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Iser Abstract

Iser, Wolfgang. *How to Do Theory*. Blackwell, 2006.

How to Do Theory, Wolfgang Iser addresses different types of theory and how they fit into the more recent development of literary theory specifically. Iser makes a claim that literary theory resulted as a response to validity in interpretations powered in part by aesthetics growing within literature. Theory is deemed as liberating literature and other art forms from the doom of philosophical aesthetics. Theories of any kind are intellectual tools, however there are different categories of theories. One category is hard-core theory which is the type of theory usually associated with the sciences, supported by predictions. A second category is soft theory which is more likely to be associated with the humanities. It is important to note the differences between different types of theories as each approaches information in their own way, whether it be through the gathering of data or testing procedures. Through the different models of theory, frameworks are provided to guide one through the process, allowing a theory to lead to methodology if applicable. Lastly, Iser addresses the similarities and differences between theory and discourse and how the two ultimately point toward the same results.

Graff Keyword Search

Graff, Gerald. "Taking Cover in Coverage." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Vincent Leitch, et al. New York: Norton, 2001. 2059-67. Subjects: recent literary theory; literature; theory; New Criticism; literature department; field-coverage model; methodology; ideology; conflict-resolution; literature curriculum.

Summary of Eagleton

A Summary of Eagleton's *Introduction: What is Literature?*

What is literature? This is the question in which Terry Eagleton wishes to explore throughout this introductory chapter. According to Eagleton, there have been many attempts to define literature--from imaginative unreal writing that is often deemed fiction to expanding to include nonfiction essays and autobiographical accounts. Whatever the previous definition, however, Eagleton makes the choice to dismiss and instead attempt to formulate his own definition of literature, one in which accounts for the discrepancies in including both fiction and nonfiction under the same umbrella of literature. By making his way through several possible definitions from history and modern times alike, Eagleton ultimately settles on literature sort of being defined through ideology rather than a traditional definition.

Eagleton proposes "perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional of 'imaginative', but because it uses language in peculiar ways" (p.2). Literature can potentially be defined, then, as any instance in which language is used in a peculiar way. This potential

definition connects to that of the Russian Formalists in that they also connected literature to language.

Eagleton also looks to Russian Formalists in order to further develop his new definition of literature. Russian Formalists believed that literature "...had its own specific laws, structures, and devices, which were to be studied in themselves rather than reduced to something else" (p.2). Formalism looked at the laws, structures, and devices of language and applied them to literature as language and literature were viewed to basically be the same thing. Literature is essentially any writing that utilizes languages which is different than that which is spoken. Individuals are able to look at the laws, structures, and devices of language through the written literature.

Eagleton also looks at definitions of literature which refer to it as 'non-pragmatic' discourse. Non-pragmatic discourse implies that literature "...serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to a general state of affairs" (p.7). This definition shows another dimension beyond language and linguistics in the formulation of a possible definition for literature.

Lastly, Eagleton looks at the essence of literature, or the lack thereof. Literature is writing that is judged as being valuable. Eagleton suggests that literature is illuminating and highly valuable as writing (p.9). Literature is based on a value system, so 'good' literature is literature that has been deemed of value and 'bad' literature is literature that has been deemed as not having value.

Eagleton concludes with comparing literature to ideology in that both include "...modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the

maintenance and reproduction of social power” (p.13). This is Eagleton’s objective ‘definition’ of literature.

Eagleton Evaluation

Eagleton begins his introductory chapter by providing a few commonly accepted definitions of literature and then disassembling them based on their flaws. For instance, Eagleton provides a definition for literature “as ‘imaginative’ writing in the sense of fiction - writing which is not literally true” (p.1). He then goes on to find faults in this definition including several essays and speeches which indeed took place and were, in fact, literally true. After disassembling a former definition of literature, Eagleton goes on to provide his own definition of literature through several examples. However, his definition of literature ends up being too broad and leaves too many holes for interpretation, in turn leaving the reader with even less of a definition than what they started with.

The first way in which Eagleton attempts to redefine the definition of literature is by making a claim about the language used to determine what is literature and what is not. Eagleton proposes early on that “perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or ‘imaginative’, but because it uses language in peculiar ways” (p.2). The aforementioned proposal is striking as it takes a different angle of approaching literature. Previous definitions in which Eagleton included focused on the type of writing, whether it be based on true accounts or writings of mere imagination, but this approach looked more at the language as the defining definition that is definitely right. As a person who has taken 'literature' classes in more than one language, I find this idea of literature being defined by its use of peculiar language to be quite

odd. As an English student, I have had to read many different authors from Shakespeare and Milton to Stienbeck and John Green. All of these authors write in their own voice and the language that results differs extremely, especially when comparing Shakespeare to a 21st century writer such as John Green. I suppose the language used by each of these authors in their works is perhaps more peculiar than that of the spoken language, but I still find it hard to pin the definition of literature on peculiar language. It seems to broad a definition. Under this definition, not only would the speeches of Donald Trump be considered literature, but so would his 'locker room talks'. One could argue that just about any conversation held that is against the 'norm' could then be considered literature. By pinning literature on peculiar language use, it is almost as if you are not defining it at all, as the argument could be made that any use of language is peculiar or not peculiar.

Eagleton attempts to support his definition of literature by turning to Russian Formalism, yet once again provides the reader with more 'definition' and less clarity. Russian Formalists applied "...linguistics to the study of literature." (p.3) because literature is written language. Russian Formulists in a way viewed language and literature as the same thing, which further complicates the 'definition' which Eagleton is attempting to formulate. Language and literature are not the same thing, are they? Literature is more than laws, structures, and devices. Literature also contains some sort of aesthetic that is more than just written language.

Eagleton further confuses the reader by introducing non-pragmatic discourse as an approach to literature and then immediately finding more faults than connections. Literature as a non-pragmatic discourse "...serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to a general state of affairs" (p.7). This definition contradicts the previous definitions that placed

value on the language and linguistic aspects of literature. The purpose of literature is not to teach laws, structures, and devices as the formalists claimed, nor is it to use a peculiar language as the first definition claimed. Under non-pragmatic discourse, the purpose of literature is to not have a purpose. It is solely a generalization and, frankly, just art. Eagleton does point out some flaws with this argument by suggesting George Orwell's writing served a purpose to inform, as have many other writers throughout the course of literary history. I get the purpose of including counterclaims in one's argument, but I cannot understand why Eagleton would include this particular definition for literature when it is clear that even he has a real hard time finding validity in the claim, due to his immediate examples against it.

Essence of literature or lack thereof - is based on a value system, meaning a piece of writing is considered literature if there is some value held to it. While this is great in theory, it once again is too broad of a definition. For example, I highly value the novel that is *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, so according to Eagleton's claim of value, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is literature. Consequently, there are people who do not value *To Kill a Mockingbird* and never take the time to read or give time to the novel. Thus, according to Eagleton's claim of value, *To Kill a Mockingbird* would not be considered literature. How can it be that a work can be literature to one person and not literature to another person? For this reason, Eagleton's claim of literature being something that is highly valued fails as what is highly valued for one person is not the same for what is highly valued for the next. A definition needs some sort of uniformity, that is the definition must hold true to many people, not change from person to person as this value system as a definition for literature suggests.

Eagleton attempts to redeem the flaws of his value system definition of literature by concluding that the entire time he was not trying to define literature (as the title *What is literature?* suggests). Instead, Eagleton comes to the conclusion that literature cannot be defined, and in turn connects literature to ideology. Ideology, as defined by Eagleton, is "...the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power structure and the power-relations of the society we live in" (p.13). Eagleton claims that literature is like ideology in the sense that not everything included within it fits the definition, yet it still fits within. More or less, Eagleton has admitted that he has failed to define literature but basically saying that all of the definitions he provided throughout the introduction could actually be valid definitions, in that there are multiple definitions of 'literature' none of which are completely correct, none of which are completely inaccurate.

In conclusion, Eagleton forces the reader to come along with him on a circular journey through the course of fourteen pages, just to come to the conclusion that any or all of the provided definitions could be correct because literature cannot actually be defined. Eagleton did not succeed at answering the question 'what is literature?' Rather, he introduced more information to make the definition even more broad and complicated, furthering the reader from discovering what they came to the writing to discover.

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