



CRITICAL THINKING AND SUFI STORIES: THE ROLE OF 'MASNAVI MA'NAVI' IN MODERN EDUCATION

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Annotation. *This article examines the educational relevance of Masnavi Ma'navi, the classical Sufi poetic work by Jalal al-Din Rumi, in fostering critical thinking in modern classrooms. Through an exploration of its narrative techniques—such as allegory, paradox, and moral ambiguity—the article highlights how Sufi storytelling can enhance intellectual engagement, ethical reflection, and emotional intelligence among students. It argues that integrating such spiritual literature into contemporary curricula can provide learners with the tools to navigate complexity, question assumptions, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.*

Keywords: *Sufism, Masnavi Ma'navi, Jalal al-Din Rumi, critical thinking, modern education, storytelling, spiritual literature, ethics, narrative pedagogy, cultural literacy, emotional intelligence.*

Introduction. In the 21st century, education is undergoing a transformative shift. As the world becomes increasingly complex, interconnected, and unpredictable, traditional models of instruction—focused primarily on memorization and standardized testing—are proving inadequate. Today's students must be equipped not only with factual knowledge but also with the ability to think critically, navigate ambiguity, and engage meaningfully with diverse perspectives. In response, educators are exploring new ways to foster deeper intellectual and emotional capacities in learners. Among these, one particularly rich and often overlooked source of educational inspiration is classical Sufi literature—especially Jalal al-Din Rumi's monumental work, *Masnavi Ma'navi*. Composed in the 13th century, *Masnavi Ma'navi* (often translated as “Spiritual Couplets”) is a six-volume epic poem that weaves together hundreds of stories, parables, and spiritual reflections. Written in Persian but now translated into many languages, it serves not only as a cornerstone of Sufi philosophy but also as a timeless treasury of human wisdom. Rumi's use of narrative is not merely for entertainment or religious instruction; his stories are crafted to provoke thought, awaken consciousness, and guide the reader toward deeper understanding. These qualities make *Masnavi Ma'navi* remarkably relevant for modern education, particularly in its potential to cultivate critical thinking skills.

This article explores how the narrative techniques and philosophical themes of *Masnavi Ma'navi* can be integrated into contemporary educational settings. It examines how Rumi's storytelling methods—rich in metaphor, paradox, and moral ambiguity—can





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serve as powerful tools for teaching students how to question, analyze, empathize, and reflect. By reintroducing ancient Sufi wisdom into modern classrooms, we may find new pathways to nurture not just informed minds, but wise and compassionate hearts.

Analysis of literary. *Masnavi Ma'navi*, written by the 13th-century Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, is a vast collection of poetic stories and spiritual teachings often referred to as the “Qur'an in Persian.” While traditionally regarded as a mystical and religious text, modern scholars have increasingly recognized its literary sophistication and philosophical depth. This analysis explores the literary techniques, narrative structure, and thematic elements of *Masnavi Ma'navi*, particularly in how they promote critical thinking and ethical reflection—making the work not only spiritually profound but pedagogically powerful in modern education. Rumi uses a non-linear, multi-layered narrative structure. Stories within the *Masnavi* are often nested—one story leading into another—which mirrors the complexity of the human mind and the spiritual path. This structure compels readers to track shifting perspectives and reconnect meaning across layers, fostering cognitive flexibility.

Rumi's dialogic style, where different characters debate moral, spiritual, or philosophical dilemmas, encourages analytical thinking. For example, the tale of the Greek and Chinese artists (Book I) explores perception, spiritual purification, and the role of inner knowledge, prompting readers to weigh opposing views and synthesize interpretations. Much of the *Masnavi* is allegorical. Characters often represent abstract concepts: the king may symbolize the soul, the slave the ego, the beloved divine truth. Such allegory requires the reader to interpret beyond the literal level—a core aspect of critical thinking. A good example is the parable of the Elephant in the Dark (Book III), where people touch different parts of an elephant and describe it inconsistently. This symbolic story critiques partial understanding and highlights the limits of perception—an invitation to epistemological humility and holistic reasoning.

Rumi's tales are deeply philosophical, tackling themes such as:

- The nature of truth and illusion
- The tension between reason and faith
- The struggle between the self and the soul
- The necessity of doubt in the journey to certainty

In educational terms, these themes encourage metacognition—thinking about one's own thinking. For instance, the tale of the Man Who Lost His Donkey (Book IV) challenges conventional ideas of loss and joy, promoting reflective thinking and emotional intelligence. Rumi frequently employs paradox—intentionally placing contradictory statements side by side to unsettle the reader. For example, he writes, “Die before you die,” suggesting spiritual death of the ego before physical death. This kind of ambiguity resists simple answers and compels students to grapple with complex truths, a fundamental exercise in higher-order reasoning. Some stories in the *Masnavi* contain





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humor or absurd elements—like foolish judges, talking animals, or ironic miscommunications. This use of satirical narrative not only entertains but also disarms rigid thinking, encouraging readers to consider deeper meanings beneath the surface. It's a way of teaching through surprise, a pedagogical strategy used even in modern classrooms to stimulate engagement.

Written in rhyming couplets, the *Masnavi* uses rhythm, repetition, and sound to enhance memorability and emotional resonance. These poetic devices support oral transmission and aid in reflection, making the text an effective educational tool across literate and non-literate cultures. Rumi's frequent use of metaphors—light and mirror for knowledge, fire for love, water for divine presence—also nurtures figurative thinking, which is essential for abstract reasoning and symbolic interpretation. Rumi's ultimate goal in *Masnavi Ma'navi* is transformation, not merely information. His storytelling is designed to awaken the heart as much as the mind. Each tale concludes (sometimes ambiguously) with a moral or spiritual insight, guiding the reader toward ethical action, humility, and inner growth. In this way, the *Masnavi* is not only a literary work but a curriculum for the soul—a blueprint for education that unites reason, emotion, and intuition.

Masnavi Ma'navi stands as one of the richest examples of literature that combines narrative art, philosophical depth, and spiritual guidance. Rumi's stories function as mirrors that reflect the reader's inner world while simultaneously challenging intellectual complacency. For modern educators, the *Masnavi* offers an invaluable tool to develop critical thinking, ethical awareness, and interpretive skills in learners. Its use of story to question, teach, and transform makes it not only a cultural treasure but a timeless educational resource.

Research methodology. This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design rooted in literary analysis and educational theory. The aim is to explore how *Masnavi Ma'navi*, a classical Sufi text, can be used to develop critical thinking skills and ethical reflection in contemporary educational settings. The approach is interdisciplinary, combining methods from:

- Literary criticism (to analyze narrative techniques)
- Hermeneutics (to interpret symbolic and philosophical meanings)
- Educational theory (to evaluate pedagogical relevance)

The primary source material for this study is Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masnavi Ma'navi*, particularly selected stories from Books I to VI that exemplify narrative complexity, ethical dilemmas, and philosophical inquiry.

Additional data includes:

- Commentaries and translations by scholars such as Reynold A. Nicholson, Ibrahim Gamard, and Jawid Mojaddedi.
- Secondary academic literature on Sufi pedagogy, narrative-based learning, and Islamic ethics.



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- Educational frameworks related to critical thinking, such as Bloom's Taxonomy, Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children (P4C), and inquiry-based learning models.

Table 1: Analytical overview of *masnavi Manavi*'s educational elements for critical thinking development

Aspect	Description	Educational Benefit	Examples from <i>Masnavi Ma'navi</i>
Narrative Structure	Non-linear, multi-layered storytelling with nested tales and dialogic debates	Enhances cognitive flexibility and perspective-taking	The Chinese and Greek Painters (Book I)
Allegory and Symbolism	Characters and events represent abstract spiritual and ethical concepts	Develops interpretive skills and abstract reasoning	Elephant in the Dark (Book III)
Philosophical Themes	Explores truth, doubt, ego vs. soul, reason vs. faith	Promotes metacognition and ethical reflection	The Man Who Lost His Donkey (Book IV)
Use of Paradox and Ambiguity	Intentionally contradictory or ambiguous statements to challenge conventional thinking	Encourages higher-order reasoning and critical inquiry	"Die before you die" concept
Humor and Absurdity	Satirical stories and absurd situations that entertain while provoking thought	Disrupts rigid thinking, fosters engagement and empathy	Foolish Judges, talking animals
Poetic Devices	Rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, and repetition aiding memorability and emotional connection	Supports figurative thinking and emotional intelligence	Use of light, fire, and water as metaphors
Didactic and Transformative Purpose	Stories conclude with moral or spiritual insights aiming at personal and ethical growth	Encourages ethical formation and self-transformation	Various parables throughout the six volumes

The analysis follows a textual and thematic method, with close reading of selected passages guided by the following key questions:

- What narrative techniques (e.g., allegory, paradox, dialogue) are used?





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- How do the stories promote questioning, interpretation, or reflection?
- In what ways can these elements be aligned with modern educational goals?
- What cognitive or ethical skills are activated in the reader or learner?

These themes are then mapped onto critical thinking indicators, such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and metacognition.

To ensure the relevance of the literary examples, the stories selected from *Masnavi Ma'navi* meet the following criteria:

- Presence of moral or philosophical ambiguity (to stimulate reflection)
- Use of dialogic or multi-perspective structure (to encourage debate)
- Symbolism or allegory (to support interpretive thinking)
- Educational applicability (suitability for classroom discussion)

Examples include:

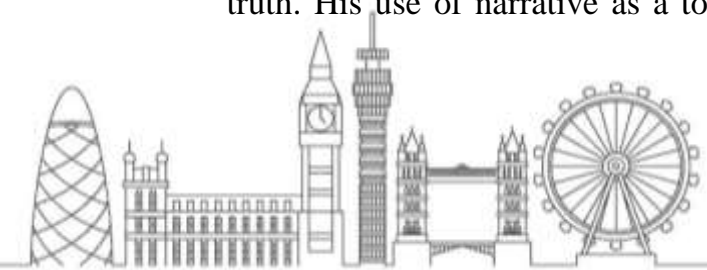
- “The Elephant in the Dark” (on epistemological limitations)
- “The Chinese and the Greek Painters” (on perception and inner vision)
- “The Man Who Lost His Donkey” (on irony and moral reframing)

The study is grounded in established theoretical frameworks, including:

- Constructivist learning theory, which supports knowledge-building through inquiry and meaning-making.
- Philosophical pedagogy, especially the role of narratives in ethical and existential education.
- Sufi educational philosophy, which emphasizes transformation of the self through reflection and metaphor.

To strengthen validity, the interpretations are cross-checked with classical commentaries and contemporary scholarly analyses from the fields of Islamic studies and comparative education. While rooted in the Sufi Islamic tradition, the *Masnavi* speaks to universal human concerns—identity, knowledge, love, justice, humility—that remain deeply relevant today. Integrating such a work into educational curricula not only enriches the literary and philosophical experience of students but also models a form of learning that is transformative rather than transactional. In doing so, it bridges the ancient and the modern, the spiritual and the intellectual, offering a model of education as a path of awakening rather than accumulation. As educational systems increasingly seek to cultivate not just smarter students but wiser human beings, *Masnavi Ma'navi* offers a powerful reminder: that the most enduring lessons are often learned not through answers, but through stories that provoke us to question.

Conclusion. In an era where education often prioritizes information acquisition and standardized assessment, *Masnavi Ma'navi* offers a timeless alternative—an approach that cultivates the whole person through reflection, inquiry, and spiritual insight. Rumi's intricate storytelling, rich in allegory, paradox, and moral complexity, engages learners not merely as passive recipients of knowledge, but as active participants in the search for truth. His use of narrative as a tool for self-exploration and ethical questioning creates





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opportunities for developing essential skills such as critical thinking, empathy, interpretive reasoning, and metacognition. This study has shown that the *Masnavi* is far more than a literary or mystical text; it is a pedagogical resource that aligns naturally with many goals of modern education. Its dialogic structure, symbolic depth, and philosophical undertones challenge students to move beyond surface understanding and grapple with the deeper layers of meaning—both in texts and in life. When introduced thoughtfully in classrooms, Rumi's stories can support culturally diverse learning, encourage open-ended discussion, and foster emotional and intellectual growth.

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