

Research Network:

Feeling and Understanding. The Role of Empathic Emotions in Understanding Persons and Literature

Workshop: Empathy, Understanding, and Appreciation

Georg-August-University Göttingen, February 21st-23rd, 2019

Claudia Hillebrandt (Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena):

Empathy and appreciation for ambivalent fictional characters

As a member of this network, I'd like to focus on ambivalent characters in fiction who induce empathy and feelings of caring as well as of disapproval or even disgust. Characters like Shylock, Phèdre, or Countess Orsina seem to belong into this group: We disapprove of their deeds, but we nonetheless understand their motives and feelings and maybe even feel compassion for them. How do texts stimulate these different feelings in their readers? Which literary techniques and character traits can be held responsible for that? Is there even a certain type or types of character that are of special interest in this context? And why do readers willingly engage in the process of experiencing mixed feelings of this kind towards fictional characters – feelings they would in many cases rather try to avoid in their everyday social relationships? By addressing these questions, two of the three core areas of this network are affected, namely appreciation and empathy and borderline cases of empathy.

In my talk, I'd like to explore the role empathy has in shaping an appreciative attitude towards fictional character. More specifically, I'd like to concentrate on emotional processes based on "Sympathie". 'Sympathie' refers to an appreciative attitude towards a person or character as well as to several emotions of caring this attitude may induce in its subject. Following Brigitte Scheele, I will argue that empathy has a key role in shaping that attitude and vice versa. This may be a starting point for further investigations regarding the questions listed above. One may sum them up as the problem of the 'sympathische Unsympathie', a fictional character that is able to provoke empathy as well as mixed feelings of caring and disapproval.