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ENGL 305

25 September 2019

Social Ideology: How Social Groups Impact the Value of Literature

**Abstract**

Eagleton, Terry. "Introduction: What is Literature?". *Literary Theory: An Introduction*.

Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1996. 1-14.

This excerpt from Terry Eagleton's book *Literary Theory: An Introduction* reviews different definitions of literature throughout history, which Eagleton ultimately rejects in order to come up with his own definition. He discusses the idea that literature is imaginative writing but then counterargues that the distinction between fact and fiction is not black and white. Next, Eagleton writes about the Russian Formalist definition of literature and the problems that arise with the idea one should only focus on the structure of a work, rather than on its social importance. Similarly, Eagleton explains that estrangement is not a correct way to describe literature because a normal language does not exist in which a strange language could deviate from. The third argument that Eagleton disputes is that literature serves no practical purpose. He writes that this definition of literature leaves everything up to the reader to decide; the definition changes based on how someone decides to read a piece of writing. The fourth and final argument that Eagleton discusses is the idea that literature is what someone values highly or thinks is good. He explains that this definition could be correct except one would have to acknowledge that anything could be considered good literature or bad literature and that what is considered good literature now might not be considered that way forever. Finally, Eagleton introduces his thesis:

literature is deemed good or bad based on what people are told is good or bad. Literature is influenced by social ideology that have to do with the power structure of society and certain social groups within society.

### **Keyword/Subject Search Description**

Eagleton, Terry. "Introduction: What is Literature?". *Literary Theory: An Introduction*.

Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1996. 1-14. Subjects: literature; Russian formalism; ideology; non-pragmatic discourse; estrangement; imaginative writing; value-judgement; literary devices; defamiliarization; context.

### **Summary**

Throughout this chapter of Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, he takes a deep-dive into numerous definitions that answer this question: what is literature? The first definition that he discusses argues that literature is anything that is fictitious. Eagleton explains that this definition cannot be true because of what was considered to be literature in the seventeenth century. He uses the example of Francis Bacon's essays; if these non-fictional essays were considered literature, then literature cannot only be fictional writing. Eagleton continues by saying that the discrepancy between fact and fiction is not necessarily objective. He calls on the Bible, mentioning that not everyone considers the book to be true. Conversely, if literature was considered to be words that are true, Eagleton says that all of the fictional writing would also be left out. Because of this objectivity, he ultimately rejects this definition of literature.

The next definition of literature that Eagleton discusses comes from the Russian Formalists, a group of critics that thrived in Russia in the 1920s. Eagleton explains that they believed literature is language that is special or distinctive. According to the Russian Formalists, literature is something that enhances language and makes it unique. Eagleton uses the example of

hearing someone speak in an unusual manner at a bus stop; if one hears another speak in a peculiar way, then they know they are hearing literature because it is different. The problem with this definition, Eagleton explains, is that there has to be a normal language in order for there to be a strange language that deviates from that normal language. Since there is not a single common shared language for everybody because everybody's definition of normal is different, then literature cannot be language that is strange. Similarly, Eagleton explains that all writing can be seen as strange depending on who is reading and how they interpret a work. Therefore, he rejects this part of the Russian formalism definition of literature.

Another way that the Russian Formalists looked at literature is how it should be criticized. According to them, literature should be analyzed based on how it works, not on how it affects society or the author who wrote the work. They wanted total separation between a particular work and the world it was conceived in. Eagleton writes that literature, in the minds of the Formalists, is about its form and the literary devices used to achieve a certain goal. He uses the example of *Animal Farm*; the plot of the book is not an allegory for Stalinism. Instead, "Stalinism would simply provide a useful opportunity for the construction of an allegory" (Eagleton 3). The Formalists thought that the commonalities between the literary devices used in a work is what makes language strange and peculiar. Literature is natural language made unnatural, and the process of language becoming unnatural makes literary language unfamiliar, making readers consciously take literature in, rather than mindlessly reading. As a counterargument, Eagleton proposes that the Russian formalists were looking at literature like poetry; they were out to define unique uses of language rather than literature as a whole. He explains that context is actually what tells someone that they are reading literature, not the language.

The next definition of literature Eagleton writes about is that literature serves no practical purpose. According to this definition, readers of literature do not gain anything by reading a piece of writing. Instead, literature refers to a general state of affairs and leaves its definition up to how someone decides to read. As a counterargument, Eagleton uses George Orwell as an example, saying that he would be surprised to learn that his essays were to be seen as less important than other pieces of writing. Eagleton explains that this definition of literature is far too subjective. The definition leaves too much up to the reader to decide instead of the work itself. There are works that are meant to be non-pragmatic, but no one can guarantee that those works will be read in that way. Similarly, Eagleton explains that some of the works studied at universities are meant to be read as literature and some are not and that texts that were never meant to be read as literature are now read as literature and vice versa. A text cannot control how it is read, and the distinction between pragmatic and non-pragmatic is not a clear line. Eagleton explains that literature does not seem to have much practical purpose at all anymore, which is why our society can try and make the distinction. For this reason, Eagleton does not accept the non-pragmatic definition of literature.

The fourth and final definition of literature that Eagleton explores before proposing his own is that literature is what readers value highly and think is good. If this definition is true, Eagleton points out, then there is no such thing as bad literature. He says that this definition is too variable by being based on what is good or bad. One has to acknowledge the fact that, under this definition, literature is not objective and that pretty much anything can be considered literature. Similarly, anything can stop being literature at any point in history. Eagleton uses the example of Shakespeare by saying that at some point in the future, Shakespeare's work could stop being considered literature. Because of this possibility, Eagleton writes that people also

have to acknowledge that the literary canon is a construct made up by a certain group of people at a given time in history. He remarks that there is not a literary work that exists that is valuable in itself; people give a work value. Eagleton then dives into what value means, explaining that a value is not concrete; values change over time depending on specific situations. Using Homer as an example, Eagleton says that our version of Homer is not the same version of Homer that people analyzed centuries ago. As a culture, we have rewritten works based on our different interpretations of them. From this idea of values, Eagleton moves into his thesis and definition of literature.

Eagleton ends this chapter by discussing ideology and how that term fits into his definition of literature. He says, “By ‘ideology’ I mean, roughly, the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in” (13). Eagleton explains that the power structure of society is what determines what people believe to a degree. By adding ideology to the value definition of literature, we do not just value a work of literature for no reason; we value it because we are told to. Basically, according to Eagleton, we are conditioned and controlled by those who are in charge. Left to our own devices, we would value what we enjoy, not what society values. He proposes that there is no essence of literature, that literature does not exist as concretely as an insect does. The value-judgements that we make about literature are very closely related to the social ideology that tells us what to believe.

## **Evaluation**

Throughout this chapter of Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, he discusses and rejects many different definitions of literature, for good reason. He finds that many definitions that people have tried to argue are either too general or too specific. Ultimately, Eagleton reaches

the conclusion that literature is made up of works that we as a society are told to value by people in power. The social ideology is why our value-judgements about literature are variable and change over history. In my own personal experience dealing with literature, Eagleton's definition holds up, especially when looking at literature that I had to read in high school. The other definitions that Eagleton brings up in this chapter are not as concrete as his own, and they do not hold up in reality quite like his does. I agree with Eagleton's definition that literature is valued based on social ideology because, through personal experiences with literature, I have seen that ideas presented to us by powerful social groups ultimately limits our view of literature.

If the value of literature was not controlled by in-power social groups, then the required texts in high schools would all be different. Coming to college, I did not meet many people who had not read *Huckleberry Finn* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* in high school. I also did not meet many people who loved reading both of these books; they either liked one or the other or neither. I personally enjoyed *To Kill a Mockingbird* more than *Huckleberry Finn*. I was told by numerous teachers in high school that *Huckleberry Finn* is the most valuable piece of literature that I will ever read, but I have to disagree. That book is not as important to me as the Harry Potter series; I did not learn as much from Huck, Jim, and Tom than I did from Harry, Ron, and Hermione. However, *Huckleberry Finn* is still much more valued and considered more literary than the Harry Potter series. Clearly, the people who create the curriculum for high schools are told to value books like these higher than others. If not, then high schools would have the opportunity to set up a curriculum based around the school's culture and students' needs. Is *To Kill a Mockingbird* as important in Wisconsin as it is in Texas? How are we supposed to determine the importance of books if we are just handed what is deemed important on a silver platter by groups in power? Of course, I understand the cultural importance of the classics, but there are

undoubtedly newer books that hold the same weight. Eagleton's definition speaks to the rigidity of these powerful social groups and their unwillingness to allow different works to be valued. Do we value these works because we value them or because we are told to value them? This question is really interesting because it asks people to really evaluate what they like about literature and what they value.

I constantly see Eagleton's definition being played out in real life through the types of books that I read right now. I have been a huge fan of young adult fiction since the beginning of high school, and I have found that high school is an acceptable time to read young adult fiction. However, as a college English major, I have begun to notice that it is more important for me to be reading the likes of Fitzgerald, Hemmingway, and Hawthorne. I have realized that I am in the minority of people who still read, and enjoy, young adult fiction, and I truly believe this is because we are told Fitzgerald, Hemmingway, and Hawthorne (and other authors of their like) are more important and write more meaningful works than young adult fiction authors. Eagleton would argue that this is because powerful social groups value Hemmingway over Suzanne Collins and that their values become engrained in our own. This is not to say that there is not value in Hemmingway, but that there can be value found outside of Hemmingway and classic novels. The overarching ideology given to us by these social groups limit the infinite nature of literature because people become afraid of rejection if they read a work that is not part of the accepted norm. Eagleton's definition of literature shows that when we value what the majority values, our exposure to different kinds of literature is significantly limited.

I have seen the ways in which value-judgements of literature has changed over time through my experience in two survey classes at St. Norbert College. Both the American and British survey classes utilized anthologies to give an overview of works of literature from

different time periods in America and the United Kingdom. I especially remember my American survey professor explaining that she chose our specific anthology because it included a more diverse overview of literature. Anthologies of literature are now starting to incorporate works from women and people of color, perhaps signaling a change in the literary canon. At the very least, the literary canon is starting to be questioned. The anthology from the American survey class included more works from Native Americans, African Americans, and women than previous anthologies on the same topic. As the values of society change in modern day, it seems that the values of literature change, too. This change directly coincides with Eagleton's definition of literature; social ideology shapes what we value as literature. As women's rights are once again being brought to the forefront and the Black Lives Matter movement is still going strong, it seems that works with similar topics are also starting to be valued more. Whereas, even five years ago, they were not. People were not exposed to historical works by women or people of color because they were told that those works were not as important as works by a white male. Different viewpoints of history have been left out because of people in power who decide that certain groups' stories are not as valued as others.

I agree with Eagleton's definition of literature because I have seen how limiting people's views of literature can be when social ideology shapes their values. Eagleton's definition that literature is considered to be literature because of what we are told to value holds up stronger than any other definition he discusses in this chapter of his book. Literature is shaped by societal values and potentially restricts access to types of literature that are not valued by social majority groups. I have seen this through experiences I had in high school with classic literature that were required for all students to read. Seemingly, groups that put value to literature do not understand what Eagleton tries to get across in his thesis: that literature has no essence and does not



concretely exist. We are conditioned by powerful social groups to value the literature we are told to value without truly questioning why. I value young adult fiction and the messages that genre can send to young people, but I am constantly told that young adult fiction is not as sophisticated or literary as classic works. Literature has always been shaped in this way, based on ideology, and will continue to be shaped in this way. The value of literature does not currently lie with the people who consume literature but with the people who are in power.

#### Works Cited

- Eagleton, Terry. "Introduction: What is Literature?". *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1996. 1-14.

