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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE NARRATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE MAGIC BRACELET IN ROUGBÊINGA BY NORBERT ZONGO AND GOD'S BITS OF WOOD BY OUSMANE SEMBÈNE

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of a cultural object, the magic bracelet, on the narrative of two novels: Norbert Zongo's Rougbêinga and Ousmane Sembène's Les Bouts de bois de Dieu. It seeks to reconcile immanence and transcendence by drawing on the cultural significance of the magic bracelet in order to reveal the structural logic of the works. The study adopts an ethnocritical approach that incorporates tools from structural criticism: within the ethnocritical perspective, the study refers to the method of Vincent Ouattara, while structural criticism is applied following the procedure proposed by Roland Barthes. The findings show that this object functions as a key narrative unit in the construction of both novels, generating dynamic narrative sequences that mark out the development of the plot.

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Introduction:-

The theoretical divide between immanence and transcendence has long fuelled debate about what underpins the meaning of the literary text. Whether to approach the text as a closed, self-sufficient system or to regard it as a reality shaped by its environment was one of the first choices confronting the critic. The aim of the present study is to contribute to contemporary interdisciplinary trends that promote a rapprochement between internal and transcendent approaches. It seeks to show that, while the literary text possesses internal coherence, this logic nonetheless bears the imprint of its context of production. The starting point is the observation that Norbert Zongo's Rougbêinga and Ousmane Sembène's Les Bouts de bois de Dieu both feature bracelets, more precisely bracelets endowed with magical powers. These bracelets are most often held by influential characters and appear to constitute sites of 'narrative tension', to borrow Adama Coulibaly's expression (Ouattara, 2020: 9). This observation leads to the following question: given its cultural significance, how does the magic bracelet inform the novels Rougbêinga and Les Bouts de bois de Dieu? The hypothesis is that the magic bracelet contributes to the structural tension of both novels by functioning as a helper for the character who possesses it. Ethnocritical theory is invoked, more specifically the approach of Vincent Ouattara, which is combined with structural criticism, particularly that of Roland Barthes. To this end, the study first examines the magic bracelet in its dual aspect as a textual object and a cultural object, and then analyses its impact on the writing, more specifically from a narrative point of view. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of quotations from French are our own.

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Theoretical and methodological framework:-
This section first presents the two theories on which the present study is based, namely ethnocriticism and structural criticism. It then sets out the methodologies of Vincent Ouattara and Roland Barthes.

Theoretical aspects:-
Launched in 1994 by Jean-Marie Privat with Bovary charivari, ethnocriticism studies 'the reappropriation and textualisation of cultural and symbolic practices' by literature (Cnockaert et al., 2011: 51). This represents an ethnological perspective on literature, an approach that aligns with the ongoing redefinition of the field of ethnology. In other words, ethnocriticism does not conform to the early, nascent form of ethnology which took as its object of study the bizarre, the strange, the picturesque, and so on, but rather to contemporary ethnology, which advocates for a perspective that examines both the self and the other, the particular and the diverse. Drawing chiefly on semiolinguistics, notably the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, and on the ethnology of the symbolic (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Daniel Fabre, Yvonne Verdier), it addresses the cultural dialogism constitutive of the literary work and advocates an 'armed deciphering' (Cnockaert et al., 2011: 28), that is, a move beyond illusory half-understanding towards the 'multiple coding of systems of signification' (Privat and Scarpa, 2018). In short, ethnocriticism combines a poetics of the text with an ethnology of the symbolic.

Structural criticism, for its part, starts from the premise that, just as language derives its meaning from the relations between words, the work in general, and the literary work in particular, finds its meaning in the correlations that structure its parts. Thus, no part of the text is isolated: 'there is never a lost unit' (Barthes, 1966: 7). According to the logic of structural criticism, each part must be interpreted in relation to the overall design, and meaning is built up as the narrative unfolds.

Methodology:-
Vincent Ouattara's ethnocritical method sets out four levels of analysis. At the first level, known as the level of the work, the ethnocritic seeks to identify culturemes in the literary text, that is, 'the cultural forms, practices and themes, the subcultures and the cultures of social categories (of modernity as well as of tradition), of dominant and dominated groups' (Ouattara, 2013: 88). This involves defining the magic bracelet as it appears in the corpus. At the second, ethnological level, the critic situates the culturemes within the cultural context to which the work refers. This is the occasion for ethnological research on the data collected from the work; it means examining the referential context of the corpus in order to grasp the magic bracelet as a cultural object. At the level of creation, the ethnocritic studies the impact of the cultureme on creation, that is, on the style of writing. Finally, the structural and semantic level considers cultural features as bearers of meaning, as signs forming a system with the text as a whole. Here the task is to analyse how the magic bracelet contributes to the signifying process and the structure of Rougbêinga and Les Bouts de bois de Dieu. It is at this last level that Roland Barthes's structural method is brought into play. This method approaches the text through three levels, namely the level of functions, the level of actions and the level of narration. The level of functions considers narrative units in two groups: distributional units, which enter into correlation with other units, and integrative units, which refer to indices, that is, information relating to the distributional units. The level of actions concerns characters as actants, that is, in relation to the role(s) they play in the narrative. The level of narration analyses narrative discourse, the narrative material proper. Our task, therefore, is to approach the magic bracelet as a sign with reference to these levels.

Elements of analysis:-
This section is devoted to the analysis of the corpus, testing the data against our research hypothesis.

Between textual object and cultural object:-
At this level, the analysis describes how the magic bracelet appears within the text, on the one hand, and, on the other, what it signifies in reality.

The occurrences of the magic bracelet in the text:-
In the corpus, the magic bracelet is used by three characters: Soura Dakuo in Rougbêinga, and Ramatoulaye and Bakary the Elder (Bakary l'Ancien) in Les Bouts de bois de Dieu.

Soura Dakuo has inherited a magic bracelet that has been handed down from father to son for several generations. This bracelet represents the soul of the Dakuo family and is bestowed upon the most deserving member of each generation. It is reputed to protect its wearer, as Soura's father's reassurance to his son testifies: 'Remember, O son, that this bracelet is the soul of your family. When the time comes to tell you everything about its power, you will

know; in the meantime, know only that it must not leave your wrist, O my son. However great the danger, do not be afraid' (Zongo, 2009: 23).

Soura's bracelet thus gives him extraordinary strength, enabling him to overcome any physical ordeal. This is evident from the object's first occurrence in the narrative, when Soura, sent by the chief of Houndé to inform the commandant of the Koudougou district of the date of the great hunt, enters Boromo, the largest village on his route. There he meets a group of unruly boys who goad him into a wrestling contest. To everyone's astonishment, the young Buaba throws each of his opponents in turn 'without moving'. After this extraordinary event, the narrator reveals that Soura's invincibility 'came to him from the bracelet he had been wearing for ten years' (Zongo, 2009: 23).

Soura's bracelet is therefore not only a receptacle of physical power but also a means of bewitchment. On arriving at the Koudougou garrison, Soura considered himself fortunate to come across the district guard Sanou Noupê, an acquaintance whom he intended to entrust with delivering the message from the chief of Houndé to Commandant Mercadieux. Unfortunately, Noupê judged Soura's approach insolent and began to beat him. Soura would not stand for this and fought back, sparking an altercation. Irritated by the incident, the commandant ordered the head of the district guards to beat both quarrellers as punishment. Noupê died from the blows. This scene made such an impression on one of the guards that, when he was later ordered to beat the young Buaba again for trying to slip away from the group mobilised for forced labour at Bamonkô, he held back, telling himself that 'this man must be dangerous; besides, Sanou Noupê died after striking him […]. He therefore had to be wary. The misfortune he embodied would strike someone else, but not him. He had been warned.' (Zongo, 2009: 42). The bracelet is thus invested with a kind of supernatural force that acts against anyone who attacks its wearer.

Soura also uses his bracelet against the 'white sorcerers', as he calls the Catholic priests. The messenger of the chief of Houndé would never abandon his plan to return to the Buamu. With his compatriot Bayili, he resolved to flee the railway construction site at Bamonkô. They feared, however, being exposed by the White priests, who had come for the funeral of an official of the colonial administration. Soura then used his bracelet to cloud the vigilance of these sorcerers with the following invocation: 'May the spirits of the ancestors blur their sight. May the spirits of the hills and rivers cast trouble and confusion upon their minds… And then there is my bracelet' (Zongo, 2009: 62).
Ramatoulaye's many rings in Les Bouts de bois de Dieu also possess the power to ward off hostile spirits. This character wears red, yellow and black bracelets at her elbows. Moreover, in one of the rooms of N'Diayène's house, of which she is the mistress, bracelets intended to 'intercept misfortune and the evil eye in passing' hang above the door (Sembène, 1960: 91).

Likewise, Bakary the Elder, 'in order to take part in the departure ceremony, had armoured his arms and forearms with gris-gris: rings of red, black and yellow leather, bracelets made of antelope horn, sheathed in mane hair or covered with scraps of red cloth and studded with cowries' (Sembène, 1960: 292).
In short, Rougbêinga and Les Bouts de bois de Dieu present the bracelet as a receptacle of mystical power that guarantees strength and protection.

The magic bracelet in African cultures
Rougbêinga and Les Bouts de bois de Dieu abound in motifs that attest to their grounding in West Africa, notably historical markers such as the construction of the Dakar-Niger railway and the two world wars, and spatial references such as Dakar, Thiès, Bamako, Réo, Koudougou and the Buamu. This is how one should seek the meanings of the magic bracelet in this context, in order to understand how it functions within the text.

In traditional African societies, the supernatural plays a significant role in an individual's life. Since the world is perceived as an interactive relationship between spirit and matter, human destiny cannot be conceived without the involvement of invisible powers. Hence the use of magical objects, such as the magical bracelet, to channel these supernatural forces. The functions of the magic bracelet are varied and encompass nearly every existential dimension of the human being. However, this study is limited to exploring the protective and apotropaic functions mentioned in the corpus.

The importance of the magic bracelet in human protective measures is evident from its indispensability right from birth. Indeed, newborns are generally made to wear bracelets to protect them against various kinds of evil spells. In a study on the Senufo people of Korhogo, in Côte d'Ivoire, Zana Madou Coulibaly (2025: 48) highlights this protective aspect in the following passage: 'As for the blacksmith, he provides the child with an iron bracelet, forged

by his own hands. The child wears it on one of his wrists to secure the protection of the gods and spirits who brought about his birth. This therapeutic quality also aligns with the cultural traditions found among the Mundan and Tupuri peoples of Chad, where certain rings crafted by a blacksmith were believed to offer protection and ensure longevity for children whose older siblings had died'.

Vincent Ouattara (2020: 24) also shows that in certain Dioula families in West Africa, the child's hair is shaved off during the baptism and weighed to determine the amount of silver, in grams, needed to craft a bracelet that will protect the child.

Thus, throughout every stage of life, the traditional African uses bracelets for protection. Among the Moose people of Kouritenga, in Burkina Faso, a twisted bracelet crafted from iron, copper, bronze, silver, or other metals, is often recommended by seers to help an individual escape misfortune whose origins are difficult to identify. Just as the bracelet twists these various metals together, it likewise deflects all manner of misfortune.

Regarding the use of a magic bracelet to mystically subdue or exert control over others, one may refer to the magic bracelets mentioned by Dim Dolebsom Ouedraogo (1934: 155-158) in his account of the malevolent practices employed among the Moose people. The author demonstrates that such bracelets could be used to bypass a person's vigilance or to prevent them from taking a particular action. Indigenous people used them to deceive the colonizers or to ward off spells cast by their enemies.

In short, one can observe a homology between the role of magic bracelets in traditional African societies and the use to which such objects are put by characters in the novels Rougbêinga and Les Bouts de bois de Dieu. In both contexts, the magic bracelet serves as a vessel for supernatural powers, offering protection while also possessing the potential to be used to exert control over others. This indicates that both Norbert Zongo and Ousmane Sembène employ a form of realism in their integration of the magic bracelet into their respective works. It is important to note, however, that this is realism in the African sense of the term, for 'African realism draws upon the African imagination and a cultural and religious universe—encompassing elements not necessarily tangible to Westerners, such as spirits and various beliefs' (Sissao, 2006: 1). Thus, in both novels, the magic bracelet functions as a traditional semiotic code; it perpetuates a communal perspective in which the bracelet is understood to confer strength, protection, and influence.

From cultural object to novelistic syntax:-

As Roland Barthes points out, 'meaning is not at the end of the narrative; it runs through it' (1966: 6). In other words, each occurrence of the magic bracelet has its 'usefulness' for the rest of the story: the object necessarily initiates a narrative sequence, insofar as it is expected to produce an effect, whether immediately or in the long term. Put briefly, the magic bracelet is a functional unit, more precisely a distributional one. This section analyses the sequence it generates in terms of its internal organisation before considering it within the overall structure of the narrative. First and foremost, the magic bracelets identified in the corpus function within the context of hostilities. Their presence thus points to a significant connection to conflicts.

The narrative sequences introduced by the magicbracelet:-

The appearance of the magic bracelet in the narrative has as its correlate a conflict that will be resolved by the effect, whether successful or not, of the object.

The prelude to the clashes in N'Diayène'scompound:-

Let us consider the concluding sentence of the description of N'Diayène's compound: 'Above the door, hanging from nails, were belts, bracelets, horns to which tufts of hair still clung, and papers cut into arabesques: fetishes intended to intercept misfortune and the evil eye in passing' (Sembène, 1960: 91). This sentence is clearly given emphasis. As Daniel Bessonnat (1988: 90) notes in his article on paragraph division and its functions, **'**the concern with closure also leads writers 'to take care over' the last sentence of the paragraph, so as to end on a high note, either with a summarising sentence prepared by the whole paragraph […] or with a surprise sentence that introduces a final twist and revives the reader's interest before the paragraph break, which then appears as the obvious mark of suspense, in every sense of the term'.

In addition to this prominent position and this warning break, it can be observed that the subject-rheme noun phrase of the sentence is inverted, which further foregrounds the household magical objects. Finally, the very content of the sentence shows that it constitutes a site of narrative tension, in that the narrator specifies that these magical objects

are 'intended to intercept misfortune and the evil eye in passing' (Sembène, 1960: 91). This passage thus conveys the hostility and external threat that prevail in this compound and, consequently, announces a possible conflict, that is, a moment when these objects will perform the functions assigned to them.

The alert is still more intense where the bracelets of Ramatoulay appear: 'At elbow height, her arms were encircled with red, yellow and black fetish rings' (Sembène, 1960: 77). As in the description of the compound, this sentence is foregrounded by being placed at the end of the paragraph. What is most striking in this passage is that the bracelets are pushed up as far as the elbows. This type of bracelet, namely the arm or elbow bracelet, is generally worn or pushed up when its use is imminent. Evidence of this is found in Dim Delobsom Ouédraogo's (1934: 145) description of the way Moose dancers intercept peebre (a malevolent poison): 'This amulet-bracelet is pushed up towards the forearm and tightened firmly for the whole duration of the warba dance. Any Pébré is then without effect'. On reading each of the two passages cited above, the reader equipped with a 'cultural passport' (Cnockaert et al., 2011: 265) logically expects them to be meaningful and to determine what follows. A possible conflict thus enters the reader's 'horizon of expectations', in Hans Robert Jauss's (1978) terminology.

In short, these passages correlate with the battles that will take place in the compound between Ramatoulaye and Vendredi, and between the women and the soldiers, thirty-six and thirty-four pages later respectively.

The magic bracelet as a framing unit of the women's great march:-

If there is one character whose presence is significant in the account of the women's great march, it is Bakary the Elder. He belongs to the small group of men responsible for preparing the movement initiated by Penda. He has the honour of discussing with the union's leaders, particularly Ibrahima Bakayoko and Lahbib, the feasibility of the undertaking and the arrangements to be made. Finally, for the departure ceremony, the Elder appears with both arms laden with magic bracelets of every kind, from wrists to shoulders. The narrator adds that, even after the women had left, Bakary did not remove his bracelets, wearing them until their return. These bracelets open the battles that the marchers were to wage during the journey. From the third day after their departure, the strikers faced various onslaughts from nature. The narrator reports that 'the sky itself seemed laden with threats' (Sembène, 1960: 306). In addition to the sun that 'beat down hard on their backs' (Sembène, 1960: 296) and the dusty wind that lashed them fiercely (Sembène, 1960: 309), they had to endure terrifying whirlwinds (Sembène, 1960: 309–310). Beyond these struggles imposed by nature, the women fought a battle in the literal sense at the entrance to Dakar, where tirailleurs were determined to force them back. Thanks to the power of the magic bracelets that old Bakary did not remove throughout the journey, the women overcame the tirailleurs posted to bar their entry into Dakar, mobilised the entire city and finally compelled the railway administration to yield to the railway workers' demands.

The structural function of the magic bracelet in Soura'sjourney:-

The bracelet sealed Soura's destiny in childhood, at the age of ten to be precise. His path as a fighter began when his father chose him to bear the 'soul' of the family (Zongo, 2009: 23). In receiving the bracelet, Soura commits himself to devoting his life to preserving the cardinal values of his clan, namely bravery, refusal to submit, patriotism and so on. The ancestral object thus programmes the character's future battles. In particular, the fact that Soura is armed with his protective bracelet when he leaves Houndé immediately introduces the possibility of dangers along his route. In short, the bracelet correlates with all the battles he fights during his journey, to mention only the fight against the lion and then against the troop of baboons, the wrestling with the young men of Boromo, the altercation with Noupê and the mystical duel with the White priests.

As can be seen from the bracelet's first appearance in Rougbêinga, the syntagmatic sanction of the object's mention does not always come later in the discourse. Its irradiations may be analeptic. In other words, the correlate may precede the occurrence of the magic bracelet in the narrative: the effect produced by the object is narrated before the object itself appears. Thus the reader discovers the secret of Soura's extraordinary performance against the young men of Boromo well after the incident has ended, once Soura has resumed his journey.

In short, the occurrence of the magic bracelet necessarily implies a correlate, which may be placed either before or after it.

The magic bracelet in the macrostructure of the novel:-

According to Roland Barthes (1966: 6), 'function only has meaning insofar as it plays a part in the overall action of an actant; and this action itself derives its ultimate meaning from the fact that it is narrated, entrusted to a discourse that possesses its own code'. Therefore, it is necessary for the study to analyze how the magic bracelet functions

within the overall structure of the story, that is, by following the mode of progressive integration of the levels of the plot. In other words, it considers the object's functioning in relation to the trajectory of the main character and to the quest on which the novel is founded.

Bakary the Elder dreams of a pension, just like the elderly toubabs:-

In Ousmane Sembène's Les Bouts de bois de Dieu, the black workers of the Dakar–Niger railway considered that the railway administration treated them unfairly: low wages, overwork, discrimination between black and white workers, the absence of pensions, and so on. Organised in a union, they submitted a list of demands to the administration, whose authorities gave no favourable response. Under the leadership of Ibrahima Bakayoko, they launched a general strike to force the administration to accept their grievances.

The strike succeeded thanks to the active participation of the women. Without their support, the men would have capitulated in the face of armed repression and, above all, food shortages. Ramatoulaye's participation in particular was of strategic importance. Her compound was in a sense the headquarters of the women of Dakar; it was from there that the railway workers' first victories over the forces of order were launched. Furthermore, Ramatoulaye's courtyard provided shelter for the hundreds of valiant women marchers from Thiès who would deliver the final blow to the railway authorities. This victory was therefore made possible by the women, foremost among whom was Ramatoulaye, the woman whose elbows were encircled with magic bracelets.

Nevertheless, the contribution of Bakary the Elder is far from negligible. He is the valiant representative of his generation in this strike of the 'young'. Like Ramatoulaye, Bakary is the most esteemed of the Thiès trade unionists. His trajectory is heroic. As his nickname 'the Elder' suggests, Bakary is in poor health. His career in the boiler room has completely exhausted him. The heat has 'scorched' his face to the point of covering it with a 'kind of callus'. Moreover, he suffers from severe tuberculosis, which makes him constantly cough up 'black balls'. 'The illness is still there, in my chest', he says (Sembène, 1960: 42). Despite this frailty, Bakary is deeply committed to the strikers and never misses a meeting. To highlight the worth of this tubercular man, let us compare him with Sounkaré, the head watchman, who is his complete opposite. Old Sounkaré opposes the strike: he dissociates himself from the protesters and, worse still, tries to discourage them. This earns him their contempt, to the point that they even end up forgetting his existence (Sembène, 1960: 209). While Sounkaré slips away when the soldiers arrive, Bakary arms himself with his magic bracelets to take part in the unrest. At the end of the strike, while the Elder is celebrated, the head watchman is found at the bottom of a pit in the engine room, gnawed by rats. Above all else, Bakary will fulfil the dream he had at the outset: to receive a pension just like the old toubabs (Sembène, 1960: 42–43).

In short, Bakary the Elder and Ramatoulaye are major actants in the railway workers' strike. They serve as auxiliaries to Ibrahima Bakayoko, the primary leader of the strike, and their actions are inseparable from the magic bracelets they possess, bracelets they wear while taking part in confrontations.

The Dakuo family bracelet: an under-exploited potential?:-

Soura returned from 'the place from which no one returns' (Zongo, 2009: 78). It was common knowledge that no one could come back from Bamonkô; indeed, no Buaba had ever returned from that land until then. As soon as Houndé learnt that its son had been conscripted, it lost all hope of his return. The Bê Gnoumou had solemnly declared that his messenger would meet 'the horrible end: to die without a funeral far from his ancestral land' (Zongo, 2009: 47), because 'whoever was chosen for Bamonkô was considered dead' (Zongo, 2009: 86). The Dakuo family had consequently resigned itself to shaving Botoni's head and going into mourning as custom required (Zongo, 2009: 49). These funeral rites placed Soura in the world of the dead: henceforth he was symbolically dead in the Bwamu. Yet some three months later, the supposed dead man reappeared in Houndé. This return would have been impossible had the bracelet not enabled him to escape from the Bamonkô camp, after protecting him from the deadly blows of the forgo Nanga and saving him from the murderous designs of the young men of Boromo. In short, thanks to the ancestral bracelet, Soura succeeded in accomplishing the mission entrusted to him by the Bê Gnoumou: to announce the great hunt to Commandant Mercadieux.

However, if we consider the twist in the story, namely the war against the Koudougou garrison, we find that Soura dies. This death can be explained by the catalysers of the bracelet's first occurrence. Indeed, this passage contains clues that may explain the 'silence' of the bracelet at the end of the story. The evidence in the corpus supports the idea that the bracelet was not fully utilized. The young Dakuo's instruction in the use of the bracelet was never completed. 'When the time comes to tell you everything about its power, you will know', his father had said (Zongo, 2009: 23). Unfortunately, the son would never know, for that time never came: Soura was separated from his father

prematurely. He was thus condemned never to learn all the secrets of the ancestral bracelet's power, and his use of it was consequently partial. Furthermore, this ultimate weapon was completely forgotten at a moment when it might have saved him. The last time Soura uses his bracelet is during his escape from the Bamonkô camp (Zongo, 2009: 60–62); he forgets it entirely throughout the war against the Nanssara. Had the bracelet eventually left his wrist, as his father had feared? Was it because the root-decoction 'potion' and the series of sacrifices of chickens and the black dog had not been renewed? Had Soura ultimately failed to keep his magic secret, as he was bound to do? (Zongo, 2009: 23-24). The text makes no mention of any such transgression. The fact remains that the hero's tragic fate may be explained by this 'fatal oversight', to borrow Issou Go's phrase (2014: 298) concerning the forgotten alliance stone that led to Wangrin's downfall in Amadou HampâtéBâ's novel L'Étrangedestin de Wangrin.

To sum up, we note a failure in the function of Soura's bracelet, a failure accounted for by concealed textual indices. Following Mahamadou Lamine Ouédraogo (2025: 55), it can be argued that this omission stems from a deliberate aesthetic choice; 'in literature, a character's refusal to take a stance on an issue, a narrator's decision to pass over certain facts or situations in silence, or an author's avoidance of a particular subject, all of these elements contribute both to literary aesthetics and to the articulation of meaning'. In any case, his failed function does not, however, undermine the bracelet's status as the character's helper.

Conclusion:-

The magic bracelet informs Rougbêinga and Les Bouts de bois de Dieu in accordance with its cultural significance in traditional Africa. Through the narrative sequences it introduces, it heightens the reader's expectations and elucidates the mysteries of the discourse. As a helper of last resort, it advances the plot by marking out its climaxes. The present study thus highlights the benefits that the convergence of internal and transcendent approaches can bring to the understanding of literary works. In short, the internal coherence of the literary text depends on the values, institutions and cultural representations of its context of production.

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