

WHAT IS LITERATURE?

By Terry Eagleton

Terry Eagleton analyses the definition of the term 'literature' in his essay WHAT IS LITERATURE? He says literature cannot just be fiction or imaginative writings. Factual and informative writings too are included within literature, like the essays of Francis Bacon, the sermons of John Donne, the spiritual autobiography of John Bunyan, the philosophy of Descartes and Pascal and also Madame de Sevigne's letters to her daughter. It also includes the essays of Lamb, Macaulay and Mill but not those of Bentham, Marx or Darwin.

Novels can be written about both true and fictional events and news reports can be written about incidents which are not always true. Terry Eagleton says "If 'literature' includes much factual writing, it also excludes quite a lot of fiction." Whereas, all purely fictional writings like Superman comics or the romance series published by Mills and Boon cannot be regarded as literature. If writings are products of creativity and imagination, one cannot exclude history, philosophy and natural sciences from the purview of literature, because these branches of study too are creative and imaginative.

Eagleton further argues that 'literature' can be defined on the basis of language. Russian critic, Roman Jakobson said that literature is a kind of writing which represents an "organized violence committed on ordinary speech". Literature, in other words, transforms and intensifies ordinary language and deviates from everyday speech. The language draws attention to itself, because its texture, resonance and rhythm are in excess, which is not present in verbal communication. For example the line: "Thou still unravished bride of quietness" is literature. But the line: "Don't you know the drivers are on strike?" is not literature. This was the definition of the 'literary' put forth by the Russian Formalists like Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsky etc. According to them, literature is made up of words not of objects or feelings or ideas or a reflection of social reality or certain transcendental truths. The formalists did not consider the novel DON QUIXOTE as a narration about a character of that name, rather the character is a device to hold together different narrative techniques. Similarly, ANIMAL FARM is not an allegory on Stalinism, rather Stalinism helps in the construction of an allegory.

The Formalists also believed that literature is actually an assemblage of devices, like sound, imagery, rhythm, syntax, metre, rhyme, narrative techniques etc. Through these uses, ordinary language is transformed, thereby making our responses and perceptions of reality unfamiliar and blunted. The readers of literature become more conscious; their experiences are deepened; their perceptions and knowledge are enriched and their awareness are in a state of excitement, suspense and thrill.

What may sound poetic or literary at one particular age might be ordinary colloquial speech at a different age. For example slang words currently used might sound literary at a later age. One person's norm might be another person's deviation. If poetic or archaic words are used in everyday speech, they would cease to be poetic. Similarly, certain novels which are prescribed for university syllabus, might be having no inherent properties which might distinguish it from other kinds of discourse.

Literature is to be considered as a 'non-pragmatic' discourse unlike textbooks of Biology or the grocery list. Literature serves no immediate purpose, but is to be taken as referring to a general state of affairs. When poet Robert Burns says "My love is like a red red rose" we should accept it as the poet's love for a woman and not judge whether he actually had a lover who resembled a rose. Literature therefore deals with the way of talking, rather than the reality of what is talked about. It leaves the definition of literature up to how somebody decides to read, not to the nature of what is written. For example if a person reads the railway timetable to study the speed and complexity of modern life and not just to be informed about a train route and time, then he would be said to be reading literature.

When a type of writing is given value, then it can be called literature. 'Value' is a transitive term. It means what is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to a particular criteria in the light of given purposes. Eagleton says that in the future there might be a society, which might be unable to get anything out of Shakespeare. Value is attached to literature when it concerns our own lives, thoughts, ideals, dreams, sufferings etc. It is for this reason certain works of literature retain their value through the centuries. Readers and critics of every century give different perspectives and values to the immortal poets like Homer or Shakespeare.

Speaking about 'ideology' Eagleton says that ideology refers to the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power relations of the society we live in. Ideology does not simply mean the deeply entrenched and unconscious beliefs which people hold on to. He means the modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which is inevitably connected to social power. The mode in which literature is valued, in different ages, is closely related to social ideologies, which refer not simply to private taste, but to the power which certain social groups exercise and maintain over others. Eagleton says "Literature does not exist in the sense that insects do" But it exists on the basis of the ideologies of a society.

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