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# HOW TO MEASURE THE SOCIAL PRESTIGE OF A NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE?

## *Development of a scale assessing the literary value of a text*

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*Starting from Walter Benjamin's definition of aura as an 'effect of a work of art being uniquely present in time and space', the objective of this study is to test whether paper books and e-books have different kinds of "aura" and if so, whether the perception of the aura influences the evaluation of the literary texts within a book and an e-book. 59 subjects read four texts from two different genres (short stories and poems) on two different devices (antique book and Kindle). To determine the effect of aura we developed a questionnaire to measure the evaluation of the literary quality by readers. Results show different attributions of literary value depending on the reading device and on the genre of the text. Despite the study's limitations, these findings support the notion that the context, i.e. the preconceptions of the readers towards a certain medium of reading, plays a determinant role in the attribution of literary value.*

**Keywords:** *digitality; literary evaluation; materiality; Nobel Prize; reading research*



## *What is aura or the social prestige of literature?*

**W**e are living in the era of the third “reading revolution”.<sup>2</sup> After the invention of writing, 6.000 years ago, and of the Gutenberg printing press in the 15th century, the introduction of digital texts and the arrival of the Kindle in 2007 is changing our reading minds. This change is of pivotal importance since writing has made our human knowledge and culture visible and storable. At least the Western culture is based on the “Order of the Book”.<sup>3</sup>

**A** similar medial revolution we are experiencing nowadays happened in the beginning of the 20th century, when radio, film, and photography were invented. To describe the consequence of this revolution on our interaction with objects, Walter Benjamin introduced the concept of aura in his 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (German: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*). Benjamin discusses the concept of aura to describe the authenticity of an artwork which gets lost by its reproduction. According to the philosopher, ‘even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin understood the aura of a work as a “distance effect” in the sense that the object perceived is placed at a certain temporal and spatial realm separated from its intended public. The distance legitimates a certain authority

to the artwork and social prestige to its owners or interpreters. According to Benjamin, the modern reproduction techniques such as cinema, photography and phonograph, nullify the distance between the original work of art and its recipients. For this reason, the aura, the unique aesthetic authority of an artwork given by its existence in a specific time and space is lost in the age of mechanical reproduction.

**A** similar loss of distance and authority is experienced nowadays through digitalization. With the invention of printing, the aura of a text reproduced in a unique manuscript has already been compromised because, as Van der Weel states: ‘with every cheap edition of the classics ever published something of the “aura” of the original artwork was lost’.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Van der Weel transfers the concept of aura from the artistic and pictorial field into the literary one, where the status of text is inevitably threatened by the digital environment because ‘the digital medium has marginalized the notion of the original’. Hence, digital copies cannot be distinguished from the original.<sup>6</sup> In a digital environment, a literary text runs always the risk of “digital obsolescence”<sup>7</sup> i.e. the deterioration of the materiality. For Van der Weel, ‘all digital texts, regardless of provenance or quality, look identical’,<sup>8</sup> as they miss the typical paratextual qualities of paper books given by typography, cover, size, color, etc.

**I**n the art market, the original painting has an immense social economic and cultural value compared to its copy. Consequently, the aura of the original implicates a

higher social prestige. Following the parallelism between the artistic and the literary field mentioned above, we postulate that the high symbolic value attributed to books is higher than that of e-books. With our experiment we wanted to empirically test Benjamin's thesis of "the loss of aura" in relation to the evaluation of literary works among contemporary readers. We asked if contemporary readers attribute different values of literary quality to a text depending on the device used to present the text (antique book vs e-reader). Based on Van der Weel's and Benjamin's thesis, we made the hypothesis that contemporary readers evaluate the social prestige for literary texts higher when texts are presented in a paper book compared to a digital version presented on an e-reader. We also tested whether this effect could be observed for different genres (short story vs. poem).

### *How can we measure the aura of a book? The study's design*

To our knowledge, the social prestige of a text has never been empirically tested before, and since no adequate questionnaire to measure it exists, we create a suitable one starting from the literary evaluation model of Renate von Heydebrand and Simone Winko.<sup>9</sup> The concept of value developed by Heydebrand and Winko to denote 'a complex social act by which a subject attributes value to an object [e.g. a book], in a concrete situation and on the basis of a certain standard of value and certain categorizing assumptions'.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, following the thesis of Heydebrand and Winko, a literary text is not intrinsically valuable, it only acquires an attributive

value in relation to standards of value. For example, for cultivated readers, a "good" book should be "complex" or "rhetorically elaborated" to meet their expectations (values), whilst for less sophisticated readers, a "good" book can be a "suspenseful" love story or detective novel. As Heydebrand and Winko point out, 'literary evaluation is by no means limited by professional judgment on literary texts'.<sup>11</sup> It takes place in a complex social system and plays a role in the production, distribution, and reception of literature. Individuals evaluate literature implicitly by selecting particular texts considered worthy of attention. For example, this occurs when literary critics consider a text a part of the canon, when a teacher selects a text for his/her syllabus, or an important publishing house chooses a text for a particular book series. There can be a number of reasons to trigger these evaluation acts including aesthetic, educational, but also economic reasons since assessment of literary quality is governed by norms influenced by economic and cultural spheres. The latter regulates 'the possible gains in terms of knowledge, action orientation, gratification, prestige'.<sup>12</sup> The model looks into two distinct forms of literary evaluation: explicit verbal utterances, and non-linguistic acts of selection (e.g. buying a book instead of another). In the structural typology of axiological textual values, the standards of value are governed by four dimensions: formal values, content values, relational values, reception values. While the first three take place on the social level, the fourth takes place on the individual level. In this study, we focused on the reception values, because we were interested in testing experimentally

the effect of the texts. Among reception values, Heydebrand and Winko propose the following sub-categorization:

*1. Individual values.* This sub-dimension considers the qualitative offer of literary texts for personal needs<sup>13</sup> and it includes:

- Cognitive value (reflection, memorability)
- Practical value (making sense, significance)
- Hedonistic value (pleasure, entertainment)

*2. Social value.* This aspect observes the “use” of literary texts on two fronts:

- Economic value: medium for money. This value captures literary products as objects of the economic system.
- Social prestige. This value represents symbolic capital and the gain in prestige amongst literature in general, or within particular texts.

Following this categorization, we created an instrument to measure the literary value perceived by the single reader. In contrast to the subcategories for social values, the categories and subcategories for individual values overlap with existing subscales from questionnaires developed to assess reading experiences. Hence, we have borrowed existing items from scales like the poetry reception questionnaire,<sup>14</sup> the experiencing questionnaire,<sup>15</sup> the foregrounding questionnaire,<sup>16</sup> the reading experience questionnaire,<sup>17</sup> and the transportation scale<sup>18</sup> to construct the three subscales

to measure individual’s value:

*1. Cognitive value:*

- I think, the text/ poem introduces a new perspective.<sup>19</sup>
- The text/ poem makes me look at things differently.<sup>20</sup>
- The subject of the text/ the poem concerns questions which I oft thought.<sup>21</sup>
- The text/ poem makes me stop and think.<sup>22</sup>

*2. Practical value*

- I felt that some aspects of the text/ the poem are important for my everyday life too.<sup>23</sup>
- This text/ poem continued to influence my mood after I finished reading it.<sup>24</sup>
- After reading it was easy to concentrate again on other things.<sup>25</sup>
- After reading this text/ poem I felt refreshed, renewed, and revitalized.<sup>26</sup>

*3. Hedonistic value*

- While reading the text/ poem I have noticed the language.<sup>27</sup>
- The text/ poem is fascinating.<sup>28</sup>
- It is a worth reading this text/ poem.<sup>29</sup>

We created, independent from the model of Heydebrand and Winko, the following items related to the economic value and of the social prestige, as we did not find any model to refer to:

*4. Economic value*

### *For the prose condition:*

- A German book publisher paid 5,000 euros for the rights of a Günter Grass anthology, another publisher paid 200 euros for the rights of an Oswald Wiener anthology. How much did a German publisher pay for the rights of the anthology which contains the text you have just read?

Answer scale: 1 (€ 200.-) - 5 (€ 5,000.-)

### *Poem condition:*

- A German book publisher paid € 5,000.- for the rights of an Erich Fried anthology, another publisher paid € 200.- for the rights of a Friedrich Achleitner anthology. How much did a German publisher pay for the rights of the anthology which contains the poem you have just read?

### 5. Social prestige

- Do you think that this text/ poem won a literary prize?
- Do you think that the literary critics rated this text as an important text/ poem?
- Do you think that this text/ poem should be taught in school?
- Do you find this text/ poem trivial?

All items were presented together with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from -2 (completely disagree) to 2 (completely agree). The items of the economic value and of the social prestige are the most important values related to our question on the literary value of a text as they explicitly

operationalize the category of social prestige introduced by Heydebrand and Winko.

Furthermore, in order to test the attentiveness and the quality of reading of our participants, we designed two memory tests, one on the formal aspects, and one on the content aspects of the texts. For the memorability of the formal aspects, the subjects had to fill in blanks in quotations of the text which they had just read, e.g.: "How (holy) is the mother's pleasance" ("Wie (heilig) ist - die Mutterwonne"). For the content, participants had to reply to questions like the following, choosing between 4 possible answers: "Where did the tourists come from? India, Italy, USA, France (correct answer: USA)".

## *Methods*

### *Participants*

We tested 59 subjects (37 women, 22 men) with a different background and aged between 18 and 70 years old, in the cities of Göttingen, Northeim, Nörten-Hardenberg, Berlin, and Uslar. Forty-nine participated without reimbursement, the remaining ten were volunteers who participated for compensation. Inclusion criteria for study participation was German as a native language.

### *Design*

The aura study has an articulated 2x2 design with each participant receiving each text genre presented on two different presentation

mediums. Each subject reads two prose texts, one on paper and one on screen, and two poems, also one on paper and one on screen. The order of the texts, the genres, and the medium was counterbalanced in order to minimize genre changes. Thereby, the two short stories and the two poems were always presented directly one after the other.

### *Reading materials*

The prose texts chosen for the experiment were two German translations of Ernest Hemingway's *Cat in the rain* and *A day's wait* from the same collection. The two poems written by the German writer Wilhelm Hauff are entitled *Mother's love* and *Wilhelm to his dear mother on her birthday*. We selected the above-mentioned prose texts and poems because they are not particularly difficult to comprehend, they do not include words and rhetorical figures that are particularly rare or difficult. The stories by Hemingway tell two very simple stories, an encounter with a cat during an accommodation in a hotel and an episode during the Second World War. The poems are focused on a very simple love of a son for his mother. In the paper version, the book had a hard-cover and looked very antique although the typographic characters used were not gothic, but contemporary characters, in order to avoid making the reading task difficult for those readers who were not familiar with black letters. The electronic and the paper version were presented in a very similar layout. For both versions of a text, the same amount of text was presented on a page. The page breaks appeared on identical positions of the text.

### *Procedures*

Participants were told that they were going to read four texts: two short stories and two poems. After each reading session they had to answer the memory questions and fill out the aura questionnaire. The items of the memory tests and the questions from the aura questionnaire were presented on a computer screen via the online platform SoSci Survey.<sup>30</sup> The presentation of the texts is described in the Material section. At the end of the study, participants were asked to fill out an additional questionnaire related to their reading habits. The participants' task was not time constrained. During reading they were told that they could go back and forth in the text as they wished, while total reading time was measured. During the question part, they could not go back to the text.

### *Results*

In the first step, reliability analyses were conducted, which evaluated the six subscales of the aura questionnaire. If necessary, items were recoded, so that high numbers indicate high value for the underlying construct. For the subscales hedonic value (hv) and practical value (pv), one item had to be removed (hv – item one, pv – item three). In the end, coefficient alpha reliabilities ranged between .69 and .84, indicating that the remaining items formed consistent subscales. In subsequent analyses, these subscales were used to study effects of medium and genre. To do this, a 2x2 repeated measure ANOVA was run for each subscale, with medium (book vs Kindle) and genre (poetry vs prose) as the two independent variables. Additionally,

we also conducted these 2x2 ANOVA for the memorability items. The mean values and standard deviations for

both memorability values, and the subscales from the aura questionnaire are reported in Table 1.

	independent variables			
	genre and medium			
	poem		short story	
	antique book	e-reader	antique book	e-reader
Dependent variables	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
content memorability	2.69 (1.27)	2.97 (1.21)	3.69 (0.50)	3.73 (0.45)
form memorability	1.24 (1.32)	1.19 (1.22)	3.64 (2.15)	3.81 (2.12)
cognitive value	2.59 (0.95)	2.56 (0.94)	2.89 (1.04)	2.74 (0.97)
hedonic value	2.86 (1.03)	2.89 (1.05)	3.56 (0.89)	3.22 (1.07)
practical value	3.50 (0.84)	3.51 (0.94)	3.10 (0.90)	3.25 (0.91)
economic value	3.80 (1.67)	3.63 (1.54)	4.25 (1.52)	3.83 (1.68)
social prestige	2.63 (0.76)	2.97 (0.79)	3.12 (0.77)	3.04 (0.84)

Table 1: Mean values and standard deviations for each subscale

### Memorability measures

The analysis for both memorability measures for form and the form content revealed a significant effect for genre (form:  $F(1,61.1)=150.6$ ,  $p<.001$ , content:  $F(1,57.7)=58.5$ ,  $p<.001$ ), indicating better memorability for prose texts compared to the poems. Neither the main effect for medium nor the interaction were significant (all  $F < 1.7$ , all  $p > .19$ ).

### Effects of genre: prose vs. poetry

The main effect for genre was significant on four of the five subscales (all  $F>4.9$ ,

all  $p<.04$ ). Only for the economic value, no significant effect could be observed ( $F(1,59.1)=2.3$ ,  $p=.13$ ). For social prestige (Meanshort story=3.08, Meanpoem=2.82), hedonic value (Meanshort story=3.39, Meanpoem=2.88), and cognitive value (Meanshort story=2.81, Meanpoem=2.57) the study participants rated short stories higher compared to the poems. On the subscale practical value, the participants reported higher values for poems compared to the short stories (Meanshort story=3.17, Meanpoem=3.51). With the exception of practical value, the results indicate that evaluation of the literary quality of the two stimuli are in line with that of literary critics and literary historians made on the works of Hemingway and

Hauff in the past. A possible explanation could be Hauff's trivial treatment of the mother's love as a topic which makes it worthy and accessible to everybody.

For the subscale social prestige (cf. Figure 1), a significant interaction could be observed ( $F(1, 55.8) = 4.4, p = .04$ ). These effects indicate that the genre difference was significant only for conditions in which the texts were presented in an antique book ( $t(54) = 3.38, p < .001$ ), but not for conditions with e-readers ( $t < 1$ ). No further interactions were significant (all  $F > 1$ ). It seems that for our readers it made a difference if they read the poem or the prose on the screen or on paper. As the graph shows, when the text was read on paper, the readers were more prone to think that the text should be taught in school, that it had been praised by literary critics, or that it was written by a Nobel Prize author.

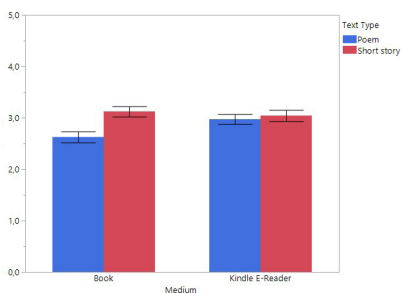


Figure 1: Genre and medium effects for the subscale Social prestige.

### Effects of medium: antique book vs. e-reader

The main effect for medium was significant only for the subscale economic value (cf. figure 2).

Here, the economic value was rated higher for texts presented in an antique book compared to texts presented on an e-reader ( $F(1, 59.1) = 4.6, p = .04$ ; Mean antique book = 4.04, Mean e-reader = 3.72). For all other scales, no effect of medium could be observed (all  $F < 2.4$ , all  $p > .12$ ).

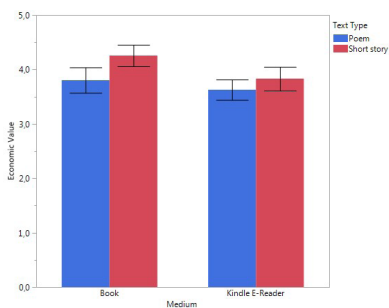


Figure 2: Genre and medium effects for the subscale economic value.

## Discussion

We chose two short stories by a Nobel Prize winner, Ernest Hemingway, and two poems by a romantic writer almost unknown to today's readers, Wilhelm Hauff. The texts not only have different social prestige but were also written in two different historical periods and, therefore, entail different temporal distance towards today's readers. In fact, while the prose of Hemingway is very plain, the two poems are written in easy and understandable, but very rhetorical and old-fashioned German. All these factors seem to have impacted the readers, who, in their judgment, consistently show that they attributed higher "literary value" to the prose text than to the poems. One limitation of our

results is that the perceived difference in social prestige between poems and prose puts in relation two different text genres and two very diverse authors who lived in a different historical and cultural period. The imbalance between the literary quality of the poems and that of the prose texts was so strong that the aura our readers grasped was not that of the paper book, as opposed to the screen, but that of a text by a Nobel Prize winner, as opposed to that of an almost forgotten author. More consistent would be a comparison between texts of the same genre and written by the same author or by coeval authors. This difference in the literary quality obscured most of the other factors related to the digital medium.

Nevertheless, we found a significant effect in the interaction between the medium and the text type in the social value, and a clear effect of the medium in

the evaluation of the economic value. Despite its limitations, these results foster our hypothesis that the context, i.e. the positive preconceptions of the readers towards a certain reading, play a determinant role in the attribution of literary value. Previous research on literary reading has shown that three elements are central in the recently elaborated Neurocognitive Poetics model of literary reading (Jacobs, 2015): the text, the reader, and the context. Our research takes a unique place in highlighting the importance of the context that is the material support of the text, in the evaluation of a literary text. Following the results of our study, it seems that the famous claim by Marshall McLuhan that the medium is the message does apply for our experiment, as readers focused not only on the content and quality of the message, i.e. the literary text, but also on the “aura” of the medium they read the text on.



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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

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