Terry Eagleton’s essay entitled *What is Literature?* examines how and if literature can be defined. He investigates the influence of fact, fiction, the perspective of the reader, the society and culture in which the work was written and is read, and the purpose of the work in determining this definition.

With this preliminary test unsuccessful, Eagleton delves in the linguistic aspects of literature. He uses the Russian Formalist perspective, which regarded poetry and literature as relatively synonymous, to wonder if literature can be defined as “a set of deviations from a norm, a kind of linguistic violence”(4). However, in order to define if something is different from the norm, one needs to know the norm. This norm is completely subjective. Eagleton uses the example of the norm for an Oxford philosopher and that of a Glaswegian docker. The way that each of these men speak is completely different from the other, and thus, the norm is different for both. The Russian Formalists also viewed literature as inherently estranging, and that through reading this different arrangement and use of words, the reader has an increased perception of what he is reading. Through this, Eagleton wonders if literature gives the reader an increased ability to view the world, with a heightened awareness of what goes on around him. The issue with this idea is that any writing can be viewed as estranging depending on the reader. For example, Eagleton states that the sign ‘dogs must be carried on the escalator’ could be interpreted in many ways. One could believe that he is not permitted to board the escalator without a dog, and another could interpret it as saying that dogs cannot ride on the escalator without someone carrying them. Therefore, they came to the conclusion that literature has a “differential” property, and that regardless of the society or reader, literature is something that is different from the typical discourse of that specific reader (5).
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[Unsatisfied with the previous attempts to define literature, Eagleton delves deeper into the Russian Formalist perspective. He states that they “were not out to define ‘literature’, but ‘literariness’-special uses of language which could be found in ‘literary’ texts but also in many places outside them”(5). They still viewed literature as something very different, but acknowledged the contextual nature of it. Eagleton uses the example of someone ]

After considering the Russian Formalist perspective, Eagleton examines if literature can be defined as “‘non-pragmatic’ discourse”(7), meaning that it serves no evident purpose. Dissimilar to some writing that satisfies an immediate use, such as a grocery list or textbook, literature speaks more to the overall qualities and state of things. Often times, literature is more the way that one talks about something rather than the subject he talks about. Eagleton claims that this makes literature a “self-referential language,” because it talks about itself”(7). However, if one says that the way of writing becomes more important than the topic itself in literature, does this not make the work less valuable? One again, Eagleton explains that it is dependent on how one decides to read literature. One could read Orwell’s essays on the Spanish civil war as metaphorical, or read Robert Burn’s works about the rose as a horticultural source. The author’s intent makes no difference if the reader approaches the work with a certain purpose in mind. In addition, the reader may gain something from a work that wasn’t even intended by its creator. This idea of perspective is incredibly important in the essay. Depending on the time period and society in which the work is written and read, the piece can be interpreted in completely different ways. Society and the reader endow the work with its meaning according to its respective set of values.

In considering what causes different readers to interpret or define literature in different ways, Eagleton analyzes the importance of ideology. Eagleton defines ideology as “the ways in
which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in” (13). This is similar to the idea that every reader rewrites a work of literature that he reads according to his own interpretation. Societal structure and time period play a vital role to the definition of literature. Ideology does not strictly pertain to individual beliefs, however. It is also important in the development and shift of power. For example, Eagleton states that ideology also consists of “those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (13). Social structure and the transfer and acquisition of power are large factors in how literature is interpreted. Nonetheless, these external circumstances have nothing to do with the author’s intent, and make the literary work completely malleable depending on the time period, location, environment, and reader. Through analyzing the importance of ideology, Eagleton solidifies his argument that there is no objective way to define literature.

Ultimately, by observing the role of fact, fiction, Russian Formalism, pragmatism, value, and ideology, Terry Eagleton comes to the conclusion that there is no way to define literature. This does not make it any less important or strong however. Eagleton expresses that the values with which the reader interprets the work bring a new and extremely strong perspective. He explains that “there is nothing at all whimsical about such kinds of value judgment: they have their roots in deeper structures of belief which are as apparently unshakable as the Empire State Building” (14). Overall, Eagleton emphasizes that just because literature cannot be defined does not weaken its presence or influence in the life of the reader.

Evaluation

In his essay What is Literature, Terry Eagleton ponders the many ways that literature can be defined. Among possibilities such as fact, fiction, non-pragmatic discourse, and something
that is valued highly, Eagleton considers the role of ideology in this definition. Through
analyzing the role of ideology, he strengthens his theory that there is no way to objectively
define literature. Eagleton also brings the reader to a greater understanding of those influences
that can change the way someone interprets a literary work. Overall, in his essay *What is
Literature*, Terry Eagleton differentiates between personal and societal ideologies and their
effects on the reader to demonstrate that literature cannot be defined because it is dynamic, and
changes with every new reader.

Eagleton defines ideology in two parts. The first part is “the largely concealed structure
of values which informs and underlies our factual statements” (13). This definition pertains to
personal ideologies, and how they influence how one views fact. For example, the writer of a
literary work can be writing something that is humorous according to his ideology, but the reader
may interpret it as serious according to his values and beliefs. Along with this personal aspect,
Eagleton examines a second, more societal definition of ideology. He states that “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). This definition more specifically applies to social
structure, rather than individual beliefs; it examines the aggregate of individual ideologies in a
society, and how they influence the general structure and allocation of power. Although Eagleton
separates these two definitions, they are symbiotic. Individual ideologies make up the collective
ideology of a society, and societal ideology changes individual ideologies in turn. Ultimately,
Eagleton’s analysis of how one can define ideology is vital to his interpretation of how literature
can be defined.

Through defining ideology, Eagleton raises an interesting dilemma: how can literature be
objectively defined when ideology is so personal and dynamic? In terms of individual ideologies,
each reader approaches a literary work with his own set of values and preconceived notions. This inevitably influences how the reader interprets the work, for it is nearly impossible to separate all of one’s own beliefs from oneself to gain an objective view of the text. In addition, the writer of the work has those same beliefs and values that influence his writing. Thus, there is a discrepancy between the author’s bias and the reader’s bias. Although there are widely regarded theories for what authors intend to convey with their works, these interpretations are subject to change with society and time. This is especially relevant to Eagleton’s second definition of ideology: the relationship between what one believes and the power and structure of his society. For example, a German citizen reading *Mein Kampf* during World War II could view it as an inspiring demonstration of nationalism, whereas a German citizen today could read it with disgust and fear of what humanity is capable of. However, anyone could currently read it as a fascinating primary source from an important historical figure. Someone could use the autobiography to gain oratorical skills or information about how to command an audience. There are countless ways in which one’s individual ideology or societal position can influence how he approaches a piece of literature.

In examining the second definition of literature, it is interesting to consider how personal and societal ideology can impact how one interprets a work of literature. One excellent example is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s work *The Great Gatsby*. This novel is common in core curriculum in high schools across America. Why? It serves many purposes, depending on one’s ideology. When the novel was written in 1925, the average reader could have interpreted the novel in many ways, even in the same time period. A wealthy family in the 1920’s could view the text as a celebration of wealth and extravagance, and a dismissal of those unfortunate enough to exist in the “Valley of Ashes.” This interpretation is not only influenced by personal ideologies, but the societal
beliefs and power structure of that period, as referenced by Eagleton. A poor family in the 1920’s could interpret the text as a condemnation of the superficial upper class, and a promise of their ultimate self-destruction. A family in the 1930’s might view the text as foreshadowing for the ultimate collapse of the economy, and a commentary on the narrow-mindedness of humanity’s perspective. In addition, a modern day history teacher may use it demonstrate the perverse nature of materialism in the 1920’s, and how the Wall Street crash of 1929 brought this way of life to an abrupt end. An English teacher could use the work as an example of great literature, through analyzing the techniques and language Fitzgerald uses. Every one of these perspectives is influenced in some way by personal or societal ideology. In addition, Fitzgerald is biased by his own ideology. Another author may have not been so critical of the 1920’s culture, and portrayed the extravagance of the wealthy as enjoyable and destructive. Overall, in relation to Eagleton’s definition of ideology, *The Great Gatsby* is an excellent example of how one work can be interpreted in countless different ways depending on one’s personal beliefs, societal norms, and time period, elements which are ultimately all included in his definition of ideology.

Eagleton’s discussion of ideology is just one part of his larger essay examining what the definition of literature is. Regarding this individual argument’s place in the larger essay, it is essential to Eagleton’s conclusion that literature cannot be defined in any one way. He uses the example of a study conducted by A. Richards in which several undergraduate students are given different poems to read without their titles or authors. The students acclaimed unknown poets and criticized renowned ones. This solidifies Eagleton’s theory that literature is completely malleable depending on the ideology of the reader. In a sense, a work is re-written with every new reader according to his beliefs. Although Eagleton does make a strong argument that literature cannot be defined, there is a weakness to his argument. Although works are continually
read with new perspectives and given new interpretations, it is a testament to their greatness if they are continually read and re-read. For example, the modern day reader interprets Great Gatsby with an ideology very different from F. Scott Fitzgerald. However, it is a testament to the greatness of Fitzgerald’s writing that his works are still read nearly a decade after their origin. In addition, readers can still find aspects that they relate to, such as the materialism of society, that transcend the time period in which the work was written. This is something that seems to consistently define great literature: its ability to speak to humanity regardless of personal ideology, culture, or time period. However, it is difficult to discredit Eagleton’s entire argument on this one possibility, for any reader could find something relatable in a work depending on his interpretation.

Overall, Terry Eagleton’s analysis of the role of ideology in defining literature greatly strengthens his argument that there is no objective way to define literature. By examining personal and societal ideology, he demonstrates that literary works are continually rewritten throughout time. This is especially evident with The Great Gatsby, which can be interpreted in several ways depending on the time period and social status of the reader. Ultimately, through investigating the ways in which values, beliefs, and societal structure can influence the reader, Terry Eagleton shows that it is impossible to define literature.

Abstract

In his essay “Taking Cover in Coverage,” Gerlad Graff examines the effects of compartmentalizing literature, especially in an educational setting. He emphasizes the importance of theory in education, and how there is a tendency to not examine it because it appears to be too difficult for students. However, Graff explains that the reason it is so confusing is that education offers no interdisciplinary connections to create a cohesive picture of theory. Educational departments are divided and independent of each other, allowing each teacher to go on “automatic pilot”(2062). There is no communication across departments, and there is no need to reflect on one’s own teaching practices, for one has nothing to compare them to. Thus, this separation of literature leads to a lack of analysis of its fundamental aspects. Students are not taught to analyze what a “period” or “genre” is, or even what theory is. It is a literary buzzword,
a title of a class that is not given any thought. Graff suggests that the way to allow students to have a more cohesive integration of theory in their educational experiences is to make it the foundation in every class. Through doing so, students have more context for their areas of study, and are able to independently interpret and master large concepts.

Comment [35]: Abstracts typically are the most abrasive summaries you can find. You seem to describe too much and not focus on the argument itself.