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Literary Theory and Writing: Summary Essay
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Terry Eagleton's Definition of Literature

Abstract

In Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 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 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.

Through this process, Eagleton finds inconsistencies with multiple definitions of literature. Proving that literature cannot be defined as any writing that is fiction, Eagleton argues that there is a certain standard to which a novel or piece of writing must uphold before it can be considered literature. 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.

Eagle then proceeds to analyze literature in terms of value-judgements. 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

Commented [1]: You have why for the first reason but do not include that for these later ones

Commented [2]: Literature?

lose its status if it has lost value over time by a group that holds power over what is considered literature or not.

Eventually, 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, rather than simply stylistic preferences or thematic elements.

Commented [3]: Very good abstract! Is there a way you can shorten it just a little bit more? Abstracts are between 150-300 words and this goes a bit over that.

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

In Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, he 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. 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.

The first inconsistency that Eagleton finds is in the definition that 'literature' covers the ground of 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. 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 creates 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, Eagle 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 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, 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.

For Eagleton's final assessment of the Formalist definition of literature, he addresses the problem with the concept of '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 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. 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 the case of determining literature too subjective, 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 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 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. The 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.

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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 and their failure to serve as an objective lens to view writing shows the process in which he determines the overall ideological foundations of the concept of literature. Despite being unable to find a true definition for literature, Eagleton stumbled 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.

Eagleton's disregard of Russian Formalism reinforces the claim that social structures must influence language to be considered 'literary' or 'not literary'. Eagleton explains that having a higher language or style of writing cannot be the means to distinguish between literature and not literature. 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.

Additionally, Russian Formalism assumption of sophisticated language over a 'normal' language reflects Eagleton's thesis that literature is chosen by powerful social structures. 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 power structures in society. If a piece of writing can only have a general meaning

and not serve any practical purpose, then a 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. Non-pragmatic discourse implies that there is a certain way that a piece of writing should be read, and in turn enforces a sort of power 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 power on others. Regarding 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, power structures take 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 social status have on history and culture.

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Works Cited

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