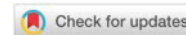


# LITERATURE AND ETHICS

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**Abstract:** “Literature is the teacher of ethics” (Temkov). If one assumes that literature reflects life, then it only serves to pedagogically illustrate classic questions: how one should behave towards one’s fellow human beings, what virtue and vice are, how conflicts arise and how they are to be solved and which are the highest goods are in life. However, literature itself teaches us much more: it touches delicate issues that no other medium would dare to do. Only literary works can delicately, profoundly and provocative handle questions like love, war, guilt, (un)justice. The modern moral standards would not allow *Lolita*, *Tadzio*, or *Törleß*.

New theories of literature and ethics focus on the reading process because ‘literary fiction debates norms and values’. In this paper, the attempt has been made to acknowledge the value of theme diversity in literature in order to broaden the limits of moral dilemmas, but also to discuss the cultural influence, as well as the role of the narrative, author and reader in the comprehension of ethical questions. Bernhard Schlink’s “The Reader” and Peter Handke’s “Winter Journey” are only the tip of the iceberg concerning a much broader topic realm.

Keywords: Literature, Ethics, Peter Handke, Bernhard Schlink

Field: Humanities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

If the literary work is considered through the prism of Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative – as an action necessary in itself, without any connection to any other goal – then the question arises as to how much the literary work itself can fit into the single ethical system of universal ethics. At the same time, I do not associate the literary work with the author and his motives (Roland Barthes established the death of the author a long time ago), nor with the content and the lesson that can be learned from it (which is what ethics in literature is most often associated with). It is about the creation and reading (interpretation) of the text as an objectively necessary action. Can some of the universal principles of ethics be attributed to that action, that is, can it be connected to the values of peace, tolerance, solidarity, cooperation?

## 2. LITERATURE – CULTURE – ETHICS

A literary work, whether considered as part of national or world literature, represents an important link in the complex chain called culture. Culture can be defined in many ways: as a way of living, but not that living that follows the natural basis of man, but that which is created by people, or as a cumulative layer of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values, attitudes, opinions, hierarchies, religions, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, as well as material objects and property acquired by a group of people over generations through individual and group efforts and aspirations. Ethics, on the other hand, is considered the highest reach of culture and points the way to higher goals.

Most of the definitions of culture can also be applied to literature. However, can the same be said about ethics, that is, can the relationship of ethics to culture be compared to that of literature? The text, like the ethics of culture, is about experiencing the world, delving into the world, and penetrating between things. Nevertheless, the creation of a literary work (through its creation or interpretation) is not always guided by the highest ethical (and in general cultural) principles, but very often can be considered as an autonomous element of national (and world) culture and art.

Ethics in literature is usually connected through its thematic, mimetic and representative function, and not through the literary structural, poetic and performative notion. Taken in this way, literature mirrors life because it simply serves the classic questions of pedagogical illustration: how we should treat other people, what the greatest virtues are, how conflicts arise and how they are resolved, and what the highest goals in life should be. Ethics in that case serves as an interpreter of literary questions: whether Hamlet

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should have immediately killed the king, whether Emilia Galotti acted immorally, etc. Literature serves ethics by reflecting the motives and goals of action in the literary work, reflecting them to the reader and society, so that they can form their own judgment. Literature offers models for clarifying the contradictions and diversities of life and represents the desired unity in life.

This is one interpretation of ethics in literature, which is more interested in the “what” in the story and its characters, than in “how” the structure of the narrative is sustained. According to Lyotard, narratives determine the criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they should be applied. They therefore define what has the right to be said and done in a culture, and since the narratives themselves are part of that culture, they are legitimized by the very fact that they do what they do. If the text is considered through the principle of Lyotard’s narrative, as well as through the prism of Kant’s categorical imperative, literature does not serve ethics, nor does the function of ethics in literature is the interpretation of ethical principles in the work. The narrative has the right to raise new ethical questions, as well as to question established ethical principles. Literary work is that part of culture that deals with the “gray sphere” beyond black and white universal ethical principles.

### 3. “THE READER”: ONE LITERARY EXAMPLE

For example, the novel “The Reader” (Der Vorleser) by Bernhard Schlink from 1995 deals with the difficulty of the German post-war generation in dealing with the Holocaust, that is, it raises the question of how the post-war generation should approach the generation that participated in, or was a witness to the horrors committed in World War II. Through several different situations, two key ethical problems arise: guilt and shame. The durability of trials conducted against war criminals, specifically concentration camp guards, is being questioned, i.e. whether pointing the finger at the guilty relieves the collective shame, or only helps to overcome the suffering due to the shame. Should we try to understand the incomprehensible, can we compare something that is incomparable, or should we simply be dumbfounded with astonishment, shame and guilt – is this the purpose of awareness of the horrors of the annihilation of the Jews? And to what extent can the guilt of the executioner be judged, who does not hate the one whom he hangs, and yet hangs him; not because he is ordered to do so, but because he is doing his job.

The problem of guilt in love is also touched upon: is a man guilty if he falls in love with a criminal. Nevertheless, perhaps the central moral dilemma in the novel revolves around the question of responsibility: if someone deliberately fails, not saving himself because of shame, and we can save him, while revealing what he is ashamed of, will we save him? By which action do we do the other good: by respecting his privacy and preserving his secret, or by saving him from ruin at the expense of his shame?

### 4. WHAT ABOUT THE AUTHOR? THE CASE OF PETER HANDKE

Again, war and the question of guilt. The Austrian writer Peter Handke, whose literary work is considered one of the most innovative and revolutionary in German literature, in the 90s of the last century, caused a stormy controversy in the world’s literary and political public, when he joined the debate regarding the wars in the Balkans. His statements regarding the war and the breakup of Yugoslavia, as well as the publication of his travelogue “A winter trip along the rivers Danube, Sava, Morava and Drina or justice for Serbia” (Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien) in 1996 in which he stands in defense of Serbia during the war, caused a real scandal and were the subject of fierce critical condemnations. Handke’s views shocked the public, because the Serbs were generally considered to be the culprits for all the troubles in the Balkans, and he stood up for them. His sympathy for Serbia finally turned into public and open affection, especially after the NATO bombing of Serbia in the late 1990s. As a result of strong emotions regarding the bloodshed in the Balkans, Handke abandoned his former poetic concept and found himself unwillingly involved in the delicate role of correspondent between a poetic and a political mission.

Handke begins his “Winter Journey” with the following statement:

„Schon lange, nun fast vier Jahre lang, seit dem Ende des Krieges in Ostslawonien, der Zerstörung von Vukovar, seit dem Ausbruch des Krieges in Bosnien-Herzegowina, hatte ich vorgehabt, nach Serbien zu fahren.“ (Handke 1996: 11)

With this trip, the author wanted to create a picture of the country, the landscape and the people in Serbia with his own eyes, but he realizes that this idea is not at all that simple because the reports in the Western media have already created a certain picture of the reality there. As a result, Peter Handke will approach things in his distinctive and specific way, as a poet. With his travelogue, he wanted to give his

readers a different picture of the Serbian population and their life, to show them the images of the silent, white winter landscape, to let them discover the rivers, nature and his archaic vision of the country. He describes the landscapes through which he travels through emotional discourse (perhaps because he had Slavic origins on his mother's side, as she was a Slovenian from Carinthia), as a reflection of the good in the human race, through a depiction of less developed regions as a contrast to modern industrial ones.

Handke also criticizes the one-sidedness of the portrayal of this region in the Western media and, according to him, it represents "a fabrication of evidence that was needed by the Western European public to justify the attacks on (then) Yugoslavia". The moralist Handke condemns all the atrocities committed by the Serbian military and paramilitary units during the war, but according to the Western European critical public, this was insufficiently clear and represents a kind of relativization of their war crimes. On the contrary, according to Handke's view, this means a one-sided schematization of the perception placed through the mass media, which represents Bosnian Muslims exclusively as victims, and Serbs as criminals, so he advocates a kind of poetic subversion. For Handke, a writer could experience the truth "more fairly" than a journalist. Because of his views, the writer Handke is facing fierce condemnations to this day.

It is interesting that Handke ends his travelogue with a farewell letter to a man in Bosnia, a former partisan, who, like his wife, took his own life after the outbreak of the war:

„Der Verrat, der Zerfall und das Chaos unseres Landes, die schwere Situation, in die unser Volk geworfen ist, der Krieg (serbokroatisch „rat“) in Bosnien-Herzegowina, das Ausrotten des serbischen Volkes und meine eigene Krankheit haben mein weiteres Leben sinnlos gemacht, und deswegen habe ich beschlossen, mich zu befreien von der Krankheit, und insbesondere von den Leiden wegen des Untergangs des Landes, um meinen erschöpften Organismus, der das alles nicht mehr aushielt, sich erholen zu lassen.“ (Handke 1996: 135)

Through this farewell letter, Handke conveys his personal emotional attitude towards the breakup of Yugoslavia (Denkovska, 2023: 37), trying to create sympathy in the (Western European) reader and pointing out the fact that victims of the war were all parties involved.

The publication of Handke's "Winter Journey" provoked the media in a rarely sharp way. Not only the media, but also numerous critics and literary colleagues accused him of writing pro-Serbian manifestos instead of literary works. Handke, on the other hand, in whose late work the emotional discourse prevails, even more emphatically offers a kind of literary paradigm as a strategy to encourage empathy in the reader in order to create, as he himself believes, a different picture in relation to all the parties involved in the wars in the Balkans in the context of the breakup of Yugoslavia. However, apart from the harsh criticism from the world public for such views, he also received some recognition for his attempt in his contemporary travelogues to present a way of perception outside the boundaries of the mainstream. The Nobel Prize for Literature, which was awarded to him in 2019, is both a confirmation of that, but also a hotbed for a new fierce critical condemnation.

The question of the objectivity of the travel writer Handke remains open and debatable. Perhaps, in the travelogue "Travelling Yesterday", with one of his own thoughts, he will lay the foundations of his further political-literary work, when he states:

„Eines weiß ich: Die Welt im Gehen, Schauen, Bedenken, Betrachten, Weitergehen stellt sich anders dar als die Welt in den Zeitungen.“ (Handke 2005: 470)

The controversy pushes towards the general question of the relationship between aesthetic autonomy and social responsibility, and in particular to the question of the ethical dimension of Handke's work and affect. Under what circumstances is artistic autonomy attested to a literary process, a text, an author, a public appearance, and under what circumstances, on the other hand, is moral quality or public responsibility demanded? Under what conditions is the author directly responsible for the effect of his texts, his statements, his actions? What about the ethical intentions in Handke's opus, how do they relate to the effect created in the texts, and finally how to the actual reception? A well-founded discussion of these questions depends on literary and cultural studies experts.

## 5. THE TEXT OR THE READER?

Not only should the experts be the judges of the ethical implications. Author aside, there is also the question of who should be responsible for the narrative: the text or the reader? The author and his intentions have long been out of the question, only the reader stands against the text. If the construction of the narrative were completely left to the reader, the text would be completely deconstructed and in a conversation between readers, it would completely lose its structure. However, vice versa, without the

reader, of course, the text cannot exist. This question again enters the deep and multifaceted field of ethics, whose specialty is to articulate the relations between freedom and necessity, desire and imperative. The text is the one that conditions and directs the reader to certain thoughts. However, the reader is free and autonomous and bears the responsibility for his own way of reading.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The complexity of a literary work spans many scientific disciplines, with ethics at the top. As an autonomous element, the creation of which is necessary in itself, legitimized by the action itself, the narrative itself cannot be attributed by the generally accepted universal ethical rules. A literary work, regardless of whether the emphasis is placed on the text or the reader during its creation, penetrates the subtlety of ethical rules and norms, breaks them down to their smallest details and deconstructs their universality. From whatever aspect it is considered, the literary work is and will always be a great challenge for ethics.

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