

Der Nobelpreis und die deutschsprachige Literatur

Eine Studie über die Vergabekriterien
des Literaturnobelpreises
1901-1971

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Abstract

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This is a historical study of the Nobel Prize in Literature and its criteria, based on the case of German authors who were nominated for the prize between 1901 and 1971. It is based on a critical examination of largely unpublished archival records, primarily from the archives of the Swedish Academy. These documents include the reports of the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy, nomination letters for the Nobel Prize that were sent to this committee and also the correspondence of the members of the Swedish Academy during that period.

The general question guiding the analysis is which factors or arguments ultimately influenced the application of the criteria. The analysis particularly revolves around the issue of whether the decisions and rejections were primarily motivated by the personal, aesthetic beliefs of the academy members or by politically motivated considerations. This study thereby shows that although aesthetic ideas were certainly very important, political factors also exerted a decisive influence which often took precedence over aesthetics. This is particularly apparent during the period 1914–1945, because of the two World Wars, Adolf Hitler's ban on German citizens receiving the Nobel Prize and the persecution of writers during the years of National Socialism.

The study begins with an analysis of the Nobel Prize criteria in theory and practice. In connection with this, the then academy members' personal impressions of both historical and twentieth century German literature and their political and aesthetic values are also examined. This is followed by a chronological reconstruction and analysis of the evaluation of all the Nobel candidacies of German authors – that is, of all candidates who wrote in German, whether they were from Germany, Austria, Switzerland or elsewhere.