

# From Page to Screen: Exploring Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" Through the Computational Lens of "*Transpoemation*"

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**Abstract**—Literary critics value the process of "close reading" which involves focused word-by-word and line-by-line reading of a literary work to derive meaning from the entire corpus and establish the role of different aspects of text in this process. As this strategy may yield previously unnoticed connotations, it is rarely performed using computer software. Although this is a widely established view, in this paper, we posit that "distant reading" using an appropriate combination of automatic/computer-assisted analytical methods can still achieve this purpose. While we do not undermine the value of the traditional process, we demonstrate that a detailed visualization of the literary work in focus (in our case a poem by William Wordsworth) through digital tools like "transpoemation" could augment the literary analysis process.

**Index Terms**—literary criticism, close reading, visualization, distant reading, transpoemation

## I. INTRODUCTION

During the 20th century, literary studies reached a crisis point. They faced stringent controversial debates, ranging from new criticism to deconstruction, through new historicism and cultural materialism, to postcolonial criticisms. Yet, close reading has remained the most prevalent reading method, which aims "to brush history against the grain" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 257). The multiple approaches that had been used in literary studies over the past century reflect the historical efforts by literary scholars to make their research responsive to developments within the academy. As a result, different approaches and ways of reading a literary text are now adopted for close reading. Some of those paradigms closely attend to the language and assign particular importance to the formal text elements, such as sentences or words. Other reading methods are either focused solely on abstractions, ideas, or figures found within the text, or depart completely from the written corpus. This range of reading styles illustrates the ability of literature to sustain numerous approaches to reading, discussing, and interpreting literary texts.

In today's technology-driven world, it has become trite to suggest that computers have transformed our way of reading, studying, and analyzing poetry. As the 21st century unfolds, the debate over incorporating computational frameworks and visualization tools into literary studies is gaining momentum. Much headway has been made to this effect by creating a myriad of computational and visualization systems to respond to the new changes and challenges. In such rapidly changing globalized environment, literature has gained new meanings and has forged intersections with digital media, owing to the increasing utilization of educational technologies.

Yet, a traditional critical approach is still perpetuated by mainstream traditional literary critics who see no value in adding the new software-based analytical methods to this process. On the other hand, many eminent scholars and pedagogues are of view that now is the time to employ novel analytical frameworks and open up new perspectives and possibilities for poetry criticism.

Despite creating various new models of scholarship and several successful applications of new visual literary analysis methods, prominent traditional literary scholars still advocate for "close reading" purporting that it allows uncovering "layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension" (Boyles, 2012, p. 37), and thus facilitates a thorough and objective interpretation of a text passage based on the analysis of events, ideas, themes, words, text structure, and style.

With this in mind, the present study foresees an urgent need to map a new approach to literary criticism and practices based primarily on the visualization tools and the "transpoemation" paradigm offered by modern technology. On these grounds, the computational framework endorsed in this paper is not limited to highlighting the rationale and premises of this paradigm. This novel approach also strives to give English majors at Sultan Qaboos University an opportunity to experiment with, practice, and engage in this method and directly experience the benefits of the "transpoemation" technique.

In light of the above, the authors argue that the field of literary study needs the computational support provided by a variety of computer-based frameworks for literary analysis. In what follows, however, we do not attempt a

comprehensive survey of all computational or visualization approaches and theories to poetry analysis. Rather than offer a hasty sketch of the entire field of computational criticism, our aim is to outline and emphasize the theory that has most profoundly impacted the first author's interpretation of William Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"—namely "transpoemation"—and was thus used in our classrooms.

Against this backdrop, we present an overview of two dominant approaches relevant to the present context and explore the tenets, aims, and processes of traditional critics' foundational reading and analytical methods. Concepts such as "close reading" and practical criticism are discussed before introducing "transpoemation" with a special focus on "distant reading" and visualization. This discussion is substantiated by a case study demonstrating how English majors in the English Department at Sultan Qaboos University employ "transpoemation" to digitally visualize William Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud".

## II. AN OVERVIEW OF LITERARY ANALYSIS METHODS AND SOFTWARE TOOLS

### A. "Close Reading" and Traditional Literary Criticism

Close reading has been a subject of extensive research, based on the view of its early theorists, practitioners, and advocates that it is a science of literature. However, according to most authors, this method derives from Richards' (1929) *Practical Criticism* and Empson's (1947) *The Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and is described as a paradigm which enhances "symptomatic reading" by focusing on the structures and patterns in a text.

In her seminal work *What Was Close Reading? A Century of Method in Literary Studies*, Smith (2006) defined close reading "not only as an activity with regard to texts but also to a type of text itself, [as] a technically informed, fine-grained analysis of some piece of writing, usually in connection with some broader question of interest. The practice has multiple ancestors, including classical rhetorical analysis, biblical exegesis, and legal interpretation, and it also has some cousins, such as iconology and psycho-analysis" (p. 58).

Guided by this paradigm, proponents of close reading, the New Critics, argued that a text is a "unified entity, complete in itself and contains meaning without any reference to external evidence such as the author's intention/history, biography or socio-cultural conditions" (Mambrol, 2016, para. 1). Advocates of close reading like Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946) rejected what they call "intentional fallacy" and discouraged the misinterpretation of literary works grounded on biographical evidence or the author's intention. Instead, they proposed close reading as the primary methodology of literary studies that "ought to be judged like any other parts of a composition (verbal arrangement special to a particular context)" (p. 484).

In literary criticism, the term "closed" in "close reading" is seen as a misnomer (Wu, 2018, p. 1008), for it refers to the careful, sustained interpretation of a brief passage of a text. Thus, it is an experiential reading method that treats a text as a self-contained and self-referential unit. Heightening attention to the words on the page and dispensing with biography, history, paraphrasing, and linguistics allows the reader to make a connection between the syntax, the flow of the content, and the different structures to derive meaning. Nonetheless, close reading is not completely devoid of external influences, as Jancovich (1993) pointed out:

Close reading was not an attempt to seal the text off from its context, but an introduction to the reading of literature as literature.... It was supposed to direct students to an awareness of paradoxes and contradictions of social and cultural activity, and hence to a critical engagement with their society and culture. (p. 88)

Similarly, Simpson (2020) purported that close reading has become a fundamental critical method in the 20th century, as it "involves paying attention to the details of a text: its diction, syntax, patterns of imagery, metaphor, and so forth" (p. 2). Reacting to the impressionistic, biographical, and moralistic approaches of earlier critics, Simpson also argues that close reading, as a result of New Criticism, is the dominant mode of literary study and "a way of discovering the tensions and paradoxes of a text in order to find their resolution into a coherent whole ... de-emphasising contextual considerations" (p. 2).

In *Teaching Literature*, Showalter (2003) showed a similar positive attitude towards close reading when she claimed: the close reading process, or *explication de texte*, that we use in analyzing literary texts does not have to come with the ponderous baggage of the New Criticism, or with political labels. Before or along with attention to factors outside the text, students have to understand something about the verbal, formal, and structural elements of the words themselves. Close reading can be a neutral first step in understanding literature. But this sort of reading is far from intuitive, and if we want students to learn how to do it, we need to give them both models and practice. (p. 56)

In this spirit, in *Ways of reading*, Dobson (2019) described close reading as "a tool to understand and explain a text ... a way to explicate the meaning of the text.... Every metaphor, word, element of punctuation, and even the blank space between words and lines, was to be framed according to poem's interior logic" (p. 547).

Jasinski (2001) concurred, purporting that "The principal object of close reading is to unpack the text. Close readers linger over words, verbal images, style elements, sentences, argument patterns, and entire paragraphs and larger discursive units within the text to explore their significance on multiple levels" (p. 14).

On the grounds of the arguments presented so far, one may surmise that traditional critics exclusively rely on "close reading" to explore meaning in poems and "unearth all possible types of ambiguities and ironies" (Looy & Baetens, 2003, p. 4). One may also concur with Brummett (2010) who opined:

the critic's job is to uncover these meanings in such a way that people have an 'aha' moment in which they suddenly agree to the reading, the meanings the critic suggests suddenly come to focus. The standard of success for the close reader who is also a critic is, therefore, the enlightenment, insights, and agreement of those who hear or read what he or she has to say (p. 18).

Yet, although "close reading" has some benefits, such as ensuring an objective and accurate examination of poems and deriving meaning from a printed text, it has many flaws and can be challenged on several grounds, as pointed out by Menand (2015):

There is a small but immitigable fallacy in the theory of close reading, ... and it applies to political journalism as well as to the reading of poetry. The text does not reveal its secrets just by being stared at. It reveals its secrets to those who already pretty much know what secrets they expect to find. Texts are always packed by the reader's prior knowledge and expectations before they are unpacked. (para. 55)

In light of this evidence, will the new "distant reading" framework inspired by computational and data visualization through "transpoemation" and "Lumen5" visualization tool help scholars and students make new observations, generate new hypotheses, and open avenues for more possibilities of meaning in a poem? Indeed, this question has motivated the work presented below.

#### B. "Distant Reading" and Literary Criticism: from Page to Screen

As we entered the new millennium, and given the proliferation of digital texts that are published and exchanged through the internet and an array of social media platforms, our habitual reading practices have undergone radical changes and have shifted from a focus on the page to a concern with the screen and digital texts. Accordingly, reading practices and approaches dominated by the close reading method within literary studies have been revisited and reevaluated. Recent critical approaches, in this respect, depart from symptomatic close reading and embrace a digital, computational, and distant reading method.

Distant reading is a novel method of reading texts that Franco Moretti introduced at the beginning of the 20th century. Moretti (2000) proposed that literary studies would derive benefit from abandoning close reading and adopting a new practice known as 'distant reading'. In an essay titled "Conjectures on world literature", Moretti (2000) described distant reading as "a little pact with the devil" (p. 57), and as a shift from the page and observation of a text to the screen and visualization of the global features of single or multiple texts:

The trouble with close reading (in all of its incarnations, from the new criticism to deconstruction) is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon.... And if you want to look beyond the canon ... close reading will not do it. It's not designed to do it, it's designed to do the opposite.... What we really need is a pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them. Distant reading ... allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. (pp. 57–58)

Suggesting that the emphasis should no longer be on close reading of individual texts but rather on computational studies of a large body of literary texts, Wilkens (2011) also pointed out that "we need to do less close reading and more of anything and everything else that might help us extract information from and about texts as indicators of larger cultural issues" (p. 251).

Jockers' (2013) proposal in *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* meshes with Moretti's suggestion that literary analysts should imitate scientists by gathering careful and exhaustive evidence and re-envisioning literary studies:

Back in the 1990s, gathering literary evidence meant reading books, noting "things" ... and then interpreting: making sense and arguments out of those observations. Today, in the age of digital libraries and large-scale book digitisation projects, the nature of the "evidence" available to us has changed, radically.... Massive digital corpora offer us unprecedented access to the literary record and invite, even demand, a new type of evidence gathering and meaning making. The literary scholar of the twenty-first century can no longer be content with anecdotal evidence, with a few random "things" [and] ... can no longer risk being just a close reader. (pp. 8–9)

Moretti, Wilkens, and Jockers are not alone in their enthusiasm for employing computational methods in literary studies. Other scholars like Burdick also called for a reinvigoration of "distant reading" in order to allow for an objective, scientific, and exhaustive digital analysis and visualization of data in literary texts. Referring to the tools necessary for digital analysis of literary texts, Burdick et al. (2012) wrote:

one way of navigating this process is through distant reading: a form of analysis that focuses on large units. It is a term that is specifically arrayed against the deep hermeneutics of extracting meaning from a text through ever-closer, microscopic readings. (p. 39)

A considerable headway has been made in capitalizing on the latest technology to achieve the goals of "distant reading" and open new possibilities for literary analysis as it applies to poetry in particular. Through computation and visualization, computer scientists and poetry scholars have created a "magic lens" that allows us to rethink, gain access to different attributes of a poem, and unearth its hidden meanings and ideas, as McCurdy et al. (2015) explained:

The use of digital tools across disciplines in the humanities has exploded during the last decade. Popular projects such as the 'Google Ngram Viewer' and 'Wordle' have harnessed the power of computation to look

across huge corpora of texts, leading to insights that had never been available before. Tools such as these are highly effective in supporting what is called *distant reading* – a term coined by literary scholar Franco Moretti to describe critical approaches that seek to understand literature and literary history by aggregating and quantitatively analyzing large text corpora. (p. 1)

Accordingly, many new digital methods and visualization tools have been developed, allowing poems to be viewed from different perspectives. Owing to these technological advances, scholars are now able to carry out the critical analysis of poetry by synthesizing and bringing forward specific features and key elements in poems that traditional literary critics have ignored.

Among the most frequently used visualization tools created for this purpose is “Lumen5”—a free video creation software that helps users without any technical expertise to create video content with ease. However, many other visualization tools for poetry analysis are available, including “Myopia”, a framework which facilitates poetry analysis by visually emphasizing the structure of the narrative, the poem's organization, language elements, and metaphors employed (Chaturvedi, 2011). Other interesting poetry visualization systems and text visualization tools which were created in support of “distant reading” and for the analysis of poetry include “Vimeo”, “Animot”, “TextArc”, and “Wordle”. Tools designed to focus on the frequency and distribution of individual words and phrases to help scholars discover patterns and concepts in any text by leveraging human visual processing include “Poem Viewer”, a visualization technique with the ability to identify sonic elements automatically, and a visualization tool which “employs rule-based visual mapping techniques to present a range of information about the poem” (McCurdy et al., 2015, p. 2), as well as “GistIcons”, “Docuburst”, “Compus”, and “Galaxies”, which employ semantic analysis of key concepts to allow users to gain a quick overview of texts. In the current study, “Lumen5” was adopted as a visualization tool to analyze William Wordsworth’s poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” because it is free, simple, and easy to use.

### C. “Lumen5” Visualization Tool: A Case Study at Sultan Qaboos University

Despite the reluctance of literary scholars and pedagogues in the English Department at Sultan Qaboos University to incorporate visualization tools into the realm of literary-critical enquiry, the work presented here proposes and details the functionality and practical application of “Lumen5” as a visualization tool for the critical analysis of William Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” and creation of videos. The “Poetry in Motion” initiative, as a part of which students animated poems and translated them into movies started in James Franco's class at NYU’s Graduate Film program. The topic was “How to Direct Poetry”.

However, our efforts in this respect primarily derive their inspiration from three seminal works, namely Emert’s (2013) *The Transpoemations Project*, Jockers’ (2013) *Macroanalysis*, and Delmonte’s (2014) *A Computational Approach to Poetic Structure, Rhythm and Rhyme*.

“Lumen5” is an experimental visualization tool with a visual interface that can be used to analyze poems, as it displays a wide range of poetic elements, such as texts, pictures, and music. Based on this visualization framework, these elements are uploaded manually, allowing users to act as “active constructors of meaning” and moviemakers (Gainer & Lapp, 2010, p. 63). Moreover, as they process text automatically and uncover new knowledge and ideas, their understanding is amplified.

Most of our students taking the “Introduction to Poetry” course in the English Department at Sultan Qaboos University have limited technical expertise. Thus, the fact that shortly after they were introduced to “Lumen5” they could apply its various features to William Wordsworth’s poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” demonstrates the practical utility of this visualization tool. The project culminated in the creation of a movie (animated pictures) that combines text, images, and music. This “transpoemation” exercise gave students an opportunity to experience the filmmakers’ interpretation of the text by reading poems in a way that writers and filmmakers would. According to Czarnecki (2009), by imitating elements of the poet’s composition, students can engage in a creative process that requires them “use their imaginations” (p. 18), paying particular attention to the poem’s structure, tone, diction, and elements of style. In the experimental phase, students progressed through three stages of “transpoemation”.

In the first stage, students were asked to read and respond to Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”, which features a lonely speaker expressing admiration for the beauty he perceives in nature in general and the majesty of the daffodils in particular. While students viewed and read the poem on the screen, they attended to the poet’s use of language and analyzed themes. They were playful in their interactions with the text, as their aim was to create a film by imitating the poet’s style, poetic structures, rhythm, literary devices, and language. In order to move from page to screen, they had to translate the written text into a visual format, i.e., a movie, using a simple moviemaking software.

The second stage in the “transpoemation” exercise consisted of reading each stanza of the poem aloud, before having a group discussion on the poet’s choice of words, repetition, exaggeration, wordplay, and the poem's language.

In the last stage in the “transpoemation” exercise, students moved to the computer lab, where they learned to use “Lumen5” MovieMaker software and gained the requisite technology skills. They also practiced searching the internet for images, uploading, downloading, saving, and filing the documents for later use. As most students were not proficient in the use of computers, they spent some time organizing their files into folders and directories to facilitate subsequent access and retrieval. Once they were sufficiently familiar with these tasks, students translated the lines of the poem visually, revised their work and their choice of images, music and tone, and downloaded a “soundtrack” that fits

the mood and tone of the poem. Finally, students created the drafted versions of their movies, paying attention to timing and details that could affect viewers' evaluation (cf. Appendix).

### III. CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the practical application of "Lumen5" in the classroom when analyzing a poem, when latest technology is used in the right context, it can serve as a valuable tool that supports "close reading" and the traditional critical framework. Thus, scholars and literary critics should not abandon this traditional criticism model, since exploring meanings in any literary work, including poems, would benefit from the application of both "close" and "distant" reading paradigms.

It is equally important to note that dispensing with close reading in the new millennium does not deny its benefits and potential effects, since close reading remains a fundamental critical method, as Gallop (2007) maintained when she wrote:

not because it is necessarily the best way to read literature but because it, learned through practice with literary texts, learned in literature classes, is a widely applicable skill, of value not just to scholars in other disciplines but to a wide range of students with many different futures. Students trained in close reading have been known to apply it to diverse sorts of texts, --newspaper articles, textbooks in other disciplines, political speeches--and thus to discover things they would not otherwise have noticed. This enhanced, intensified reading can prove invaluable for many kinds of jobs as well as in their lives. (p. 183)

Although "transpoemation" and the visualization tools offered by "Lumen5" enable literary critics and literature students to interpret a poem and attain a richer and healthier understanding of poems, it would be dishonest to pretend that a computational approach solves all the problems of mutually exclusive interpretations of poems.

The existence of "massive digital corpora" has made the traditional ways of interpreting literary texts inappropriate, impractical, and "untenable" (Jockers, 2013, p. 21). However, the new possibility of literary interpretation through computational processing does not undermine their value. Rather, it prompts new questions, which would lead to the exploration of unknown avenues and new practices, while sharpening or revising the existing ones.

While supporting the incorporation of recent theories and practices—namely "distant reading", visualization, and "transpoemation"—into the literary study, the evidence presented here certainly does not challenge the "follow us or die" view defended by Saklofske et al. (2012). These authors debated that digital reading, owing to multimedia technology, has recently become a cornerstone of text analysis:

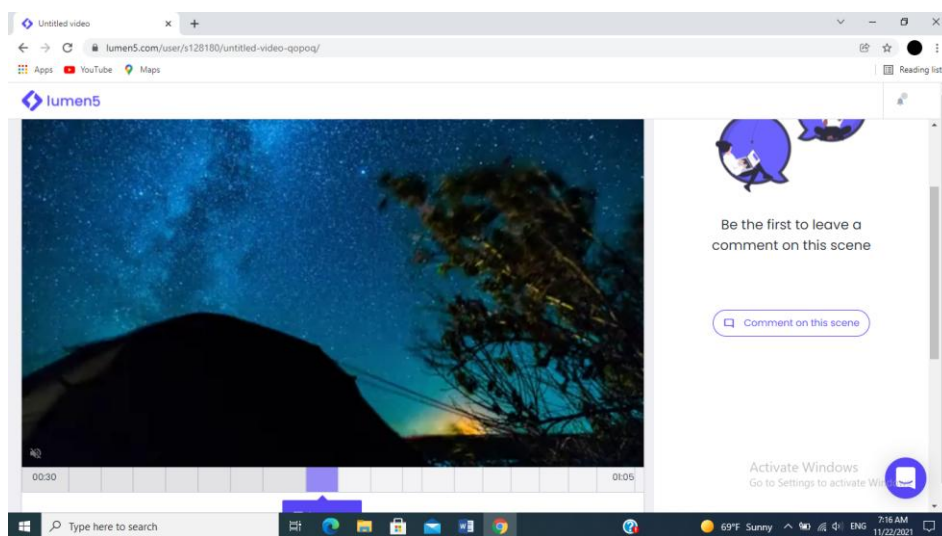
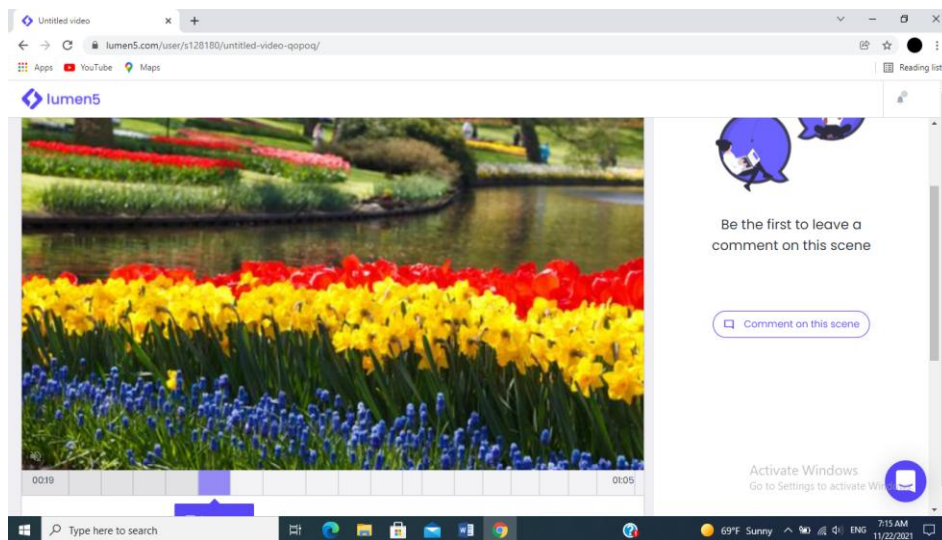
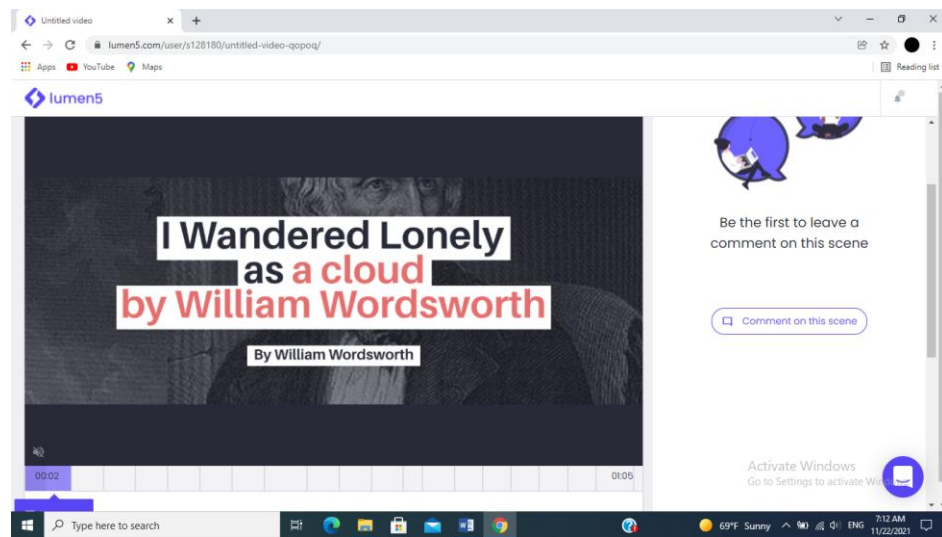
Taking a wait-and-see attitude that cautiously preserves the status quo is akin to choosing an unnecessary slow death over the possibility of an innovative cure. In an era of budget crisis, enrollment uncertainty, and an increasing lack of connections between university-level career preparation and professional practice, it would be foolish to ignore an opportunity to reinvent [the humanities] and reconsider existing paradigms and practices. Digital humanities represent an already-established movement from the doom-inviting stasis of the second hand conservatism of universities that know the Net Generation has come, and yet decline to build the education system Net Geners both want and need. (p. 329)

From this perspective, this paper does not offer a definitive prescription or a fixed paradigm that must be followed. Rather, its aim is to convey a spirit upon which an argument for an ongoing struggle to unravel a vexing tangle in literary analysis should rest. Likewise, the proposed visualization framework cannot be easily applied like an "ointment" because no one can claim to understand everything or have a latchkey to the "correct" meaning of a literary text. In sum, the main aim of this paper is to entice scholars and academics to opt for an approach that "opposes centered modes of analysis and enhances plurality and open-endedness for genuine inquiry, an approach where the only way to go wrong is to show refutation or reservation towards other modes of analysis and to decline to meet the challenge" (Ben Zid, 2013, p. 39).

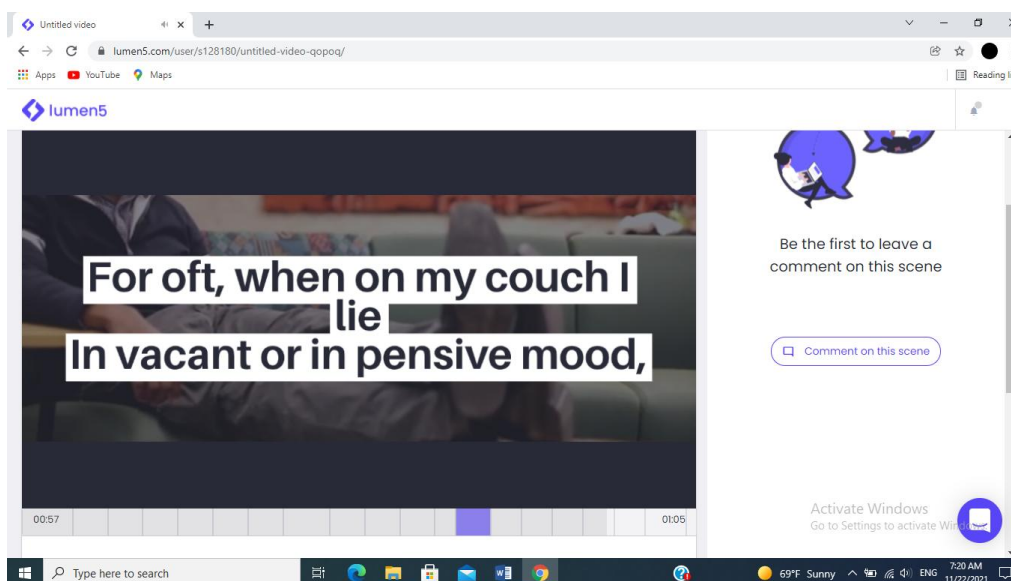
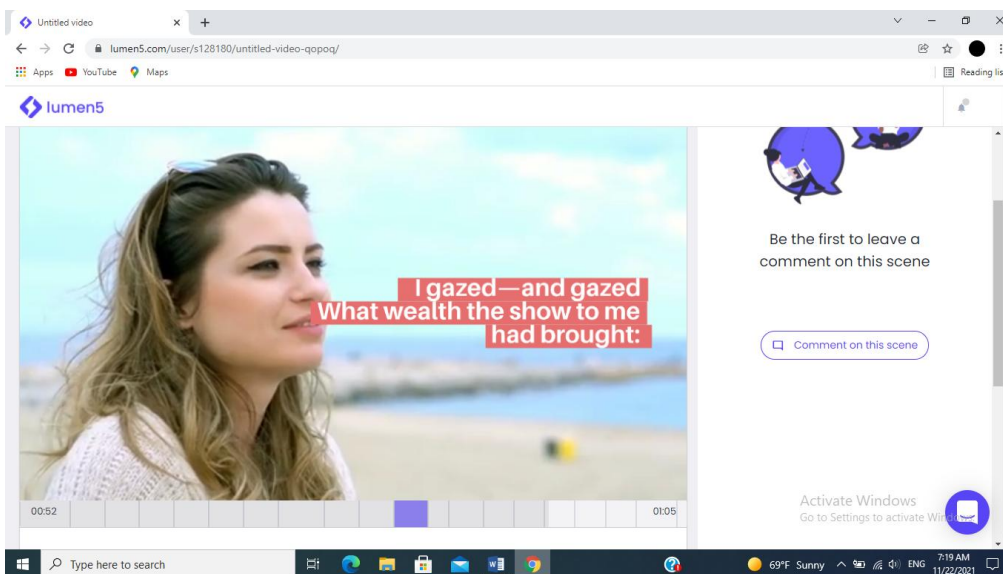
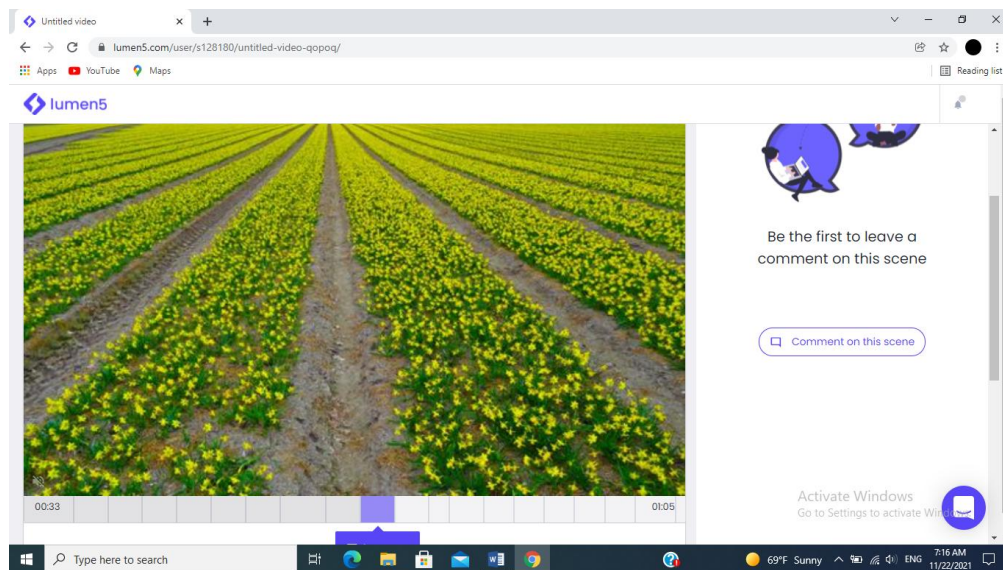
#### APPENDIX 1. LINKS TO STUDENT SAMPLE VIDEOS

<https://lumen5.com/user/s128180/untitled-video-qopq/>  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OREmNhHAIH48XT6sFnmQCeyfNM3t2zl2/view>  
<https://lumen5.com/user/s125469/untitled-video-abukw/>  
<https://lumen5.com/user/maravilloso67/untitled-video-ojofz/>  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ueqPB76HkpyfbM4DOz1IfkWkg0dWByZY/view>  
<https://lumen5.com/user/s125815/al-safa-humaid-al-ho-qa6h8/>  
<https://lumen5.com/user/s125832/alla-rashid-al-maama-s2cu3/>  
<https://lumen5.com/user/s120367/i-wondered-lonely-as-b30z4/>  
<https://lumen5.com/user/s128180/untitled-video-qopq/>

## APPENDIX 2. STUDENT SAMPLE VIDEO IMAGES







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