

Research Project

Literature, Ethics, Morality: American Studies Perspectives (SANAS Biannual Conference 2014)

Project funded by own resources

Project title Literature, Ethics, Morality: American Studies Perspectives (SANAS Biannual Conference 2014)

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If we follow Jürgen Habermas in glossing ethics as the theory of the good life and morality as a guide to right conduct, then literary texts are neither ethical nor moral in any straightforward sense. Many twenty-first-century literary scholars would also chafe at the idea that literature serves specific moral purposes. Yet the earliest American novelists regularly dedicated their prefaces to assert their novels' truthfulness, social utility, moral rectitude, and didactic value. Later texts as diverse as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), and Dave Eggers' *What Is the What* (2006) were also written with the intent of sensitizing their readers to social ills and alerting them to their responsibilities toward disadvantaged ethnic, social, and cultural others. The controversy surrounding conservative pundit and erstwhile U.S. Secretary of State William J. Bennett's publication of *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* in 1993 further testifies both to the fact that readers do ascribe great moral force to storytelling and that the intersection of literature, ethics, and morality is highly contested ground.

This conference is dedicated to surveying that ground from American Studies perspectives. We invite abstracts that propose to close-read literary texts from moral and/or ethical perspectives, develop historical perspectives on literary negotiations of moral issues as well as more theoretically inclined proposals on current contributions to ethics, be they from the Wittgensteinian wing exemplified by the work of Stanley Cavell, the Aristotelian wing for which Martha C. Nussbaum stands, the deconstructive wing influenced by thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, the Spinozist wing most prominently expounded by Gilles Deleuze, or yet to be determined further camps.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to

- The writer's and the reader's responsibility
- U.S. literary narratives and their impacts on readers' lives
- Literature and the good life
- Literature as a resource for moral philosophy
- Literary didacticism
- The ethics of literary and cultural criticism
- Cognitive and affective functions of literary texts
- Are "ethics and aesthetics . . . one and the same" (Wittgenstein)?
- Can literature foster moral understanding?
- Understanding others through literature

- Immoral books/censorship
- Is "[e]thicstypology of immanent modes of existence" (Deleuze)?
- Literature's relation to concerns beyond the strictly human: ecology and/or cosmology

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Add publication

Published results

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