Present-day narrative fiction of the Western world engages in the topic of euthanasia and assisted suicide. This dissertation, titled *Einde verhaal* (The End of the Story), discusses the results of research into the representation of euthanasia and assisted suicide in fictional stories (since 1960) and the ways in which they are embedded in debates on these thematics. Four works from the Netherlands and the United States take up a central position in this study: two novels, *Het refrein is Hein* (Bert Keizer, 1994) and *One True Thing* (Anna Quindlen, 1994); and two films, *SIMPON* (Eddy Terstall, 2004) and *MILLION DOLLAR BABY* (Clint Eastwood, 2004).

The first chapter argues that the way in which narrative fiction inscribes itself into debates regarding the voluntary termination of life can be studied by comparing, in a non-hierarchical manner, fictional representations (creating their own fictional worlds) to non-fictional representations (concerned with the actual world) on this topic. In this, it is not the aim to determine what effect these works had in the actual world, but to interpret and understand how they relate to all kinds of arguments about euthanasia and assisted suicide such as they emerge in various public debates. The research therefore has a hermeneutic purpose. Thus, the present study is oriented on the question of how narrative fiction fulfills three different though aligned functions regarding the topic of the voluntary termination of life. The epistemological function is about the reflection such fictions can offer on the conditions of possibility with respect to learning about euthanasia and assisted suicide, the ethical function concerns the way in which they evaluate these practices in a moral sense, and the political function is about how narrative fiction responds to a certain state of affairs regarding this topic in the actual world.

In methodological terms, reception studies, intertextuality, and narratology contribute to answering the research questions. The method of reception studies charts, on the basis of four dimensions of euthanasia and assisted suicide, how recipients relate these fictional works to the topic at hand (while also paying attention to the presence of intertextual references in the reception documents). Examining reception is conducive to defining the context of the works, which is relevant for answering the research questions. Studying the reception of these works, which as such has a heuristic function, therefore provides an intersubjective foundation for the inevitably subjective interpretations of the way these works engage in euthanasia and assisted suicide. For each work a number of issues are identified that require further scrutiny; the interpretative chapters argue how these topics are represented in the works and consider the way in which the epistemological, ethical, and political functions are fulfilled. The interpretations result from using a comprehensive conception of intertextuality, which enables the analysis of how these narrative fictions are situated in the context that was defined by the reception research. Structuralist narratology is also used as an interpretative tool.
Chapters two to five are successively centered on the interpretations of SIMON, One True Thing, Het refrein is Hein, and MILLION DOLLAR BABY. A brief indication of the way the three above-mentioned functions are fulfilled follows here:

- The epistemological function of SIMON is dominated by an unproblematic view on learning about euthanasia. The film also offers a positive ethical judgment of this theme, particularly because of the value it assigns to self-determination. In line with this, the political function of SIMON consists of a very positive appraisal of the Dutch approach to euthanasia and assisted suicide. Terstall’s film presents euthanasia, besides gay marriage and a liberal attitude to (soft) drugs, as an achievement of Dutch secular society.

- Although One True Thing ostensibly provides a basic justification for the voluntary termination of life on the grounds of both autonomy and compassion, the novel is characterized by an ambiguous ethical function due to the way it fulfills the epistemological function. The possibility of empathic knowledge does in fact meet a highly critical stance in Quindlen’s novel. Given the ambivalent ethical evaluation, One True Thing does not endorse a ban on the voluntary termination of life, but neither does it embrace this practice without criticism.

- Het refrein is Hein clarifies the problems that arise and the different possibilities that exist when trying to establish the autonomy of a death wish as well as the criteria of unbearable and hopeless suffering that would justify euthanasia or assisted suicide. The ethical function of Keizer’s work shows a fundamental justification of the voluntary termination of life, in part because autonomy and the prevention of suffering are seen to be important values, but given the epistemological function, this is not without ambivalence. Even so, with regard to the political function Het refrein is Hein argues for another way of thinking about the terminal stages of patients’ lives: one where the process of medical decision making is guided by a patient’s wishes rather than the medical options.

- The epistemological function of MILLION DOLLAR BABY is characterized by a low degree of skepticism, which means that the ethical function is mainly characterized by a positive view on euthanasia. However, this is primarily due to the importance of the principles of autonomy and compassion. In line with this, the political function of MILLION DOLLAR BABY involves implicit criticism of the way the terminal stages of a patient’s life is handled in most of the United States. Euthanasia is represented as a humane act, while the film questions the rigid line drawn in American society between the voluntary termination of life on the one hand and, on the other, the common and widely accepted practice of stopping medical treatments that have the sole purpose of prolonging life.

The interpretations developed in chapters two to five are subsequently integrated in chapter six, in order to offer an analysis of how narrative-fictional works from the Netherlands and the United States inscribe themselves into a number of debates on euthanasia and/or assisted suicide. The analysis also involves a few works from some additional Western countries. The debates that are discussed in this chapter relate
successively to the causes of the desire for an acceleration of death; the relationship between autonomy and compassion; the problems and possibilities when determining the patient's suffering; the problems and possibilities when determining the autonomy of a request for euthanasia or assisted suicide; the attitude towards the patient's suffering; the issue of “managing” the process of dying; the possibility of abuse, that is, the “slippery slope”; and, finally, the distinction between euthanasia and the practice of leaving the patient to die.

Next, the chapter describes how fictional stories, through their engagement in these debates, fulfill the epistemological, ethical, and political functions. As for the epistemological function, many works present the possibility of reliable knowledge acquisition as relatively unproblematic. Apart from that, some works present epistemological difficulties concomitant with strategies to overcome them, or offer a predominantly critical view on epistemological issues. By contrast, it is uncommon for narrative fiction to present a fundamental epistemological skepticism in this respect.

Although the ways in which the ethical function is fulfilled is very diverse, a substantial part of the works studied does permit a (mostly) positive ethical evaluation of the voluntary termination of life. A dominant pattern can be observed for the corpus of stories where this applies, as these stories are largely concerned with a single individual whose suffering is existential (whether or not in interaction with physical suffering) and cannot be alleviated, or just barely so, because of this. An autonomous death wish exists as a result of this particular suffering, while at the same time the legitimacy of compassion as grounds for the act of euthanasia or assisted suicide with this person is also represented. Thus, a positive appreciation of the voluntary termination of life can arise.

The political function of narrative fiction differs for each of the two countries: since a majority of these works is characterized by a broadminded, progressive ethical function, many of the recent Dutch fictions endorse the Dutch approach to euthanasia and assisted suicide, while American narrative fiction about the voluntary termination of life in contrast does not endorse the official approach and often criticizes – though implicitly, mostly – US policy (such as it is in large parts of the US), thus withholding moral legitimacy according to the legal system.

Chapter six ends with a summary of some similarities and differences between Dutch and American fictional stories. Important points that works of these two countries have in common are, apart from their predominantly liberal position: that a negative evaluation of the voluntary termination of life also occurs in some fictional stories of both countries; that narrative fiction represents a wide variety of diseases and conditions; and that the issue of completed life is discussed in fictional stories from both countries. The differences relate to the fact that there is often a tension in American works between moral versus legal legitimacy; that loved ones therefore are more frequently involved in the voluntary termination of life and that this more often concerns a form of assisted suicide compared to Dutch narrative fiction; that in Dutch works existential suffering played an important part in an earlier stage and that the issue of euthanasia in the case of dementia is an important feature, while in the US this is rather the case for disability.
The seventh and final chapter is devoted to a further reflection on the results and methodological and theoretical aspects of the research. Advantages and disadvantages of the reception research are discussed and it is again briefly discussed how narrative fiction fulfills the respective functions. These findings subsequently inform a review of the similarities and differences in form and content between (Dutch and American) novels and films, leading to the conclusion that differences in form do not imply any generalizable difference in content in the way the two art forms address the voluntary termination of life. I then proceed to discuss the relationship between narrative-fictional works on the one hand and, among other things, scientific and journalistic texts representing euthanasia and assisted suicide on the other, arguing how some of these constitute a separate discourse.

This separate discourse presents the voluntary termination of life as a (more or less) desirable death; a view on the end of life that is typified by a number of important characteristics. Firstly, this view underscores the fundamental value of autonomy, that is, the ability to organize one’s own life the way one wants it to be. Secondly, life in this view is not presented as essentially inviolable: no matter how important it is, it represents only a relative value. It follows that in this view there are a number of legitimate reasons to desire for euthanasia or assisted suicide. A lot of importance is attached to the degree of suffering that makes life impossible. A situation where suffering causes a person to experience his or her existence no longer as meaningful or as “unlivable” must accordingly be prevented or, if such is no longer possible, be ended by ending life itself. Medical technology in this view enables such decisions and should not be an end in itself.

This is followed by a reflection (resulting from the relationship between work and interpreter) on the nature of narrative fiction and the consequences this has for the representation of euthanasia and assisted suicide. I argue in two ways against claims for the specificity of narrative fiction. First, I believe that a strictly formal distinction between fictional stories and non-narrative or non-fictional “texts” does not hold. Second, I argue that clear formal differences as such do not rule out the possibility of analogies in content. So without necessarily leading to a rigid distinction with non-narrative and / or non-fictional “texts” as far as this concerns fulfilling the epistemological, ethical, and political functions, individual works use fictionality and narrativity in various ways when they contribute to debates on euthanasia.

The last points of this chapter concern a consideration of the notion of commitment or engagement, as I argue that the subject matter researched here implies that this notion should be broadened beyond the realm of literature that it conventionally covers. In addition the present study offers methodological tools for studying the commitment of narrative fiction and identifying relevant theoretical perspectives to this end. The book then closes with suggesting some starting points for further research.

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