Gerald Graff’s essay *Taking Cover in Coverage* is about the value of theory in English studies. Graff argues that theory is essential for all high school and college students to learn theory. Without theory, he argues, students will not fully understand the meaning of and social function of literature and criticism. They would be unable to view things with a different perspective, would not be able to generalize, and learn from other people’s theories. Graff says that instead of teaching theory, almost all teachers turn to close literary analysis, which is isolation of literature and it’s concepts. Graff believes this is a very negative approach because of how narrow-minded it is. Since teachers rely on this close reading technique, the students gain minimal background information and experience talking about literature from one perspective or another (for example queer, feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic theories). Because of this lack of exposure to theory, most students resort to using guided online summaries and notes such as *Cliffnotes*. Graff supports the study and teaching of theory in all classes, thinks that online sites, such as *Cliffnotes*, are heading in the right
direction, and thinks that teachers should follow their lead. Graff discusses the full coverage model and thinks we need to reorganize the English department and how they are set up, organized, and operate because he thinks this directly influences students and their learning. He thinks that not only should theory be in all English classes, but in all classes in general. Students rarely ever hear controversy and debate from teachers and could really benefit from this exposure. Unresolved conflict should be seen as having potential educational value, but most teachers usually fail to see this and try to cover up or hide the conflict. Graff feels something needs to be done and changed because the system that schools have in place now, are not working effectively.

Keyword/Subject Search Description of Iser's Essay: How to Do Theory

Summary of Terry Eagleton’s Essay: *Literary Theory: An Introduction*

In the *Literary Theory: an Introduction*, Eagleton starts his argument questioning what literature and literary theory are and whether or not either even exists. He goes on through the rest of the essay professing what literature is, but actually explaining what it is not. He discusses that Literature is more of a value judgment and talks about how literature is related to ideology. The goal of his paper is to create an accurate and effective definition for literature and literary theory.

Eagleton begins his argument claiming that literature has a variety of definitions and many people have tried to define literature, but all have seemed to not be able to accomplish this task. Eagleton takes a historical standpoint throughout most of his argument, mentioning historical dates, historical writers, and historical literature. Eagleton looks at fact and fiction and tries to see if either is consistently categorized as literature, to prove his theory that one is an example of literature while the other is not. But he concludes that neither are consistently categorized as literature.

Eagleton looks at the formalist view of literature and argues against some of their points. Formalists view literature as an analysis of literary content and form. Formalists think literature is all about structure. Formalists would argue that literature is different from normal speech and you wouldn’t use literary language in everyday speech. According to formalists, whether it is literature or not depends on the function or reason of the writing. Formalists would say that “literariness” constitutes special uses of language, which are commonly known
as literary devices. But Eagleton disagrees and says that literary devices are sometimes used in daily language, so that definition wouldn’t work either.

Then Eagleton discusses “non-pragmatic discourse” and looks at things that are not considered literature, such as signs and questions why they are not literature. He suggests that literature could be a process of how you read and understand something and again adjusts his definition of literature. Then he says that talking literarily is focusing on how we talk, rather than on what we actually say. But then Eagleton changes his definition once again because most of the time what we want to say is more important than how we say it. Eagleton further explains that the value of truth and what is said is important to the overall effect and the meaning. In response, Eagleton comes up with another definition for literature. Now literature is how someone reads and understands the text, not what is written. He explains that most of what we consider to be literature is originally created to be read as literature, but some are not. Eagleton explains that some may start off intended for something else such as a historical or a philosophical text, but in the end may be also categorized as literature. They may start off as literature, but then switch to something else or vise versa. Then he goes on to explain that other people decide if what was written was literature or not, even if it is not originally intended to be literature.

Eagleton claims that literature does not have a set of features or rules that it has to follow to be considered literature. Such a list, he argues, would be extremely difficult, if not impossible to make. He then argues that there is not one thing that all literature has in common. So now the new definition of literature that
Eagleton comes up with is that literature is any kind of writing that for a reason or reasons is highly valued.

He goes on to say that maybe literature does not have a definition and that it is questionable whether or not it even exists. Then he wonders why we even have literature because he says that literature does not even have a practical function. Eagleton then reflects on what is considered “fine writing”. Eagleton notes that when people use the word literature that they are usually just referring to a piece of writing that they think is good or well written. But then Eagleton argues if this were true, there wouldn’t be bad literature. After considering this, Eagleton again decides to change his definition of literature. So then Eagleton decides that valued judgments are important to what is seen as what is literature and what is not. Most people have to view it as “fine writing” to be seen as literary. But then Eagleton argues that the terms “fine writing” are subjective and can mean something different for every person. One person can see it as good writing, while another can view it as bad.

Eagleton sees literature as a highly valued kind of writing and adds that labeling something as literary is objective. He also notes that anything can be literature and anything can stop being literature at any time. Eagleton brings up the example of Shakespeare and talks about how for a long time he has been in the Literary Canon. He also discusses how Shakespeare has been seen for a long time as the model of literature. But then he goes on to explain that even Shakespeare could end up not being considered literary. The study of literature is not stable because literature cannot even be defined and seems to be always
changing. Literature then, is seen as highly valued writing, but is unstable because judgments can change. Throughout the times, people can change their minds about what they see as literature and what they consider valuable.

Then Eagleton questions why literature is so unstable. Eagleton explains that language and communication are based on values and is part of the reason why literature is so unstable. Without value, Eagleton argues, we would have nothing to say. Our knowledge cannot be value free, argues Eagleton. Eagleton goes on to explain that society affects the way we see and value texts. He believes that we are socially constructed to read and interpret a certain way.

Eagleton argues ideology and the power structure also have an effect on what is considered literature. He explains that ideology is “the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power structure and power relations of the society we live in” (13). What Eagleton is talking about here is that society and the power structure of the time helps construct what we say and believe. He also talks about how it is ingrained in humans to see writing and literature as constantly progressing and authors getting improving their writing from the past. Eagleton argues that this way of viewing and perceiving the future may connect to the power structure of our society. He writes that these “modes of feelings, valuing, perceiving, and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (13). And this is why Eagleton believes that many of us share common views and beliefs that don’t change about literature.
Near the end of the article he talks about a famous study called *Practical Criticism* (1929) that relates to Eagleton’s arguments and explains his argument using the example of an experiment. The experiment was conducted by a professor at Cambridge college and reveals just how subjective and inconsistent literary values and judgments could be. The professor gave his undergraduate students a set of poems, not revealing the titles or the author’s names, and asked them to evaluate them. The results of the experiment were that the students marked down the older poets and marked up the newer and obscure poets.

This experiment showed that literature is a socially structured way of perceiving the world because of how closely related the evaluations were in the class and how most students marked the same ones up and the same ones down for similar reasons. In another words, many of the students had shared common views and beliefs that Eagleton demonstrated was connected to ideology and the power structure. In the end, Eagleton creates a definition of literature that ties in a little of everything that he talked about throughout his essay.

**Evaluation of Eagleton’s Essay: Literary Theory: An Introduction**

Terry Eagleton ends his essay with his thesis when he says, “What we have uncovered so far, then is not only that literature does not exist in the sense that insects do, and that the value-judgments by which it is constituted are historically variable, but that these value-judgments themselves have a close
relation to social ideologies” (14). Though I understand and agree with most of the points Eagleton makes, I question or don’t agree with all of them. There are certain points I agree with and certain points I disagree with. I disliked the way Eagleton organized his essay, but what I disliked the most was how he concluded his essay. I will go through the points of his essay and emphasize the points that I agree with and I will question and disagree with the points that I didn’t understand or agree with. Toward the end of my essay I will discuss the aspects of his essay that I did not like and thought could have been done differently.

Near the beginning of Eagleton’s article, there was a long section about Formalists and what they considered to be literature. Formalists would say that “literariness” constitutes special uses of language, which are commonly known as literary devices. These could be found in literary texts and are devices such as “sound, imagery, rhythm, syntax, metre, rhyme, narrative techniques” (3). But Eagleton disagrees and says that literary devices are sometimes used in daily language, so that definition wouldn’t work either.

When Eagleton says that literary devices are sometimes used in daily language, I question Eagleton. How common is it for someone to actually speak literarily unless you were some sort of English teacher or were reading or discussing literary language out loud? In my experience, literary devices are usually not used in spoken daily language. So I would argue that the Formalists are partially right because people normally do not talk using literary devices, but usually use these devices in writing.
Formalists wanted to compare and contrast one language to another, but Eagleton argues that you can’t do that because it’s not that simple. Formalists would argue that literature is different from normal speech and you wouldn’t use literary language in everyday speech. Formalists view literature as not a normal language, but as its own unique language. Eagleton explained Formalisms viewpoint that literature was “ordinary language intensified, condensed, twisted, telescoped, drawn out, and turned on its head” (3). But then Eagleton disagrees and argues that there is no such thing as a “normal” language. Eagleton explains that, “the idea that there is a single ‘normal’ language, a common currency shared equally by all members of society, is an illusion. Any actual language consists of a highly complex range of discourses, differentiated according to class, region, gender, status, and so on, which can by no means by neatly unified into a single homogeneous linguistic community” (4). As Eagleton shows, there is not just one language, but multiple languages spoken by different people. As he shows in his quote, a language has many parts, and aspects to consider before one tries to create one language that should be read and understood by all. According to Eagleton, languages are too different and complex to even compare.

I agree with Eagleton to an extent that there is not a normal language because not everybody speaks the same language. Languages are highly complex and though there are similarities and differences between languages, words, phrases, and meanings do not always translate accurately across languages. I understand what he’s trying to say, but I think you can compare
languages to a certain extent. Take for example comparing the English language to the German language; you can compare and translate most words and sentences from one language to another, yet some words do not exist in another language. This is where Eagleton’s argument does come in to play because sometimes there is just no way to translate a sentence in one language to another. It will never mean the same exact thing. You can rephrase poetry so that it doesn’t sound poetic even if it has the same essential ‘meaning’ in a literal sense. But if someone would do this, it robs it of literariness, however, the formalists would argue.

Then Eagleton looks at things that are not considered literature and questions why they are not literature. I think this is a great question to ask and explore because it is important to answer. This is an important aspect of his whole essay. Eagleton looks at things that are not considered literature, such as signs and questions why they are not literature. He suggests that literature could be a process of how you read and understand something and again adjusts his definition of literature.

Then Eagleton comes up with another definition for literature. He argues that the “definition of literature is up to how somebody decides to read, not to the nature of what is written” (7). Now he understands literature to be how someone reads and understands the text, not what is written.

I agree with Eagleton that in a way literature is about how someone reads and understands the text. Essentially it is up to the reader to take what the writer wrote and create their own meaning and interpretation from that. The reader isn’t
always going to read and interpret exactly the way the writer intended the reader to. This difference in reading and understanding the text is apparent when people interpret what they read differently.

Eagleton then brings up a story about a drunk on an escalator misreading an ambiguous sign that reads, “dogs must be carried on the escalator” (6). By using this analogy he is trying to explain and emphasize that different people can read the same thing, but read it completely different and understand it in two completely unique ways. So here, Eagleton is emphasizing that the definition of literature is that it is a process of how you read and understand something. I agree with Eagleton that the ambiguous sign can be interpreted in a similar way and is a counterexample to the previous definition of literature he created because signs are not considered literature to most people.

Then he goes on to explain that most literature is originally created to be read as literature, but some are not. Literature is not always meant to be read as literature because it may start off intended for something else. Texts may start off as literature, but then switch to something else or vise versa. This makes sense to me and I agree with him. There always seems to be a debate about what should be in the Literary Canon and what should students be required to read in the classroom.

Eagleton explains that literature does not have a set of features or rules that it has to follow to be considered literature. Such a list, he argues, would be extremely difficult, if not impossible to make. I can already tell that this is true by this essay and his struggle to create a definition for literature. Eagleton argues
that there is not one thing that all literature has in common. I disagree with
Eagleton on this one important point that he brings up. There is one thing that I
can think of that all literature has in common. All literature uses language in some
way and is either written or spoken.

Then he goes on to say that maybe literature doesn’t have a definition and
that it is questionable whether or not it should even exist. I was beginning to
wonder the same thing as Eagleton continued to create definitions and then think
of counterexamples to shoot others and even his own definitions down.

Then he wonders why we even have literature because he says that
literature doesn’t even have a practical function. Right here is another place I
question his argument. In his article, he doesn’t really go on to further explain this
point. I think that literature does have a practical purpose in that it makes us
question what is valued, realize how times and values have changed, and realize
how other people can effect and even possibly change the way we view and
perceive things. Not to mention since literature is a theory, it might not even be a
real thing, but it still can be debated can give people a lot to talk about and try to
figure out. This is why I think literary theory is important and does have a
practical function.

Then Eagleton takes a look at the Literary Canon, which he says is the
unquestioned “great tradition” of national literature. Eagleton questions why there
is a Literary Canon, why these texts are considered literature, and why many are
often left unquestioned as to why they are in the Literary Canon. I’ve always
wondered the same thing and questioned this too. Eagleton says that the Literary
Canon was socially constructed “fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time” (10).

This makes sense to me and I agree with what Eagleton is saying. I agree because I’ve read books in school that are in the literary canon that I thought were old-fashioned, dull, and didn’t even understand why we’re even reading the book in the first place. I’ve also read books out of class, in my free time that were really well written and interesting and connected to me in a more modern light. I always wondered why these types of books never were given a chance and never considered to be read in school. I think that more modern books should have a chance or at least be considered to be able to read and learn about in an educational setting.

Then Eagleton brings up how we use literature in education and how we educate our students in this thing that is so called literature. In education, we focus on different text elements to value and devalue, such as literary devices, or effective writing skills and ineffective writing skills, but Eagleton notes that these haven’t been the same throughout history. Throughout the times, different literary elements have been emphasized as being effective or ineffective. Eagleton explains that society is a part of how individuals read, interpret, and understand certain texts. I never even thought about this or realized this. It’s interesting that he brings this up and is of great interest to me since I want to become an English teacher. Like other fields of education, English and literature will change and continue to change. What and how teachers teach and what and
how students learn is affected by the society and what they want taught and how they want it taught.

Eagleton argues ideology and the power structure also have an effect of what is considered literature. He explains that ideology is “the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power structure and power relations of the society we live in” (13). What Eagleton is talking about here is that society and the power structure of the time helps construct what we say and believe. He also talks about how with writing and literature it is ingrained in humans to see us as moving forward, constantly progressing, and authors getting better at writing. Eagleton argues that this way of viewing and perceiving the future may connect to the power structure of our society. He writes that these “modes of feelings, valuing, perceiving, and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (13). And this power structure is why Eagleton believes that many of us share common views and beliefs that don’t change about literature.

I agree with Eagleton with the point that he made in this argument but I feel like he did not discuss it long enough and didn’t explain it well enough to be easily understood. The first two times I read this section I was really confused about what Eagleton was talking about and what he was trying to argue. I was really confused about how this even related to his argument at first. After rereading it a couple of times and understanding what he was trying to say, I think that this was definitely an essential part of his essay, but he could have discussed and focused on it a little more.
Near the end of the article Eagleton talks about a famous study called *Practical Criticism* (1929) that relates to Eagleton’s arguments and explains his argument using the example of an experiment. The experiment was conducted by a professor at Cambridge college and reveals just how subjective and inconsistent literary values and judgments could be. The professor gave his undergraduate students a set of poems, not revealing the titles or the author’s names, and asked them to evaluate them. The results of the experiment were that the students marked down the older poets and marked up the newer and obscure poets. According to Eagleton, this experiment showed that literature is a socially structured way of perceiving the world because of how closely related the evaluations were in the class and how most students marked the same ones up and the same ones down for similar reasons. In another words, many of the students had shared common views and beliefs that Eagleton demonstrated was connected to ideology and the power structure. This experiment was a great one to use in his essay and really went well with his argument. I thought it was a smart idea to include this in the argument and fit well with what he was trying to explain and helped him to better articulate what he was trying to explain to the reader. In the end, Eagleton creates a definition of literature that ties in a little of everything that he talked about throughout his essay.

Now that I’ve discussed Eagleton’s points that I agree with and disagree with, I will talk about what I disliked about his essay. I disliked the way Eagleton organized his essay, but what I disliked the most was how he concluded his essay. First I will discuss why I disliked how he organized his essay. I liked the
idea of and the concept of framing the whole essay around trying to create a
definition for a word. But I didn’t like how he kept on connecting a bunch of other
different words and trying to find their definition too. I kept feeling like he was
digressing from the main argument he was trying to prove and starting to go off
topic. It was almost like he was writing in a stream of consciousness and wrote
whatever popped up in his head, which made it seem random and unconnected
at times. I thought there were way too many definitions and after awhile it started
to get kind of tedious and repetitive.

I was very frustrated with Eagleton’s conclusion because it didn’t end his
argument very well at all. Eagleton’s main goal of his essay was to create a
definition for literature and literature theory, but in the end he didn’t accomplish
that goal. Eagleton never even created an objective definition for either literature
or literary theory! All he did was create a definition for other words and a long,
vague description of what literature is. I thought it would have made more sense
to be straightforward and less arrogant in his approach in trying to find the
definition for literature. I feel like this essay went in a complete circle and as the
reader we ended up pretty much in the same place that we started, which is
basically in a state of confusion. I’m going to be really honest and straightforward
with you. My last thought after reading this essay was, “Are you kidding me? Why
did I even read this essay? We are right back where we started!” And I don’t think
that is a good last thought to have and what you’re supposed to be asking
yourself after reading an essay.
Works Cited

