

## The Black Cook and the Tin Drum: Intimate Ethics in Literature

### Presenter

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### Mentor

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### Session

- [Session 2M: Philosophy, Ethics and Literature](#)
- 288 MGH
- 3:30 PM to 5:00 PM

After its publication in 1959, Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum* roused a number of scathing reviews from its critics who found its treatment of the devastation incurred under the Nazi regime irreverent and its subject matter generally distasteful. Now widely recognized as one of the most significant anti-war novels of the twentieth century, disparities in the criticism remain in both focus and method for the treatment of a novel whose scope is at once immense and minute, its narration spanning nearly fifty years but its perspective anchored to the diminutive stature of Oskar, the "eternal three-year-old." This study proceeds with the belief that the novel's peculiar narrative situation, privileging the lives of individuals and devoid of the application of an "adult" morality or location of guilt, advances a portrait of pre-, inter-, and post-war Germany which is, nonetheless, profoundly ethical. To examine the function of the intimate ethics afforded by the literary text, my analysis of *The Tin Drum* is situated within a framework of theoretical and philosophical texts, including work by Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno, all of whom address problems of ethics and history through the deployment of theory. This study takes as its objective the exploration of the relation between literature and theory, and literature and standard historical accounts, in terms of what can be seen or envisioned by each type of text. The analysis centers on numerous oppositional dualities staged by the novel, which, as models for understanding the identity of the inverse or the contrary, offer a singular illumination of structures of power and narratives of progress. The latter stands as Grass' primary antagonist throughout his work, as that which obscures the presence of the past in our own time and the experience of the individual in the context of empire.