

Sibylle Baumbach, Herbert Grabes, Ansgar Nünning (eds.)

## Literature and Values

Literature as a Medium for Representing, Disseminating and  
Constructing Norms and Values

# GCSC

## Giessen Contributions to the Study of Culture

2

Edited by

Horst Carl, Wolfgang Hallet, Ansgar Nünning, Martin Zierold



International Graduate Centre  
for the Study of Culture

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Literature as a Medium for Representing,  
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and Constructing Norms and Values**

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## PREFACE

This volume tries to explore the intersection between literature and values. Addressing key theories and concepts of values and providing numerous case-studies that range from the Early Modern period to the present day, it offers a wide range of new approaches to the characteristics, functions, and roles of literature in the dissemination of values. The articles have been specifically commissioned to address ways in which ethical values are disseminated in and through culture via literature and other media.

The present volume has received support from a variety of sources. We are deeply indebted to the International Association of University Professors of English (IAUPE), the University of Lund and the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) for supporting two conferences devoted to exploring the connections between literature and values and for facilitating the intensive and animated exchange of views between international scholars. We would also like to thank Dr Erwin Otto and Markus Nußbaum from the Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier for their support throughout the process of editing this volume, Katharina Zilles for her invaluable editorial assistance, and Sara B. Young for proofreading the essays. Finally, we would like to thank all contributors for their fascinating discussions of the topic, as well as their responsiveness and efficiency in developing their papers for the volume.



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# VALUES IN LITERATURE AND THE VALUE OF LITERATURE: LITERATURE AS A MEDIUM FOR REPRESENTING, DISSEMINATING AND CONSTRUCTING NORMS AND VALUES

SIBYLLE BAUMBACH, HERBERT GRABES & ANSGAR NÜNNING

## 1. Introduction: values in literature – the value of literature

“Issues of value and evaluation tend to recur whenever literature, art, and other forms of cultural activity become a focus of discussion, whether in informal or institutional context”, Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1995: 177) observes at the beginning of her fine essay on the intricate and thorny topic of “Value/Evaluation”. Debates about value(s) and evaluation, and the ethical dimension of literature have indeed been perennial issues in literary criticism and literary theory, even “central to Western critical theory for at least the past two hundred years” (ibid.). The last two decades, however, have witnessed a renewed interest in the relationship between literature and values and the ethical dimension of literature, culminating in what has been dubbed ‘the ethical turn’ and the re-emergence of ethical criticism. While the developments and new perspectives subsumed under such umbrellas as ‘the ethical turn’, ‘ethical criticism’ or ‘the ethics of criticism in the age after value’ have been mapped by a number of informative surveys (cf. e.g. Antor 1996; Eaglestone 1997, 2003; Davis/Womack 2001), the complex and reciprocal relationship between literature and value has not received as much attention as it arguably deserves: “[T]he importance of literature and other media for the dissemination of ethical values within a culture has not yet been duly acknowledged and submitted to scrutiny” (Grabes 2008: 3-4).

The present volume seeks to redress the balance, not by providing yet another mapping of the ethical turn or a meta-summary of the new perspectives and transformations that the renewed interest in ethical criticism has brought about, but by looking more closely at the relationship between literature and values and by exploring the characteristics, functions and roles of literary texts that make literature so fascinating and valuable (cf. Erll/Grabes/Nünning 2008). The main goals of this introduction are to gauge the relationship between literature and values, and to provide a provisional overview of some of the most important functions of literature, while also giving a brief survey of the wide range of topics and perspectives that the contributions that follow deal with and explore.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, of course, that the relationship between literature and value, and the views that have been put forward about this topic, have themselves been subject to historical change. While many authors, critics and theorists have maintained that the value of literature is inseparable from the ways in which norms and values are represented, others have equally forcefully asserted that the

realms of art and moral values, or of aesthetics and ethics, are oceans apart and should never be confused. In the ‘Preface’ to his equally famous and infamous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde, for example, bluntly proclaimed: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.” Two more quotations from the Preface may serve to show just how important it was for Wilde to dissociate literature as well as the other arts from morality and ethical values:

The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.

No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.

Whether or not Oscar Wilde and his works lived up to his own sayings, or to his immoral reputation, may be open to debate (cf. V. Nünning 2002), but the majority of his contemporaries certainly did not seem to share this avant-garde view of the aestheticians, who wanted to divorce literature and art from morality once and for all. On the contrary, Wilde’s views were generally regarded as a challenge to ingrained Victorian assumptions about the central function, and value, of literature. As is well known, Wilde himself was severely taken to task later on in his life for having published what was regarded as demoralising literature, and the alleged immorality of his novel was even publicly debated in court in order to ‘prove’ that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was an immoral book, which in turn served to demonstrate that its author Oscar Wilde held immoral views himself. In doing so, the attorney and judge as well as a host of commentators in the newspapers merely did what Victorians critics, publishers and readers had been doing for decades, namely exploring in how far a given literary work served to disseminate Christian and ethical values and to promote moral behaviour. Peter Keating (1989: 252) aptly described this “unwritten code”: “They acquiesced in what amounted to a gigantic moral conspiracy with publishers, libraries, reviewers, editors, and easily-shocked readers.” Though the case of Oscar Wilde is, of course, much more complex than these brief observations may imply, they may suffice to illustrate that in the Victorian fin-de-siècle, there was no longer an implicit general agreement on what the role of literature vis-à-vis moral values was taken to be.

Several decades later, in the heyday of poststructuralism and postmodernism, widespread agreement prevailed again, but amidst an era of poststructuralist relativism, readers and writers, publishers and critics now seemed to agree that the realms of literature and morality were indeed two entirely separate spheres. For a while it really seemed that we were living in an ‘Age after Value’ and that the question of whether literature had anything to do with values seemed irrelevant at best, meaningless at worst. Influential postmodern writers like John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover or Thomas Pynchon foregrounded in their works the “*Contingencies of Value*” (1988) Barbara Herrnstein Smith and many other critics presented as the most advanced view. Yet – as E. Ann Kaplan pointed out in her otherwise friendly review of the book – “the preoccupation with context, with multiple variables,