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ENGL 305-A

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Summary Assignment: Exploring Literature and Literary Theory

Abstract of Iser

Iser, Wolfgang. Introduction. *How to do Theory*, Blackwell, 2006, pp.1-13.

Iser explains that theory has been spread as a practice partly by the evolution of the

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Aristotelian poetical tradition to the ontologically based Philosophical aesthetics; neither was suited to address the modernity of art in the twentieth century. This combined with the complications of impressionistic criticism and growing conflict of interpretation in the 40's and 50's promoted theory as a way to investigate the nature of art as a multitude of co-existing facets. Furthermore, Iser makes a critical distinction between hard-core theory, usually used in natural sciences, and soft theory, the kind employed in the humanities. According to Iser, soft theory, unlike hard-core theory, does not aim to make predictions, to establish laws, or to function with a practical purpose; rather, soft theory uses metaphor to catalyze new understanding. Iser also discusses structure, function, and communication as the three tenets common to the variety of modern theory, the general concern of theory with the relationship between art, audience, and context, and the variety of origin among different theories. Finally, Iser examines the application of theory. He says that while theory can sometimes be directly applied at other times it requires method, and he discusses similarities and differences between theory and discourse.

Keyword Search of Graff

Graff, Gerald. "Taking Cover in Coverage." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, gen. ed. Vincent Leitch, 2nd ed, Norton, 2010, pp. 1962-70. Subjects: Traditional literary humanism; literary theory; cultural studies; humanities curriculum; departmental structure; field-coverage model; required courses; electives; intellectual community; methodological models; pedagogy; academic institutions.

Summary of Eagleton

Eagleton, Terry. Introduction: What is Literature? *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, anniversary ed, U of Minnesota P, 2008, pp.1-14.

The introductory chapter to Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* aims to arrive at a specific definition of literature in order to facilitate discussion of literary theory, Eagleton's primary focus throughout the book. The existence of literary theory presupposes something called literature. Eagleton leads the reader to an understanding of his very specific definition of literature by starting with the most simplistic of definitions, discarding non-viable arguments, and keeping the few valid ones from a variety of perspectives. His arguments point to the impossibility of an objective definition, but his inclusion of the concept of ideology, "the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in" (13), underlying the fluid definition of literature provides enough unity to the term "literature" to allow Eagleton to expound on the theory pertaining to it.

Eagleton beginns with the oversimplified definition of literature as creative or fictive writing. He quickly points out where this definition fails: first, some of what is usually considered literature, such as the sermons of Donne, is non-fictional; second, not all fictional writing is considered literature. Further, the fiction or nonfiction status of many works is disputed. Genesis and some early Icelandic legends, for example, are read as containing both

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historical and creative perspectives. Eagleton also points out that this definition unfairly implies uncreativity on the part of writers in fields such as science and history.

Eagleton next discusses the Russian Formalist proposal that literature is defined by the use of language "in peculiar ways" (2). Literature, according to this definition, has nothing to do with content; the subject of the writing is just an excuse to exercise the mechanics of language. Estrangement or defamiliarization of language, which is expressed through devices such as "sound, imagery, rhythm, syntax, metre, rhyme, narrative techniques, in fact the whole stock of formal literary elements" (3), is the focus of the Russian Formalist literary definition. The point of the estrangement was that being forced to examine the unfamiliar language allows the reader access to a fresh perspective on a familiar world. Eagleton explicates using air as an example: because air, like language, constantly surrounds us, we become so used to it that we forget it is there; if the air is changed (or the language estranged), we immediately pay attention and see from a fresh perspective.

However, failure of language to conform with the standard presupposes a standard in the first place, and there is none. Language differs from person to person, between classes and locations, social status, gender, and much more. As Eagleton points out, "Even the most 'prosaic' text of the fifteenth century may sound 'poetic' to us today because of its archaism" (4). And even if there were one normal everyday language, not all departures from that norm would be considered literature; slang, for example, is usually not considered poetic. Formalists acknowledged objections about lack of a single standard norm, so placed their interest in studying literature comparatively. Rather than discovering what made something literature, they explored what made it literary in a given context. Language, however, is too disorderly to allow for this definition of literature; what is thought of as "estranging" language is used in everyday

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speech, and some everyday speech is only considered literary because it is found in what is usually considered literature. The Formalist approach focused on "estranged" language is more suited to the study of poetry, which only accounts for part of literature. Eagleton lists various types of contrived, unnatural language—chants at sporting events, advertising, jokes—which may count as "estranging" but do not count as literature.

Eagleton's next debated definition of literature as "'non-pragmatic' discourse" (7), writing that "serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to a general state of affairs" (7), fares no better as a definition. In many cases, accepted literary works are informed by some practical purpose, and in the opposite case, jokes are decidedly non-practical and non-literary. Historically, literature has sometimes served religion in a practical role; all these exceptions prevent this definition from being very convincing. Even more significant, Eagleton says, is the implication that if the determining factor is a way of reading, not the qualities of what is read, then there can be no objective definition of literature.

Eagleton surmises that literature may not lie in the work, but in "a number of ways in which people *relate themselves* to writing" (8). He points out how difficult it would be to find a single consistent quality present in all of what we have identified as literature, and suggests that "literature", like "weed", is a "*functional* rather than *ontological*" term, concerning how we react to an item, rather than the nature of the item itself (8). The first reaction to this new definition possibility is to denote literature as writing we think has value; Eagleton quickly refines this definition, however, to be a *type* of writing we think has value. Otherwise, there would not be such a thing as bad literature, or any good writing outside the category of "literature". By adjusting the definition to a type of writing, Eagleton allows for more flexibility within the genre or category of "highly valued writing" (literature) for a range of quality of individual works.

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There is still more to understand within Eagleton's definition, though. A definition of literature, based on value, cannot be stable, because value judgements are not stable. Eagleton even indicates that this definition completely invalidates the idea of a canon, or that any individual work has an ageless literary quality. Literature that seems to hold its value through long periods of time simply does so because each new generation creates a way to value it; whatever merit a new generation finds will be influenced by their presuppositions and preconceptions, so that it might be said they do not read the same piece of work as their predecessors at all, but an entirely new one. And while it is not much of a stretch to concede that value judgments are subjective, Eagleton goes farther. He submits that even statements are imbued with value judgments; after all, the speaker chooses what he or she considers important to say, to whom he or she will say it, whether the conversation is a valuable way to spend time, and so on. Eagleton says, "We may disagree on this or that, but we can only do so because we share certain 'deep' ways of seeing and valuing which are bound up with our social life, and which could not be changed without transforming that life" (12), suggesting that the judgements which seem independent are actually innately linked by shared social context. This shared link as an influence on individual value judgements is central to his argument, and termed ideology: "[not] simply the deeply entrenched, often unconscious beliefs which people hold…ore particularly those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power" (13).

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Eagleton suggests that although "literature" has no objective definition, no set criteria that can be used to conclusively say for all time which works are literature, our methods of categorizing literature are not completely arbitrary, either. Seemingly random value-judgements depend on his deliberately defined concept of ideology; similarities in our inherent value systems

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are explained by our awareness of social power. Eagleton cites a 1929 study by critic I.A. Richards, who compared the blind literary analyses of his white, similarly educate, upper-middle-class undergraduate students and found them to be surprisingly diverse. Eagleton, reviewing the study, saw the opposite: he found their outwardly varied responses to be essentially harmonious, as a result of similar ideologies of the students. Ideologies, described by Eagleton, are "those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power" (13). Such deeply ingrained yet slowly evolving influences affect our deepest ways of interacting with literature, including our way of defining it.

Evaluation of Eagleton

Terry Eagleton's analysis of the definition of literature seems to do an excellent job in sorting through various complex aspects of literature. Especially insightful is his discussion of how each person reads a work of writing differently. He speaks specifically of how "'Our' Homer is not identical with the Homer of the Middle Ages, nor 'our' Shakespeare with that of his contemporaries" (Eagleton 11). However, I think it goes a great deal farther than that. For example, when encountering a difficult word in class reading, a professor may ask students what it means. At these moments, though even if I have a very clear and familiar response to the word, I sometimes find it hard to articulate its exact meaning. I learn many words in the context of stories, so their definition is at first obscure in my mind; I know what the word means, but can only bring to mind its nature by the associations I have between the word and the context in which it was given. In becoming more familiar with a word, it loses this cryptic quality, and enters my vocabulary entire, but some small flavor of its former context will forever floats along behind it.

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While Eagleton's insights about the context of social power shaping our "modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing" (13) are valid, I find that personal experience is an important determining aspect of these "modes" to recognize; it penetrates even to the understanding of individual words. For example, in my middle school years; I read a great deal, but a large percentage of my reading material was composed by only a few authors, who maintained a consistent style throughout their work. Their turns of phrase affected the way I internalized meaning and denotation of those phrases; specific connotations accompanied certain words. Because of this, before those phrases were assimilated into my vocabulary with greater understanding, they meant something slightly different to me than they did to anyone else. I read many of Juliet Marillier's folkloric fantasy novels set in the historic British Isles. Because she drew on traditional myths, most of the books contained at least one fairy, if not a whole court. I remember her consistent application of the word "capricious" to her fey characters. Now, though I understand that the accepted definition of "capricious" has nothing to do with magic, my default response is always to associate the term with enchantment, ethereal forces, and otherworld beings. While my applied comprehension of the word is much more in sync with accepted definitions, those subtle nuances will always linger. By this example I mean to emphasize that Eagleton's description of the variations between readers applies down to the smallest details of contemporary vocabulary, not just to the differences between Elizabethan and modern audiences of Shakespeare. Certainly, no two people ever read the same book.

In contrast, Eagleton's claim that readers with shared ideologies are more similar than they think is also very insightful. For instance: Reader A of a literary work holds an ideology a. Reader B possesses ideology b, and Reader C, ideology c. Each could read Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and enjoy it for different reasons. This is possible even if they lived one hundred

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years apart and were brought up on different continents. Although they might have drastically different interpretations, each reader managed to find meaning in the play. Perhaps one audience recognized the metacommentary on theatre as a form of expression in Viola's choice to act as a boy or Feste's imitation of a priest, while another group of people tend to focus on issues of gender, again represented by Viola's double identity as Cesario. Eagleton might say this was possible because their ideologies shared certain basic similarities, or that the play contains elements that can be assessed as valuable in more than one way. This is something that I find is essential to the nature of literature—regardless of original intent (or not exclusively mindful of original intent) of the playwright, exceptional literature holds the potential for many different meanings, or many facets of meaning.

Eagleton seems to focus on the struggle to unify a body of work as "literature". However, his ultimate conclusion is that an ideologically based definition is the only applicable one, because of differences in personal interpretation. I see these concurrent possibilities for interpretation not as an unfortunate aspect of literature which is an obstacle to categorization, but as a quality to be appreciated. At the most basic level, writing and language are about communication. Part of the identity of literature lies in its ability to communicate a breadth and depth of meaning; if it were possible to ascribe a single meaning to a piece of literature, and each element of the piece contained only a single contribution to the overall effect, it would hardly be worth reading twice. However, language, particularly in a literary context, functions with layers upon layers of meaning. In a practical context, such as in Eagleton's 'Dogs must be carried on the escalator' example, delving into those levels of nuance is tiresome; in a literary context (defined, as Eagleton says, by our ideologies), it is an exploration of ideas. In Wolfgang Iser's "Introduction" to the book *How to Do Theory*, he refers to this infinity of possibility as the

"inexhaustible potential of art and literature" (Iser 7). The multitude of possibilities in the study of literature, through use of metaphor, "triggers associations" (Iser 6). The ability to excavate fresh understanding of a text is part of treating that text as literature. An apect of Eagleton's definition of literature proceeds from individual value-judgements (influenced though they be by ideologies); I tend to place a high premium on works which trigger multiple associations and to which I can turn again and again for fresh understanding. A set of my favorites, though not necessarily literature, are Megan Whalen Turner's Queen's Thief series. Part of what makes them so appealing to me is that I can read them again and again and find some new complexity or implication that I missed before. Though this may not be true of all literature, and all writings which accommodate re-readings and multiple interpretations may not usually be classied as literature.

Eagleton concedes that interpretive practice is applied to different texts to different degrees; he mentions Orwell's essays, which are nonfictive. It is certainly ill-advised to "generalize what he says about the Spanish civil war to some cosmic utterance about human life" (Eagleton 7), but the craftsmanship of the essay cannot help but inspire industrious thought if one's ideology directs one to consider Orwell's essay literature. This freedom to savor and contemplate many concurrent meanings and subtleties in the language of a literary text is an essential and I think pleasurable aspect of engaging with literature.

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Eagleton, Terry. Introduction: What is Literature? *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, anniversary ed, U of Minnesota P, 2008, pp. 1-14.

Graff, Gerald. "Taking Cover in Coverage." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, gen. ed. Vincent Leitch, 2nd ed, Norton, 2010, pp. 1962-70.

Iser, Wolfgang. Introduction. *How to do Theory*, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 1-13.

Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism. Summary: This resource will help you begin the process of understanding literary theory and schools of criticism and how they are used in the academy. Introduction. A very basic way of thinking about literary theory is that these ideas act as different lenses critics use to view and talk about art, literature, and even culture. These different lenses allow critics to consider works of art based on certain assumptions within that school of theory. The different lenses also allow critics to focus on particular aspects of a work they consider important.Â How to Use Adjectives and Adverbs. Adjectives with Count and Noncount Nouns. Adjective or Adverb? Literary theory in a strict sense is the systematic study of the nature of literature and of the methods for analyzing literature. However, literary scholarship since the 19th century often includesâ€”in addition to, or even instead of literary theory in the strict senseâ€”considerations of intellectual history, moral philosophy, social prophecy, and other interdisciplinary themes which are of relevance to the way humans interpret meaning. In the humanities in modern academia, the latter style of Wolfgang Iserâ€™s (1926-2007) theories of reader response were initially presented in a lecture of 1970 entitled The Affective Structure of the Text, and then in two major works, The Implied Reader (1972) and The Act of Reading (1976). After examining a number of English novels in The Implied Reader, Iser outlines his approach in a section of this book entitled The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach.1 Iser begins by pointing out that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also â€œthe actions involved in responding to that text.â€