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### Abstract

In “What is Literature?”, Terry Eagleton argues that literature is not objectively definable by analyzing definitions previously given to the word ‘literature’. He analyzes five different definitions: literature as imaginative writing, literature as estranging language, literature as non-pragmatic discourse, literature as having no essence, and literature as highly valued writing. After providing arguments as to why each definition is not completely correct, Eagleton constructs his own definition claiming that literature is writing that is valued very highly based on social ideologies. Despite the fact that literature is writing that is valued highly, the value of a writing is not determined by any person’s individual values, but rather what is valued by society. Furthermore, what society values is determined by individuals with power. In short, Terry Eagleton describes what is, in his opinion, the best definition of ‘literature’ by debunking other definitions of the word in his essay “What is Literature?”.

Commented [1]: Passive

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### Keyword Search

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1996. 1-14. Subjects: Terry Eagleton, social ideologies, literature, Russian Formalism, imaginative writing, value judgements, truth value, estranging language, non-pragmatic, fiction.

### Summary of Eagleton’s “What is Literature?”

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If literary theory exists, then there must be something called literature. The word “literature” does not have an objective definition. There are several possibilities for categorizing literature, but each definition is neither complete nor completely correct. Terry Eagleton’s essay “What is Literature?” closely analyzes four of these ways of categorizing literature and finds the flaws in each, and follows these definitions with his own. In his essay “What is Literature?”, Terry Eagleton discusses that the word “literature” has no objective definition, but it is that which is valued very highly based on social ideologies.

The first definition that Terry Eagleton presents is the argument of literature as imaginative writing, or fact versus fiction. Eagleton does not dwell on the reason for this categorization long, and jumps quickly to the flaws in seeing literature as imaginative writing. Classifying literature solely based on its imaginative quality excludes most non-fiction works. Moreover, it would be difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction because there simply is no hard line between the two. For example, some works of literature were considered at one point to be factual and are no longer considered to be so. In addition to the changing factual validity of some works over time, other literary works vary truth-wise from person to person. One example of such work is the Bible. One person might say it is made up of simple stories while another may read it as fact. Along with the struggle to distinguish between fact and fiction, another outlier of the literature-as-imaginative-writing definition are the Superman comics, which are certainly creative, but can they be considered literature?

The next definition that Eagleton scrutinizes is the Russian Formalist definition of literature that suggests that literature is a “systematic deviation from everyday speech ” (Eagleton 3). Formalists saw the peculiar structure of language in literature, and declared that it was this element that set it apart from other writing. To the Formalists, literature was a mere

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“assemblage of ‘devices,’” (Eagleton 3) including sound, imagery, rhythm, rhyme, and more. In this way, literary language was estranged from other, common, language, making the familiar strange through words. For Eagleton, the biggest flaw in Russian Formalist thinking is that in order to say that literary language differs from common language, one must be able to differentiate between what language is common and what language is not. However, there is no common language as language changes across time, societies, race, class, gender, location, and from person to person. In the way that the Formalists suggest that literature is estranging, Eagleton claims that “To think of literature as the Formalists do is really to think of all literature as *poetry*” (Eagleton 5). The problem with seeing literature as poetry is that anything can be estranging or poetic based on how it is read because “‘literature’ may be at least as much a question of what people do to writing as of what writing does to them” (Eagleton 6). An example of this is a sign on an elevator that states “dogs must be carried on the elevator”. One person can read this as a helpful notice to dog owners, whereas another may fear they are not allowed to ride without a four legged friend. By this definition, anything can be read as literature, so Eagleton the Russian Formalists definition.

The third definition of literature that Eagleton takes on is literature as non-pragmatic discourse. This definition states that literature has no practical purpose, and should be observed for how it is written rather than what is written. The biggest problem with seeing literature as non-pragmatic is that it minimized the truth value in a piece of writing. For example, George Orwell would be astounded to hear that people found less value in the topics he discussed in his essays than in the way that he discussed them. By following this definition of literature, the value of a piece of literature is equally determined by how a person decides to read it as what is actually written. In this way, many written works are ‘constructed’ to be read as literature. For

example, a piece of writing may be published as a philosophical or historical text, but later it may be considered literature. Other works may start off as literature but end up being valued for something else. Eagleton describes this phenomenon, “Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust upon them. Breeding in this respect may count for a good deal more than birth,” (Eagleton 7).

The fourth definition of literature in Eagleton’s essay states that literature in itself has no essence. It would be difficult to pick qualities among all pieces of literature because literature has no inherent qualities that are clearly displayed in every work. The one and only thing all works of literature have in common is how readers relate themselves to writing. John M. Ellis states that the term ‘literature’ “operates rather like the word ‘weed’: weeds are not particular kinds of plant, but just any kind of plant which for some reason or another a gardener does not want around,” (Eagleton 8). Eagleton claims that finding a distinguishing feature in all literature would be as difficult as trying to find a feature which all games have in common.

The last definition that Eagleton addresses ties into his own definition of literature. This definition defines literature as highly valued writing, and claims that there is no such thing as “good” and “bad” literature, but that some writings are simply regarded more highly than others. Eagleton agrees partly with this definition, but argues that values change across time, place, and people so a literary canon under this definition would be inconsistent. By using this definition, anything could be classified as literature because everyone values something different, so Eagleton tweaks this definition a bit to form his own that states that literature is that which is valued very highly based on social ideologies. People value something primarily based on conditioning through ideologies. Since social ideologies are created and influenced by people

with power, what is and is not considered literature is constructed based on the values of those with power.

In “What Is Literature?”, Terry Eagleton comes to the conclusion that literature is defined by our social ideologies. He is able to make this judgement by stating, analyzing, and debunking other definitions of literature that came before his. By using these other definitions, Eagleton is able to perfect his own definition of Literature to share in his essay.

**Evaluation** ←- \* This is just some absolute garbage that I threw together before I knew what Dr. Pennington wanted, I'm gonna redo this whole thing, I just didn't have time to do it for first draft\*

In “What is Literature?”, Terry Eagleton argues that the word ‘literature’ has no objective definition. He makes this claim by sighting several definitions of literature and then proceeding to describe why each definition is incomplete or not completely correct. By disproving the other definition, Eagleton is able to use pieces from each argument that he thinks are correct and construct his own argument very solidly to prove to the reader that ‘literature’, indeed, has no objective definition.

The first definition that Eagleton deals with in his essay states that literature can be described as imaginative writing. Eagleton is quick to debunk this description because this definition would exclude non-fiction writing. I agree with Eagleton’s decision to label this definition as false because it would be too difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction. Eagleton does not use any part of this definition to construct his own, but I agree with his choice because I don’t see characterizing literature as imaginative writing as a useful or correct definition of literature.

The second definition discussed in “What is Literature?” describes literature as estranging language. Eagleton refutes this definition by stating that anything can be read as poetry or read estrangingly. I agree that this definition of literature is not accurate because any person can read any work of writing however they choose, so it would be impossible to determine which works were poetry and which were not. Eagleton does not use any part of this definition in his own, but I agree with that decision because I think there is too much ambiguity in defining literature in labeling literature as estranging writing.

The third definition presents literature as non-pragmatic discourse and claims that it serves no practical purpose, choosing to focus on how a work is written rather than what is actually written. Eagleton debunks this definition by pointing out that it minimizes the truth value of a work. I agree with his choice not to use this definition because I think literature has a purpose to educate. Even fictional writing can educate. Therefore, what is written has an equal value to how it is written.

The fourth of the definitions of literature deals with the idea that literature itself has no essence. I agree with this definition because it is clear that it would be impossible to pick out a defining characteristic that is present in all literature. Eagleton uses this interpretation in his own definition as he is also convinced that the writing itself has no defining qualities. Eagleton and I are in agreement here.

The final definition presented in Eagleton’s essay states that literature is that which we value very highly, and because of this, some writings are valued more highly than others. At first, I was in complete agreement with this definition as it seems to fit the literary canon that is read and taught in schools. My opinion changed, however, when Eagleton pointed out that according to this definition, anything can be literature because different people value different

things. After he makes this point, I acknowledge that something is missing, so I agree with his decision to label this definition as not completely correct.

After debunking the 5 other definitions and pulling pieces from arguments four and five, Eagleton argues that literature is that which we value very highly based on our social ideologies. I viewed definitions four and five as partially correct but not completely whole. That being said, Eagleton's definition of literature is the best definition of literature discussed in "What is Literature?" because it uses the most logical parts of the definitions and adds its own detail to make it the most accurate of the definitions.

#### Notes for redoing the evaluation

Value/ideologies- make a claim

What are we taught vs what we should value

Personal value trumps ideology- we should not be forced to read what society says is valuable

- By continuing to read and teach the literary canon, we reinforce social ideologies
- Curriculum vs english 100 curriculum
- Agree with eagleton that we are conditioned to what is valuable
- Literature stands the test of time because we continue to teach it
  - We find value in things we are told have value
    - We are flock animals

**Commented [4]:** There are some instances of adverbs and passive voice but those should be easy to fix. Reading this made me understand the prompt a little better haha. Nice job!

Work Cited

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1996. 1-14