contact with a relatively large number of literary works, ranging from ancient to modern times, from Vietnam to other cultures around the world so the literary perception of each may not be even nor the same; or the literary interest and taste of each may not be the same. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect the quality of all classroom lectures by teachers to be equal. Therefore, we assume that, in this case, teachers need to figure out how to establish a harmonious combination between reason and emotions, between liking or disliking an artwork, between being to teach an artwork well and not being to teach another one well. As coming up with such thoughts, teachers must find ways to gradually arm themselves with an acceptable level of knowledge about the literary work, especially the ones that he/she has not really

"mastered" before teaching. It is also necessary to avoid the situation in which, because of being fond of the artwork, he/she overestimates, overpraises, or simply, spends too much time on it which leads to a deduction of time spent on other artworks.

## ***2.2. The process of perceiving and conveying: adhere to and break through the systematic principle***

The teacher's process of perceiving literary artworks needs to adhere to the systematic principle as we mentioned above. Currently, the vast majority of teachers' guidebooks for teaching literature as well as the fact that a teacher's teaching steps for giving a literature lecture lesson all follow a fairly old-fashioned "order": (1) *General introduction*, which is a general introduction about the author and the artwork (except for those who are introduced in a separate lesson such as Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Du, Nam Cao, Ho Chi Minh, To Huu, etc.); (2) *Reading comprehension*, including contents such as learning the characteristics of genre (for lyrical artworks), layout, segments, main content of each segment; and then going into analysis and evaluation of the content characteristics of each segment, each paragraph; analyzing the characters, character psychological development, situations, language, artistic writing, etc., and then drawing some artistic successes of the artwork; and finally (3) *Summary and review*, re-emphasizing the key characteristics in the content and the main artistic successes of the artwork. This is a fairly familiar process and is implicitly applied by most of the teachers; of course, students will likely experience and accept the artwork as specified by the above orientation from the teacher. The creativity of teachers or students in this process of perceiving and conveying will lie somewhere in a link of the whole process, but can rarely disarrange the whole process or disarrange the systematic approach principle for literary works.

The above approach, besides some basic upsides, in our opinion, needs a few more changes. In the overall structure of a literary work, the content and form factors as well as the smaller elements lying within the content and the form are not of equal or equivalent value. The reality also shows that, in the correlation between this artwork and others of the same writer or among different writers, there is also such unevenness. Here is a typical example: If *The Tale of Kieu* by Nguyen Du is a success in all aspects, generally a perfect artistic whole, then when referring to another work of the same genre which is *Luc Van Tien* by Nguyen Dinh Chieu, the success leans more towards content aspects. Or in the genre of lyric poetry, considering the system of authors and works of the New Poetry movement (1932-1941), it is clear that besides some works that follow the formalism with little value, numerous poems have achieved excellent success in terms of content expression and art form; meanwhile, during the period of the resistance war against France and the resistance war against American, a series of poems such as *Advancing Westward* by Quang Dung, *Viet Bac* by To Huu, *Across the Duong River* by Hoang Cam, *The Country* by Nguyen Dinh Thi or chapter *The Country* (excerpt from the epic poetry *The Road of Desire*) by Nguyen Khoa Diem, etc., yet, produces only a few successful stanzas following that orientation, the remaining passages and stanzas are simply narration which spreads out, lacks succinctness and necessary artistic extraction. From this practice, if teachers approach to perceive the artwork in order to convey it to students without "discrimination" against each part, each element within the whole, it will become a waste of effort, leading to a state in which things needed to be emphasized have not been paid enough attention to and wasting time on the unnecessary things; the uniqueness, which creates a place for the work in particular and for the author in general, may either not be or be mentioned but not yet make a strong impression nor become really convincing to students. The above situation will also be somewhat similar to when we approach the genre of short stories in Vietnamese literature. For several short stories of the medieval genre with characteristics quite similar to folk tales, it can be said that the author's imprint of creativity is quite faint, or if it is not, they still follow the available motifs which

had been adopted from author to author. At the beginning of the twentieth century, literature moved in the direction of modernization, absorbing Western cultural and literary elements to establish pure Vietnamese literature. In general, the modern short story genre has really been formed and developed strongly. However, there were plenty of stories in the first 20 and 30 years of the century that were still heavy on imitation of which artistic writing had not yet achieved the necessary clarity and coherence. It was not until the period from 1930 to 1945, with the appearance of a series of short story writers, first of all, lyrical short stories by Nguyen Tuan, Thach Lam, Thanh Tinh, Ho DZenh, etc., and then realistic short stories by Nguyen Cong Hoan, Bui Hien, Nam Cao, etc., did the modern short story genre really reach its artistic peaks. Considering the crystallization of both aspects of the author and the artwork, and of course, in terms of the wholeness of a short-story artwork, the aspects of content, of the form, and the partial elements within the short story all reached a certain level. However, as the start of a new period, from 1945 to before the Renovation (1986), in our view, the genre of short stories went down compared to the period of 1930-1945, considering the crystallization of content and art in each author and each artwork. That was again "improved" thanks to a series of writers who pioneered the innovation trend for the genre from about the early 80s to the end of the 20th century, in which Nguyen Minh Chau is a typical example. He is known for short stories such as *The Picture*, *The Woman on the Express* or *The Boat In The Distance*, etc. Thus, it is clear that, when holistically approaching the artwork, the teacher needs to know for sure which aspects yield the main success of the work, which elements and parts in the whole are most unique, in order to spend time inculcating and expanding the evaluation so as to convey to the learners a clear impression of that aspect of the artwork. Only then, in a normal psychological rule, will students feel and, from one or more of those features, will they love the artwork.

### **2.3. Some illustrative instances**

**2.3.1. First instance:** Analyze the Truong Sinh character in *A Nam Xuong Women's Tale* by Nguyen Du (*Vietnamese Literature Textbook for 9th Graders*, Vol. 2)

When analyzing and interpreting this short story to students, teachers always pay more attention to the Vu Thi Thiet character for the mentioned contents as follows: (1) *Beauty and qualities*; (2) *Tragedy fate and its causes*; thereby giving comments on (3) *Humanitarian values* in Nguyen Du's writings, etc. As this is a short story, based on the perfect whole organization of content and form factors, such an analysis approach is absolutely acceptable. However, the character that deserves more attention should be Truong Sinh. As analyzing this character, on the one hand, we criticize his bad manners that caused Vu Nuong to seek death in gross injustice. On the other hand, we orient students to try considering things that may lead us to sympathize with him. With such orientation, the students begin to depict opinions as follows: his rude behaviors and excessive jealousy are due to the fact that he was "a son of a rich family but with little education"; after returning from the war, the pain of losing his mother was so great that he redirected his feelings towards his child even when he could not recognize him; suffering the double pain of disappointment and loss, he asked his son and received the answer "My father just visited last night...". The evidence and childish words were all against Vu Nuong which made even the most ordinary man think that his wife was having an affair. Those are the excuses that we can rely on to sympathize and tolerate the character; however, the fact that Truong Sinh scolded, cursed, beat, and sent his wife away even when the neighbors had justified and defended her is unacceptable. Surely it is not without reason that Nguyen Du did not curse Truong Sinh as "dogs and pigs" just like cursing Trong Quy in *The Biography of an adoptive father in Khoai Chau* (Huu and Du, 1999, pg.227) but only meant to gently put: "As a man, you shouldn't make your beloved one suffer injustice like that, should you?" (Huu and Du, 1999, pg.390).

**2.3.2. Second instance:** Analyze the art of organizing elements in the structure of *The Tale of Kieu* (Vietnamese Literature Textbook for 9th Graders, Vol. 2 and Vietnamese Literature Textbook for 10th Graders, Vol. 2)

*The Tale of Kieu*, as we often refer to, is what we call The masterpiece *A New Cry From a Broken Heart* by the epic poet Nguyen Du. When analyzing the structure of this artwork, we often put it in a relation with a smaller concept which is the Plot. Accordingly, *Structure = Plot + elements that are not part of the plot organization*<sup>3</sup>. In the case of *The Tale of Kieu*, these are the introduction, preamble, and epilogue of the artwork, along with the “extravehicular lyricism” that appears quite a lot in the artwork. These elements are sometimes “unjustly” overlooked or just obscurely and briefly mentioned. “A hundred years in this life span on earth/ talent and destiny are apt to feud./ You must go through a play of ebb and flow/ and watch such things as make you sick at heart...” or “This we have learned with Heaven rest all things,/ Heaven appoints each human to a place./ If doomed to roll in dust, we'll roll in dust;/ we'll sit on high when destined for high seats./ Does Heaven ever favor anyone,/ bestowing both rare talent and good luck?/ In talent take no overweening pride,/ for talent and disaster form a pair...” likely include many features that can be acceptable in the conception of human life and the artistic reflection of Nguyen Du that have been encoded into the figurative world of the artwork. Furthermore, in the Plot organization (the Structure), if analyzed from the incidents: (1) *Meeting and betrothed*, (2) *Tragedy and wandering*, and (3) *Reunion* then it is clear that Nguyen Du's artistic intention, on the one hand, is expressed in the correlation of “dosage” between the three incidents compared with that of the same three incidents in other contemporary Nom stories; on the other hand, is reflected in the nature of each event and even every detail of the event as well as in each event of the incident. In line with that multi-layered awareness, when analyzing and interpreting the excerpts from textbooks, we pay great attention to considering which incident this event is in, then it shall bear the characteristics and nature of that incident. For example, the event in which Thuy Kieu met Thuc Sinh was part of the Tragedy and Separation incident, it is clear that the meeting was just “happy for a while”, then parting, then suffering. That's why there is such a comment “She walked back home to face the night alone,/ and by himself he fared the long, long way./ Who split the lovers' moon?/ Half stayed and slept by her lone pillow, half lit his far road.” which is Kieu's genius premonition of a permanent separation. The poetry lyrics are full of writhing and pain because it is the eternal parting with the desire for the simplest happiness of a girl who has gone through many stages in life. After that separation, Kieu and Thuc would never get a chance to reunite. However, some students may argue that Kieu saw Thuc again at Hoan Thu's house, and then Thuc also met Kieu in the revenge scene. It's not wrong but whoever wants to reunite in such a situation. Seeing each other, face to face, but they actually were separated away like stars in the sky; they split up the way just like two banks of a fast-flowing river to the sea, forever no longer having the opportunity to realize their dreams.

**2.3.3. Third instance:** Analyze the potential vitality of the character Mi in the short story *A Phu couple* by To Hoai (Vietnamese Literature Textbook for 12th Graders, Vol. 2)

Potential vitality can be interpreted as the inner force and will to live hidden inside a person's mind against the harsh realities of life that he/she has to face. Actually, all of us possess and need to gain the vitality to overcome the difficulties of our situation in order to reach and achieve the life goal of personal value. However, literature may only truly achieve sublimation through special and problematic fates, so that from an individual case, the author

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<sup>3</sup> It is also possible to examine the structural organization of *The Tale of Kieu* in terms of time, space, and character progress as well as psychological structure.

may come to artistic and ideological generalizations. Mi in the A Phu couple suffered from the trampling, oppression, and exploitation of the two following forces: *tangible forces* (violence and power) and *intangible forces* (theocracy and evil customs) in the high mountains of the Northwest before liberation. Whatever it was, she was not overpowered but still silently and resignedly lived, fought back, and slowly leaned towards the light of the Revolution so that one day she could truly "change her skin" When analyzing the potential vitality of this character, the teachers always focus on emphasizing the psychological manifestations and actions of Mi in the spring love night in Hong Ngai and those of Mi since meeting and untying A Phu and then running after A Phu, freeing herself from her miserable and humiliating life. In our opinion, such analysis of the potential vitality of the character is not accurate. In other words, we have only been able to point out the manifestations of the issue but have not properly drawn into the deepest layer, the tightest, most enduring cohesion of this so-called vitality of this woman.

As a beautiful girl, talented in playing the flute, and with many good qualities, according to common logic, she should have had the opportunity to have a live life. But due to her family circumstances, she had to sell herself to the Pa Tra family as a "debt-clearing daughter-in-law". That would certainly be a life of bondage, loss of freedom, full of physical exploitation and mental trampling. Towards the better, her self-resistance would have been seeking death (suicide) but it would become useless because if Mi suicided, her parents' debt would still remain. Choosing to become a "debt-clearing daughter-in-law" for that family, she expected to have the opportunity to pay off all the debt sometime (maybe 5 or 10 years, ...) so that she could get back her freedom. However, ironically, taking advantage of the "intangible hand" of theocracy and evil custom, the Pa Tra family performed a "ghost offering to introduce new members" when Mi first became their bride. It also means that if Mi lives, she must be the bride of the Patra family, and if Mi dies, she must still become the ghost of the Pa Tra family; she will never have a chance to set free. Consequently, in the days that followed, Mi had constantly been living in a miserable and humiliating condition, from tormenting her body to trampling her spirit, working day and night, and being treated as inferior to a buffalo or a horse, etc. Such life was meaningless, boring, tiresome, and not worth living, she was alive but considered dead. Mi worked like a machine, she wandered around just like a ghost as if she's dead, etc. To Hoai describes Mi as living quietly and resignedly "like a turtle raised in the corner", being inanimate, losing all feeling and perception of life, living space as well as the meaning of living. So why, at this point, Mi didn't seek death anymore? Why didn't she eat heartbreak grass to suicide? Or did Mi no longer think about death because living was just like dead already? Actually, to our mind: The fact that Mi could stand living in such a situation actually showed her willpower, in other words, it was the intense potential vitality of Mi. In a situation where there seems to be no reason to exist but she could still survive, that must be considered extraordinary willpower, right?! Hence, when analyzing, we think that the capability to live "like a turtle raised in a corner" should be viewed as the potential vitality of the character, while the psychology and actions of Mi in the spring love night and when meeting and untying A Phu are just the two vivid manifestations of that potential vitality only. Isn't it?

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Again, we want to affirm the meaning and importance of mastering the principles of the holistic system theory for the process of approaching, discovering and conveying the characteristics and values in both content and artistic aspects of a literary work for a teacher during his literary lecture. Once mastering that systematic principle, the teacher needs to be flexible in applying it to each specific case to avoid boredom and stereotyping. On the one hand, teachers will synthesize arguments about the artwork of previous researchers to

summarize the most necessary knowledge, but on the other hand, we always believe that a literary work is inherently a living entity without staying still because it "has a life of its own; therefore, for each moment or for a certain emotional state, the teacher may have the opportunity to deepen and suddenly breakthrough to a "crack of light", a certain "acupoint" of the artwork so that his students will never forget the excellence and beauty of the artwork. If such a thing is possible, we believe that the teacher's literary lecture time will become more attractive to students. And in turn, students will become more interested in and passionate about the literature class, in particular, as well as love and respect the noble spiritual values left behind by our ancestors, in general, and see it as a way to foster the national spirit and the beauty of the Vietnamese people's soul in the new era.

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