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Literary Theory and Writing: Revision 24

10-0815-19

Terry Eagleton's Definition of Literature

Abstract of Eagleton

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

Eagleton addresses the ambivalence around the term 'literature' and seeks to define what constitutes a writing as literary or not. In order to introduce literary theory, there must be a concrete definition of literature to build off of. His process in determining the definition of literature involves firstly interpreting different definitions of literature and finding inconsistencies within them. ~~by different literary scholars, providing examples in which each definition proves to be inconsistent with the actual scope of literary history, and thus moving onto a new definition.~~ Eagleton argues that literature also cannot be determined by a certain writing style or use of speech, as suggested by Russian Formalists. Literature cannot be acknowledged through the meaning it portrays either, and it cannot be defined as non-pragmatic discourse. Eagleton ~~then~~ proceeds to analyze literature in terms of value-judgements, stating that ~~. If a piece of writing is valued, then it can be considered literature. However, there remains the fact that~~ literature can lose value over time due to shifting viewpoints. ~~A piece of writing cannot be denied the status of literary based on an individual's taste or opinion of the writing, it can only lose its status if it has lost value over time by a group that holds power over what is considered literature or not.~~ After exhausting the definitions of literature by outside sources that Eagleton has investigated, Eagleton arrives on his own discovery about the nature of the term literature. Rather than providing a solid definition for literature, Eagleton instead proposes the idea that

literature is influenced by changing social ~~ideologies~~ideology, rather than simply stylistic preferences or thematic elements.

Keyword Search of Eagleton

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1996. 1-14. Subjects: literature; writing; literary theory; subjectivity; Formalism; value-judgment; social group;- social ideology; non-pragmatism; social construct.

Summary of- Eagleton's Writing

Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, seeks to discover the standards by which literature is determined and therefore evaluated. ~~Eagleton seeks to find a definition of literature that stands firm enough to build literary theory upon. Finding a definition of literature holds true in all cases~~This proves to be complicated, however, so Eagleton begins to critically analyze different definitions and concepts of 'literature' in order to find a solid starting ground for analyzing literature.

The first inconsistency that Eagleton finds is ~~that the view that 'literature' covers the ground of~~ is considered the difference between fact and fiction. all fiction writing. There is a theory that literature can simply be any type of writing that is not real, and that literature is simply any type of imaginative writing. ~~By this definition, literature is considered the difference between fact and fiction.~~ Eagleton challenges this definition by drawing reference to traditional pieces of writing, such as the book of Genesis, which are "now read as 'fact' by some and 'fiction' by others" (Eagleton 2). ~~This create~~ing s a dilemma in which Genesis both serves and does not serve as true literature, based on how it is chosen to be interpreted by the reader.

Instead, there must remain a certain quality or standard by which to decide whether or not a piece of writing is considered literature. Or, building off of that concept, there must remain a large enough group of people that value the piece of writing to regard it as literature.

Having determined that a fact vs. fiction definition of literature does not suffice, Eagleton moves on to detail the definition of literature created by the Russian Formalists. Formalism relies on the concept that literature is determined by “pass[ing] over the analysis of literary ‘content’ for the study of literary form” (Eagleton 3). Formalists believed that literature was meant to estrange the reader from everyday language and instead ~~brought~~bring about a new set of language, perceivably of a higher order. The Formalists “saw literary language as a set of deviations from a norm... literature is a ‘special’ kind of language, in contrast to the ‘ordinary’ language we commonly use” (Eagleton 4). Therefore, literature can be determined simply by the language used, regardless of the content.

Eagleton finds the inconsistencies in the Formalist definition of literature in its presentation of the concept of “ordinary” language. With a world of many different cultures, languages, and class structures, “one person’s norm may be another’s deviation” (Eagleton 4). There could be an area where what is considered “literary” language could also be considered the everyday language among a certain group of people. Eagleton argues that- “the fact that a piece of language was ‘estranging’ did not guarantee that it was always and everywhere so: it was estranging only against a certain normative linguistic background” (Eagleton 5). This definition, like the fact vs. fiction definition of literature, implies a group of people who value one type of language over another to be considered literary language.

Eagleton addresses the problem with the concept of ~~‘estranged’~~“estranged” language. However, the only type of language that seems estranged enough to follow the Formalist

definition would be of poetry. He argues that “to think of literature as the Formalists do is really to think of all literature as poetry... but literature is usually judged to contain much besides poetry” (Eagleton 5). Again, Eagleton has found that there must be some type of judgement beyond the actual writing style or word choice that can determine what writings are literary or not.

Moving on from Formalism, Eagleton addresses “non-pragmatic” discourse in his search for a definition ~~for~~of literature. A piece of writing can be considered literature by how it makes a generalized statement about the world, rather than having an immediate practical purpose. The writing must comment on a certain aspect of life and living, rather than revolve around a certain issue that is relevant to the time that it was written. This definition is found by Eagleton to be problematic, on the basis that literature cannot just be defined by how someone finds meaning in a piece of writing. A writing can inspire a generalized, world-related meaning by one reader, but only have a practical meaning to another reader.~~This makes,~~ making the case of determining literature too subjective, ~~and~~and This theory “leaves the definition of literature up to how somebody decides to *read*, not to the nature of what is written” (Eagleton 7).

The discovery that Eagleton makes after denying the past definitions of literature is that “value-judgements would certainly seem to have a lot to do with what is judged literature and what isn’t” (Eagleton 8). The pieces of writing that a majority of people deem as valuable gets to be considered literature. This definition finally deserts the idea “that the category ‘literature’ is ‘objective’, in the sense of being eternally given and immutable” (Eagleton 9). This claim is especially true when considering that values have and will have changed throughout the course of history, therefore making these value-judgements of literature subject to change. Eagleton uses Shakespeare as an example, saying that one day a new value-judgement of Shakespeare

could disregard his works as literature if history demands it. This potential erasure of Shakespeare is possible ~~is~~ because “the so-called ‘literary canon’... has to be recognized as a *construct*” (Eagleton 10). Literature is constructed by those who make value-judgements as to what should be considered literary and not considered literary.

The question remains to Eagleton, however, of who actually decides the literary canon. It is one thing for someone to not have a taste for a certain piece of writing, but it is not socially acceptable for the same person to claim that the piece of writing is not literature. Who, then, decides this fact? The answer lies in ideology. Those who are powerful in the world seek to impose their mindset on the surrounding people. These social structures in power determine what is literature and what is not. Literature cannot be subjective individually, but it can be subjective according to the social structures and ideologies in power. Through his exploration of different definitions of literature, Eagleton determines that literature, and what constitutes pieces of writing as literature, is reflective of the power dynamic of different social structures throughout history.

Evaluation of Writing

Terry Eagleton’s quest to define literature was very thoughtfully analyzed and determined, and his ~~piece-by-piece~~ analysis of different literary definitions shows highlights the process in which he determines the ideological foundations of of the concept of literature. Despite being unable to find an encompassing definition for literature, Eagleton stumbles upon an even more pressing discovery: that literature is up to the power structures at hand. Using this discovery that Eagleton makes about social status and power, the preceding definitions of literature that Eagleton disregards reflect and support this theory of power dynamic and its

relation to literature. Each of the definitions that Eagleton ~~analyzes in his writing denote a certain ideology that is sought to be imposed on society as a whole.~~ analyzes are influenced by ideology, just as Eagleton discovers at the end of his analysis.

~~Eagleton's disregard of Russian Formalism reinforces the claim that social structures must influence language to be considered 'literary' or 'not literary'. Ideology influences the concept of higher language that Russian Formalists use to determine what is literary or not.~~ Eagleton explains that having a higher language or style of writing cannot be the means used to distinguish between literature and not literature. Formalism's assumption of sophisticated language over a "normal" language is influenced by power structures. By claiming that there is a more sophisticated level of language that literature must reflect, Formalists assume that there is only one type of language, or one group of people, that can be considered the default or standard of worth. There are, in fact, many pieces of writing that contradict the claim that Formalists make about sophisticated writing constituting literature. For example, the reason that Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is so highly regarded as literature can be based in its similarity to the normal language at the time of its writing. *Huck Finn* is considered literature, yet the language used by Twain is almost exactly similar to what the reader's language was at the time of its publication. Huck's slang and word choices embodied the concept of regionalism that is valued in certain pieces of literature. For example, many literary scholars praise The the Formalist approach would instead only categorize pieces of writing such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* as great literature, based on the fact that due to Joyce's writing is praised for its sophisticated use of language. This implies that other novels that use a different type of language, such as regional dialects or slang, are not as literary as Joyce's novel. In this specific case, Joyce's novel is praised for its white upper-class form of language, and its praise shows

ideology. The praise implies that this specific demographic, this upper-class white male language, is considered sophisticated as opposed to other types of language or dialects.

~~Additionally, Russian Formalism assumption of sophisticated language over a 'normal' language reflects Eagleton's thesis of ideology. By claiming that there is a 'normal' type of language in contrast to a higher, more sophisticated level of language that literature must reflect, Formalists assume that there is only one type of language, or one group of people, that can be considered the default or a standard of worth. This thought process disregards different cultures and classes of people and instead implements one group of people to be considered the standard, therefore implementing power in the marginalization of other social groups. A value judgement is therefore not only put on a piece of writing, but on a group of people as a whole.~~

~~Eagleton's assessments of the use of non-pragmatic discourse in defining literature also prove to reflect ideology.~~Non-pragmatic discourse also proves to be influenced by ideology.
Using this definition of literature, social structures value a certain method to interpret a piece of writing over others. ~~If Non-pragmatic discourse claims that~~ a piece of writing can only have a general meaning and not serve any practical purpose, ~~then and the~~ reader should only be able to analyze it in that method. However, the interpretation of writing is obviously subjective, and different readers can find different meanings in the same piece of writing, whether it is a general meaning, a practical purpose, neither, or both. ~~This, however, is up to the reader and not to the group that decides literary canon.~~ In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, for example, Daisy can be interpreted either as a woman or as a manifestation of the American dream. Non-pragmatic discourse would demand that Daisy should be seen as the American dream, and that she cannot serve such a practical purpose as to just be a woman that Gatsby is in love with. The underlying ideology in non-pragmatic discourse is used to influence how a reader should analyze

~~a piece of writing, rather than valuing multiple types of interpretation. Non-pragmatic discourse implies that there is a certain way that a piece of writing should be read, and in turn enforces a certain ideology upon the reader to interpret writing in a certain way.~~

Value-judgements, and the inconsistency of them across different demographics and interpretations of literature, are also used to impose ideology on others. Relating to this fact, I am reminded of a conversation that I experienced in which a person was discussing the themes and intricacies of *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. As I explained my dislike of the novel, the person claimed to me that my dislike of the novel must stem from the fact that I did not read the novel correctly. This value judgement, this assumption of the *exact* way that I was supposed to read the novel, implies a hierarchy of meaning and interpretation that must overpower my interpretation. Certain social structures imply that there is a proper way to read and place value on a novel, otherwise the reader must be mistaken or thought of as lesser. By thinking of a person as lesser based on their value-judgement of literature, ideology takes reign in imposing what is literature and what is not.

Eagleton's final analysis of literature finds the interwoven concept that creates each of these remaining literary definitions. If power structures and social groups did not influence the choosing and interpretation of literary canon, then these definitions would not have been able to be formulated in the first place. Literature seems to be just another framework to view the impact that power and ideology have on history and culture.

Works Cited

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