

# *Moral Emotions in Literary Reception*

## *An Introduction*

One of the central dimensions of narrative reception is moral judgment. When readers engage with narrative texts, they almost inevitably evaluate the agents depicted in them—human characters or human-like beings—through moral lens. Actions are intuitively assessed as “right” or “wrong,” the characters as “good” or “bad,” and these judgments function as cognitive tools, through which readers map the moral norms that structure the world represented in the fictional world. Moral evaluation thus constitutes a fundamental component of narrative sense-making rather than an optional or secondary layer of interpretation.

Recent developments in moral psychology conceptualize moral judgment as the outcome of the interaction between two cognitive systems: an intuitive, affect-laden system and a more deliberate, reflective mode of reasoning. Depending on the context, one or the other may be differentially activated. Empirical research on literary reception suggests that, in the case of aesthetic narratives, readers tend to preferentially rely upon intuitive and emotion-based judgments. For this reason, the present special issue focuses specifically on moral emotions as key drivers of literary understanding.

Among emotions, the negative moral emotions—such as anger, contempt, moral disgust, or indignation—play a particularly significant role in reception. These emotions are known to intensify subjective experience, capture and sustain attention, and enhance memory formation. In comparison with other types of moral emotions, they therefore exert a disproportionate influence on how narratives are processed, remembered, and interpreted. For this reason, this issue centres around the interpretive function of readers’ negative moral emotions and examines how they shape ethical engagement with literary texts.

Human moral expectations are grounded both in culturally specific norms and in principles often regarded as universal, such as the condemnation of killing or of actions that violate another person’s psychological integrity. Literary narratives, however, are capable of challenging even these seemingly fundamental expectations. Through specific representational techniques, narrative texts can suspend, complicate, or even reverse readers’ default moral responses. Accordingly, the contributions published in this issue investigate which narrative strategies and lin-

guistic devices shape readers' moral emotions and how these emotions, in turn, influence interpretation.

While rooted in evolutionarily constrained cognitive processes, readers' emotional responses are also influenced by cultural context and individual experiences. The articles in this volume take these factors into account as they explore the ethical dimensions of literary texts as a complex and dynamic phenomenon.

From this issue onward, our journal is published in English and has also expanded its profile: in addition to research articles, we also publish book reviews to inform our readers about recent developments in cognitive literary studies. We hope that these changes will allow the journal to reach a broader audience and to provide multifaceted insights into this rapidly evolving field.

We wish all our readers an engaging and stimulating reading experience.

The editors  
SZTE, NTNU