

Franz Meier: *Sexualität und Tod. Eine Themenverknüpfung in der englischen Schauer- und Sensationsliteratur und ihrem Soziokulturellen Kontext (1764-1897)* (Buchreihe der Anglia 36). Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2002. XII + 433 S., geb. 66,00 €.

After a century of the post-Freudian focus on sexuality and a rising interest in death in recent decades of literary and cultural criticism, Franz Meier sets out to analyse the combination of sexuality and death in Gothic and sensational novels as well as in their social and cultural context between Romanticism and the Victorian fin-de-siècle. In a very systematic, critical, and meticulous way, the author establishes a conceptual framework for his approach along the lines of cultural studies, structuralism, constructivism, and systems theory.

On the basis of Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy, Meier conceives similarity and contiguity as basic modes of combining the topics of sexuality and death. He follows David Lodge's arguments that differences between categories can also be found among items within single categories, and that therefore, structures reveal dominant and minor modes of combinations rather than a rigid dichotomy of either/or. Meier identifies two major types within the mode of similarity, the identity of sexuality and death, for example necrophilia, and the identifying substitution, such as the Vampire's kiss of death. In addition, he specifies three important types within the mode of contiguity, opposition, e.g. love versus war, causality, for example the fallen woman's death, and antagonistic substitution, as in the motif of the sepulchral marriage bed. The convincing central thesis captures the historical development of the combination of sexuality and death in the image of the pendulum. The pendulum swings from a cultural dispersion of taboos on the fields of sexuality and death and the tendency towards their similarity in cultural discourses at the times of social instability during the Romantic era to the Victorian concentration of the taboo on sexuality and on the mode of contiguity at a period of relative social stability. The movement turns back to dispersion and similarity in the fin-de-siècle of the nineteenth century.

The author chooses the usual suspects among popular and representative Gothic and sensational narratives (by Walpole, Lewis, Shelley, Polidori, Brontë, Collins, Le Fanu, Wilde, Stoker) for close analyses. His extremely careful and highly reflected approach counter-acts the structuralist tendency towards generalizing classification by his close readings, which scrutinize the texts for various manifestations of combinations of sexuality and death. The *Castle of Otranto*, for example, foregrounds the similarity of death and sexuality in the depiction of morbid desire and the images of the monstrous sword and the lethal helmet, super-natural events caused by an illegitimate genealogy that is punished by death according to the mode of contiguity. Meier maintains that Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White* performs the Victorian change of the paradigm from the initial similarity of sexuality and death in the character of the attractive Laura as her dead sister's Doppelgänger to the final contiguity in the discovery of illegitimate sexuality as the (indirect) reason for subsequent deaths and the antagonistic substitution of death by sexuality because Hartright erases the wrong attribution of death to Laura and marries her.

Meier argues that cultural discourses and literature overlap and that literature reflects the cultural taboo, which calls for an increased negotiation of boundaries and transgressions. However, Victorian literature does not follow the cultural segregation of sexuality from death but rather changes thanatosexual combinations towards the mode of contiguity, thereby transcending the theses that restrict literature to the functions of a mirror of society or the latent pattern-maintenance of cultural values. Meier's book impresses the reader by its broad approach, excellent structure, thorough reflections, balanced judgements, and last but not least its comprehensive documentation with a wealth of information and discussion in the footnotes.

Michael Meyer (Koblenz-Landau)