

Standards and Norms in the Study of American Literature

From its beginning as an academic discipline in the post-WW II years, the study of American literature (*Amerikanistik*) tried to distinguish itself from approaches to the study of English literature (*Anglistik*) by the promise of a new methodology, conceptualized as a combination of literary and cultural analysis. In order to justify American Studies' institutionalization as a separate discipline, American literature had to be read as an expression of American society and culture, but this had to be done on the basis of a close reading of literary form as propagated by the *New Criticism*. In the first part, my essay describes the problems arising from this linkage of cultural and literary analysis, leading, in the end, to the increasingly implausible claim that the cultural insights of major American works reside in the very quality that distinguish them as literary texts according to the *New Criticism*, namely their organic unity. In the second part, this essay traces the consequences of a growing critique of new critical formalism and the foundational myths of American Exceptionalism that provided the basis for cultural readings of American literature. The claim that literary texts can and should best be understood as an expression of national character was submitted to a scathing critique by the new social movements and their insistence on the key role diversity plays in American culture. This has led to new theories of literary effect, a redefinition of the relation between reading and identity formation, and, more generally speaking, to a pluralization of interpretive approaches that have undermined any attempt to define methodological standards and norms of the field. In their place, ›powerful‹ rhetorical performances often remain the only criterion for distinguishing literary interpretations.

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