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Ethics and Literature: the present change in the light of the past

In the last ten years, ethical issues have become central to literary production: the debate on gender and ethnic equity, on environmental or animal issues, for example, are not only addressed in novels as political issues, but as moral problems concerning the individual commitment of the reader. Whether critics are opposed or in favour, it is clear that a change is underway. The rise of self – help novels and the emphasis on reparative literature are a sign of the increased importance of ethics in literary production and reception. According to Niklas Luhmann (1989), this change is not new, but has been recurring cyclically, in times of crisis, since the Renaissance. In order to understand today's changes, it is therefore interesting to study their history. Around 1570, a major change in mentality brought about a paradigm shift which, in some respects, could help explain the present change. Late Renaissance literature was also seen as a form of self – help, the religious turmoil of the time led to increased reflection on the didactic power of literature, and the rise of censorship led to a theorisation of the ethical issues of the text and its power of persuasion. The case of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which was considered a linguistic and ethical model at the beginning of the 16th century and was banned and burnt at the end of the century as an immoral book, will allow us to better understand the links between ethics and literature in Western society, in the past as well as in the present debate.