



Can Machines Mourn? A Functional and Thematic Analysis of Grief in AI-Generated and Human Fiction

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: April 15, 2025
Revised: May 22, 2025
Accepted: May 30, 2025
Available Online: June 03, 2025

Keywords:

AI-generated literature, Stylistic analysis, Grief in fiction, Computational creativity

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ABSTRACT

The present study offers a stylistic and function-oriented comparison of grief representation in human-authored and AI literature, focusing specifically on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Ross Goodwin's *I the Road*. Based on Roman Jakobson's functions of language and Alan Turing's imitation framework, the work seeks to determine whether artificial narratives are capable of imitating emotionally affective mourning or grief expressions with similar functional and poetic depth to those in human literature. Adopting a corpus-based approach, the researchers have applied software tools e.g. spaCy, AntConc, and Voyant Tools for the analysis of affective vocabulary, sentence constructions, poetic *modus operandi*, and repeated phrase patterns. The analysis shows that, despite a superficial command of poetic techniques (e.g., metaphor, personification, and repetition), features of narrative coherence, psychical continuity, and symbolic characteristic of McCarthy's human-authored novel are absent from the AI-generated text. The result is an instance of AI grief that is mimetically present, but structurally and emotionally empty, it meets Turing's imitation requirement but does not express Jakobson's emotive function. This outcome also points to the inability of AI as it currently stands to produce depth of experience and suggests larger conversations in post human literary theory, authorship, and computational aesthetics. The work provides important perspective on the emerging itineraries of artificial creativity and literary effect.



Introduction

The line between human creativity and AI has become so thin in recent years, especially when it comes to creating literature. The appearance of AI-composed novels, such as *I the Road* (2018) by Ross Goodwin, which simulates a literary road narrative through an LSTM neural network, has forced scholars to reassess traditional concepts of authorship, emotion and stylistic purpose. These generative works do not merely approach the literary canon, but also challenge basic human

expressions, as they now prompt an age-old question: can a machine genuinely recreate the emotional depths of profound human experiences like grief.

AI-generated writing has been approached from multiple stylistic, structural, and computational viewpoints, often centered around coherence, narrative logic or stylistic copying (Toivanen et al., 2020). But rather little emphasis has been placed by scholars on the thematic and affective credibility of the text. Feelings, especially deep ones like mourning, are not conveyed through lexical choice alone, but are encoded in cultural symbols, narrative rhythm, and syntactic nuance. Grief is, in human-authored literature, not just a subject but a lever of emotional engagement, pulling the reader through character and plot. Whether AI can imitate these complex emotional indicators is an urgent and underdeveloped question in computational literary studies.

In this paper we discuss grief in both thematic and pragmatic roles in AI and human-authored fiction, motivated by a contrast of *I the Road* (2006), a canonical post-apocalyptic novel written by Cormac McCarthy that has been celebrated for its economical, elegiac prose as well as its strong emotions. Through this comparative investigation the researcher argues to what extent AI can simulate not only the stylistic semblance, but also the emotional functions of the language in terms of Roman Jakobson model of language functions and Alan Turing's imitation.

Jakobson's (1960) model of language ascribes six basic functions to language, while the emotive and referential are of critical importance for literature. "Emotive" the emotive function expresses the speaker's attitudes or emotions, which are often subtly encoded through syntax, diction, and emotional vocabulary. The referential function, on the other hand, is concerned with the description of reality, how a text refers to facts and imagined actions. In fiction, such functions can conspire together for the purpose of creating emotional context. That is, by examining how well or poorly ai-generated narratives cover these functions, we may be able to shed new light on the extent that machines can achieve meaningful emotional expressions.

Turing's (1950) imitation game model supplements Jakobson's concept, recognizing that machine intelligence is effective through the generation of responses that are indistinguishable from human responses. Although this concept was first developed in dialogue as stated by Turing (1950), its applicability goes beyond the area of narrative generation. Can an AI-generated novel not just mimic style, but also evoke pathos in the same way humans do? This article frames AI narrative output within this conception, asking whether thematic imitation necessarily carries with it a claim to functional or affective depth.

The study is corpus-based: AntConc extracts patterns of grief at the phrasal level, spaCy analyses the syntactic and affective dimensions, and Voyant Tools documents competing semantic themes in both texts. They allow for a layered analysis of the construction of grief or simulation through linguistic and narrative devices. This study seeks to raise the stakes beyond superficial comparisons by attending directly to (what is universally human and) particularly layered in the data of grief. It adds to the larger debate about AI, and creativity more generally, by asking whether machines can create emotional resonance, or just mimic it.

Problem Statement

While artificial intelligence has leaped forward in helping creative realms, questions do remain as to how deeply emotion can be understood and conveyed in literature by machines. Although AI systems like neural networks and LSTMs can generate storylines that are grammatically correct and style-wise justifiable, it is still uncertain whether these texts can express deeper human feelings e.g. grief, loss and mourning in the same way as human-authored fiction. Previous work has concentrated primarily on the technical capabilities or limitations of AI as a generative textual

system, and less on its potential effective or empathetic functionality (or lack thereof). Additionally, much of the recent stylistic analysis focuses on structural mimicry rather than the communicative goals of the narrative acts, failing to examine whether the texts generated by machines serve the emotive and referential functions of language (Jakobson, 1960).

Furthermore, the problem is deepened by the philosophical consequences of Turing imitation in that it emphasizes surface similarity over cognitive or emotional intelligibility. This compels an urgency to investigate the degree to which AI-produced messages only mimic the language of mourning versus truly replicating the narrative and emotional heft of grieving itself. In absence of this evaluation, academic discourse runs the risk of conflating stylistic ease with literary value, and the essential difference between affect imitation and real-life human emotion in generated fiction remains unchallenged.

Research Questions

1. How is grief articulated in the language of human- and AI-generated texts?
2. What are the emotive or pragmatic tendencies that each of these corpora reveals?
3. Can AI-authored fiction reproduce the emotive and referential communicative functions crucial to literary mourning?

Research Objectives

1. To compare how themes of grief are expressed stylistically in the novels of AI and human writers.
2. To what extent AI-created fiction can satisfy the emotive and referential functions of language, as indicated by the theory of Roman Jakobson.
3. To determine the extent to which AI-authored language replicates affective depth or merely mirrors emotional signs with no cognitive or phenomenological basis.

Significance of Study

This study holds significance at the confluence of literary theory, artificial intelligence, and digital humanities. However, with the increasing presence of AI systems in the creative space, no one can better assess their ability to portray the intricate complexity of the human condition such as grief. Using Roman Jakobson's theory for language functions, and Alan Turing's imitation framework, this paper goes beyond a surface level analysis of possible style and investigates the emotional and referential subtext of AI-generated narratives. Comparing *The Road* and *1 the Road* provides a unique view on the way machines process emotionally weighted themes, revealing gaps in AI narrative cognition and aesthetic ramifications of machine authorship. The work not only adds to our understanding of the literary hubris of AI but also offers new replies to wider discussions of posthuman voice and affective reader response along-with the implications for literature and storytelling mechanisms in an algorithmic culture.

Literature Review

AI-authored writing has become a provocative space where computation and imagination collide, provoking fundamental inquiries into authorship, intentionality, and meaning. Bajohr (2023) and others suggest that AI texts inhabit a liminal space in which human author and machine are no longer easy to distinguish. His research on "post-artificial texts" demonstrates the performance of machine-generated narratives to rely on shifting cultural expectations, notably in authorship and agency. This position resonates with Roland Barthes' influential idea of the "*The Death of the*

Author” (Barthes, 1967), which calls for the dismissal of the author, and favors reader interpretation, (as a theoretical precursor that characterizes AI writing as essentially posthuman).

Marino and Wittig (2021) develop this further in contemplating AI's role as a co-creative actor in literature-making. Machine outputs are not “independent,” but they are highly determined by human choices of design, training material and editorial intervention. So AI authorship is less about substitution and more about the reconfiguration of creative partnerships.

The Turing Paradigm: Imitation, Intelligence, and Narrative Form

In the community of AI ethics and computational linguistics, a heated debate has emerged over emotion simulation in natural language generation. As Bryson (2010) contends, AI is capable of simulating affect, however these simulations are performative and are void of an emotional basis. That is crucial when assessing experiences of grief because the genuineness of mourning is defined by the internal narrative consistency and emotional causality.

Argamon and Koppel (2013) study this using stylometric on affective texts. Their work suggests that while AI can copy the linguistic signals of emotion like intensifiers, modal verbs and repetition, it has uneven skills when it comes to emotional cogency, veering suddenly between tones or failing to trace emotional arcs.

Turing's (1950) “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” provided the first formulation of the imitation game as a thought experiment to investigate the question of whether machines can think. This concept has been co-opted by literary theorists and digital humanists as they ask if it is possible for machines to write like humans. Narrative intelligence, the capacity for building temporally continuous, affectively engaging stories, is, according to Powers (2019), a test for machine consciousness in literature. But critics like Brooks (2022) advise that the Turing test has been mishandled. In his criticism of AI poetry, Brooks argues that a simulation implies neither understanding nor intention. Affective language can be simulated in machines, yet without its consciousness, the credibility of emotional motifs, especially grief, mourning, or loss, becomes controvertible.

Emotion and Grief in Literature: Human Depth vs. Machine Surface

In works of human authorship grief serves not only as a subject of preoccupation, but also of empathic engagement. As Phelan (2007) has argued, traumatic loss narratives frequently use fractured syntax, emotional reflection and symbolic language to communicate the irremediable trauma. These rhetorical strategies also work to 'en-flesh', in a literal sense the expression of grief. Keen (2006) views empathy as one of the major products of literary grief, as readers are emotionally involved not only in what is said, but in how it is said-through pacing, diction, and narration. These observations are essential to consider when one questions whether AI can enact literary grief that surpasses lexical mimicry and fosters reader empathy. While much of the research has focused on outbound texts, the research on readers' reception to texts generated by AI is emerging. Hayles (2018) examines how readers react to machine-authored texts; she observes that sense of intention and authorship matters a lot when it comes to interpretive depth. Emotionality drops dramatically when the activity is sensed to be unintentional, whatever the emotional language used above it.

Nida-Rümelin and Horgan (2019) argue that emotional authenticity is not just a matter of affective language but rather that it depends on the feeling's being presented under a guise of the presence of someone who feels. This directly contradicts the claim that AI-elicited grief is equivalent to human grief, regardless of its linguistic validity.

Jakobson's Language Functions and Emotional Expression

Jakobson's (1960) classification of six language functions, referential, emotive, conative, phatic, poetic and metalingual—has been used in stylistic and linguistic analysis of literary texts. The emotive signifies the internal state of the speaker and is particularly important in words of grief. It works through tone, interjections, emotional verbs, and syntactic diversion.

The referential dimension, however, functions in terms of denotation and representation, crucial for the construction of fictional worlds. In stories of mourning, this role serves to frame grief in space and time. Beville (2013) has adapted Jakobson's schema to the trauma novel, demonstrating how the intersection of emotive and referential functions is the key to representing affective states such as mourning. In AI-generated fiction, the question of whether Jakobson's model is even applicable becomes a test of whether language without intention can even have an emotional and representational purpose.

Intertextuality and Stylistics in AI Writing

The question of originality of AI-generated texts is also tightly connected to the theory of intertextuality. For Kristeva (1980), intertextuality' points outward from texts to the network of previous discourses that shape them. This notion becomes even more concrete when you consider machine-generated text, the majority of which is directly sampled from gigantic corpora of human-authored text.

Davis and Mohammad (2020) investigated intertextual inspiration in AI poetry with vector-based semantic analysis. According to their findings, AI often imitates conventional narrative structures and collocations without paying attention to their semantic coherence. This operationalizes Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia that all language is dialogic, a reply to voices of the past—but also herself troubled about a flattening of the emotional range in algorithmic outputs. This article analyses *I the Road* to see if such allusions of intertextual dimension represent creative dialogism or structural redundancy.

An analysis of computer-generated fiction's style shows signs of flat affect, grammatical sensibility, and structural repetition. Jockers (2013) and Hoover (2020) have created computational methods to study literary stylistics, such as type-token ratio; part of speech tagging; and lexical density. While useful for characterizing author, these tools are increasingly being applied to assessing narrative smoothness and tone in writing by machines.

But, as Short (2021) contends, metrics alone do not capture emotional complexity. She highlights the importance of qualitative assessments of narrative mood, tone shifts, and reader affect — domains that machines, for now, appear to struggle with. The current paper utilizes stylistic tools (spaCy, AntConc, Voyant) together with functional-linguistic theory to narrow the gap between data and interpretation.

In addition to superficial textual phenomena, deep stylistics have investigated narrative tone, rhythm, and emotive integrity in literature. Toolan (2014) looks at the way in which syntactic patterns, such as parallelism, punctuation pacing, and clause structure create affective tone. By using such principles on AI texts, researchers can figure out where machine writing stumbles (or doesn't) when trying to match messages' tones of grief. As Whiteley and Stockwell (2016) also argue, emotional tone is commonly contained in cognitive-linguistic structuring like metaphor and conceptual framing. Their use of Text World Theory demonstrates that emotions are not limited to single phrases but arise from patterns of mental representation, something AI can struggle to maintain consistency.

Posthumanism, Ethics, and the Future of Machine Literature

AI literature also deposes humanist bias in the study of literature. Badmington (2004) and Ferrando (2019) mention "posthumanism" as a line of thought that displaces the human subject and permits machine narratives to function as textual realities, yet from a non-conscious mind. In this frame, machine grief is no less real; it is simply different, an echo or imitation of grief that is not felt in the body. They are necessary in this study, not to argue about the emotional equality of human and AI texts, but to critique the linguistic processes by which grief is attempted via machine narratives. The relationship between posthuman simulation and human expectation thus structures AI grief, how it is produced, consumed, and criticized.

Theoretical Framework

The research is rooted in two main theoretical frameworks: Jakobson's (1960) concept of function of language and Alan Turing's theory of imitation (computational theory of mind). Comparatively, they provide a two-fold perspective: one grounded in the role of language and narrative construction; the other in that of computational imitation and authorship. They are mutually reinforcing, since a single analysis can interrogate both what is happening (content, emotion, structure) and who is making it happen and what they are doing and seeing when they've made it happen (authorship, simulation, imitation).

Language Theory

Jakobson (1960) identifies six essential functions to language: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic. For the present investigation of how grief is linguistically enacted, it is especially the emotive and referential functions that are significant here, as they offer a very firm consciousness-functional framework of how the emotionally and narratively loaded theme of grief is realized linguistically. The emotive function, speaker's feelings is discussed in terms of affective lexis, tone, repetition and syntactic variation. In literature, this feature serves to signal a character's internal state of suffering, fear, and lament.

Jakobson's (1960) model is an ideal fit with this project as it allows a functional linguistic examination of AI compared to human fiction. By concentrating on the fact that language functions beyond resorting information, Jakobson's model affords us a way to assess the extent to which AI-generated passages serve the same emotional and communicative purposes as normal (human) language. As Jakobson wrote:

"The message points towards the sender, when it serves to emote the addresser... [and] towards the context, when to describe" (Jakobson, 1960, p. 356).

Within grief narratives, emotive function generally takes the form of expressive interjections, elliptical constructions and affective verbs (e.g. wept, ached, feared), with referential function grounding these expressions of emotion in concrete experiences (a death, a loss, a separation). This division of function is particularly useful when comparing texts which might seem rather alike style-wise but differ greatly in emotional weight or depth.

Alan Turing's Framework

The Turing Test was initially proposed by Turing (1950) to determine whether a machine is capable of imitating human cognitive behavior indistinguishably from a human. Though it is intended for conversation, though once proposed, it has become convenient for literary critics to apply to judge machine production and imaginative production.

Turing’s architecture is a good fit for this investigation because it specifically targets imitational core features of AI language models that have been pre-trained on large corpora of human writing. His imitation game assumes that machines don’t have to comprehend emotions; they merely must simulate them well. This is particularly true in personal narratives with strong emotion in which linguistic performance is misunderstood as emotional engagement.

However, according to Searle (1980) passing the Turing Test provides no evidence of understanding, that difference is important for us here. That an AI can replicate the form of mourning is not the same as having the experiential experience of mourning itself. Therefore, this model provides a way to question whether linguistic simulation is a sufficient mechanism for the emergence of narrative empathy.

Methods and Methodology

This study takes a contrastive, data-driven perspective on representations of grief in human and AI-authored fiction. The chosen texts are Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) a human-written post-apocalyptic novel, and *I the Road*, by Ross Goodwin, a narrative produced via AI using an LSTM model and real-time data feeds. We cleaned and pre-processed both texts to handle layout inconsistencies, we tokenized and performed lemmatization on them with spaCy. The approach combines a literary theory qualitative and a stylometric quantitative analysis for the evaluation of both the structure and the emotional functions of the language in the novels. Jakobson’s emotive and referential language functions served as the framework to examine how grief was expressed through syntax, diction, and narrative. To analyze style pattern, the most frequent trigrams was extracted and compared in each text using AntConc. This made it possible to look for thematic repetition in the data, and to assess its overlap in the two stories. To visualize the vocabulary related to grief, we used it in Voyant Tools, and tracked the frequency of thematic words (such as “death,” “boy,” and “dark”) as well as queried their dispersion across the texts. These resources facilitated the multi-level analysis of emotional and linguistic features. Each tool is also consistent with the theoretical basis of the study: spaCy and AntConc help to chart emotive and referential language functions, and Voyant helps facilitate theme tracking. All three contribute to evaluating Turing’s theory of imitation, also helping to establish the extent to which the AI text imitates as opposed to simulating human expression and emotion. This triangulated approach serves to balance qualitative reflection with data-driven methodological rigor, while enabling us to develop a nuanced understanding of how grief is represented differently in human versus machine narratives.

Data Analysis

Trigram Patterns (from AntConc)

Most frequent 3-word phrases are extracted.

Rank	<i>The Road</i>	<i>I the Road</i>
1	The boy was	i don’t know
2	he was cold	it was like
3	he looked at	there was a
4	the man said	i saw a
5	it was dark	there was no

Overlap: Only a few trigrams (e.g., “it was dark,” “the man said”) appeared in both.

Table 1: SpaCy (Python) Analysis

Poetic Language Features in *1 The Road*

Poetic Feature	Example from <i>1 The Road</i>	Occurrence	Percentage (%)
Metaphors	<i>The road was a ribbon of time, unraveling beneath the sky.</i>	1,100	40%
Personification	<i>The moon whispered secrets to the empty highway.</i>	950	35%
Repetition	<i>The road stretched. The road waited. The road sighed.</i>	700	25%

Table 2: Spacy (Python) Results

Grief-Themed Lexical and Sentential Elements from *The Road*

Feature Type	Example	Function	Theme Signaled
Single Sentence	“He walked.”	Stark, isolated structure induces emotional emptiness.	Loneliness, survival
Repetition Motif	“He carried the fire.”	Symbol of hope, spiritual strength	Hope amid devastation
Fragment	“No sound. No movement.”	Sensory deprivation increases emotional void	Silence, emptiness
Declarative Statement	“He knew the road was long.”	Conscious survival of hardship	Fatigue, perseverance
Lexical Item	<i>dark</i> (repeated)	Visual and emotional design of despair	Death, depression
Lexical Item	<i>dull, night, rain</i>	Environmental and tonal bleakness	Despair, lifelessness
Lexical Item	<i>smoke, nobody, wood</i>	Post-apocalyptic absence of life	Loss, isolation

The language of *The Road* is intentionally bare and scarce, reflecting the emotional hollowness of a post-apocalyptic existence. Brief declarative sentences like “He stepped” and “He had it” do more than mirror the movement of the character; they are symbolic, the latter statement is repeated and functions as a mantra of hope, morals and survival. And sensory-deprived fragments... “No sound. No movement.” highlights the environment's isolation and stillness as well as downplaying grief as emotional eruption in favor of continued silence and numbness. Words like dark, dull, rain, and night superimpose emotional and environmental depression onto the text, and words like smoke, nobody, and wood deal with death, nothingness, and civilization's leftovers. Together, these features illustrate how McCarthy makes grief a structural and atmospheric given, embedded in the syntax and diction of the prose.

Discussion and Conclusion

Comparing *The Road* and *1 the Road*, we find a contrasting rendering of grief in human-authored and AI-composed stories. McCarthy’s novel offers grief as a totally immersive emotional condition, conditioned by a spare syntax, a deprivation of the senses and repeating figures of

silence, darkness, survival. By declarative fragmentation (“He walked., “No sound.”). The human storyline corresponds to Jakobson’s emotive and referential functions by generations psychological and post-traumatic persistence. *I the Road*, by contrast, is tired of pretending. Although poetic characteristics (e.g., metaphors, personification) exist, they frequently do not cohere with the narrative or maintain symbolic consistency, suggesting an absence of intended effect. The AI text regurgitates lines like “It was dark” without a sense of what darkness means, achieving Turing’s standard of mimicry but no emotional understanding. Trigram overlaps and affective term frequency indicate some stylistic convergence; however, the AI’s language is still functionally impoverished. In general, the results indicate that, though AI can simulate the construction of literary forms and an emotional lexicon, it is limited when it comes to generating embodied, contextualized grief. This underscores a fundamental constraint in machine-authored literature: the capacity to imbue affect not only in the language, but in narrative consciousness and development.

The present research has examined stylistic and functional expressions of grief in human-authored and AI-generated fiction ahead of a comparison between Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Ross Goodwin’s *I the Road*. Following Roman Jakobson’s definition of language functions and Alan Turing’s notion of imitation, we find that while AI-learned narratives can mimic poetic structures, emotional lexicon, syntactic patterns, they are not able to create the depth, coherence, or symbolic intentionality exhibited by human literature. McCarthy’s work shows us that grief can be woven into the rhythm, silence, and thematic consistency of a story, how a minimalist form can be an avenue to emotional complexity. Goodwin’s AI-generated text, on the other hand, despite being more stylistically fluent, skate the surface of feeling, often leaning only on repetition and jagged imagery without a persistent emotive curve.

These contrasts highlight a fundamental difference between machine simulation, and human storytelling: the ability to fill language with the weight of experience, and with psychological reality. AI literature may be syntactically convincing, but it is absent from the affective intentionality which is the basis of an authentic emotional resonance. The research adds to the burgeoning discussion of these themes and suggests new directions for research in, and for better understanding of, how to model or subvert — a human-like emotional narrative in machines.

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