



What Is Literature?

A paraphrase, summary, and adaptation of the opening chapter of Terry Eagleton's *Introduction to Literary Theory*

The Problem

Have you ever felt ashamed or secretive about books you like because they are not on approved reading lists? Have you ever had a teacher, friend, or parent tell you that what you are reading isn't "literature," that it may have words printed on a page, but it is somehow inferior in quality to other books? That is, it might be "literature" in the broad sense of the term (words on a page) but it's not "literary"?

Well, the problem with such judgments is that if you press someone about her definition of "literature" or "literariness," she will have a hard time finding a criteria that works for everything we have ever called literature. Although many have tried to define what "literature" is or what makes something "literary," no one has successfully defined literature in such a way that it accounts for the complexities of language and the wide variety of written texts. Consider the following proposals:

Literature Is Imaginative Writing

Some define literature as writing which is "imaginative" or fictive, as opposed to factual, true, or historical. This seems reasonable until we realize that ...

(1) what counts as "fact" varies with cultures and time periods. Is the book of Genesis (and the entire Bible for that matter) fact or fiction? Are the legends and myths of Greek, Scandinavia, and Native Americans fact or fiction? Is Darwin's *Origin of Species* fact or fiction? Are news reports fact or fiction?

(2) What is clearly imaginative writing is often not considered literature. For example, comic books, computer game stories, and Harlequin Romances are usually excluded from the category of "literature" even though they are certainly imaginative.

(3) A lot of what we do consider literature is more like history (i.e. Boswell's *Biography of Samuel Johnson*, Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*) or philosophy (i.e. the works of Mill, Ruskin, Newman). In sum, fact vs. fiction is not a helpful way to distinguish between what is literary and what is not. There are also a lot of "facts" in novels, and many novels are based on real historical events.

Literature Is Extraordinary Language

Perhaps it is the way we use language. As some argue, literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language. If I say, "Thou still unravished bride of quietness," then you know it's literature or you know that I'm using "literary" language. The language is different from everyday speech in texture, rhythm and resonance. The sentence, "This is awfully squiggly handwriting!" doesn't sound literary, does it? However, there are also some problems.

Victor Shklovsky (early 20th century Russian formalist)

"Habitualization devours objects, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. If all the complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been. Art exists to help us recover the sensation of life; it exists to make us feel things, to make the stone stony. The end of art is to give a sensation of the object as seen, not as recognized. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important."

(1) "Unordinary" speech depends upon a norm from which to deviate. But the specialized vocabulary used in sports, dance, music, small town diners, Glaswegian dockworkers, etc. or even everyday slang varies widely from the norm, but we don't classify that language as "literary." For example, most if not all of our swear words employ metaphorical/poetic language. Isn't the sentence "You're an asshole!" literary because of its use of metaphor? The language "defamiliarizes" or "estranges" the ordinary.

(2) There isn't a universal norm. One person's norm may be another's deviation. "Shitkicker" for "cowboy boot" may be poetic to someone from New York, but it's everyday speech in Laramie. Many Americans think British words for everyday items seem poetic. For example, I smiled at a sign posted in a shopping mall in Salisbury: "Watch Out for Slow Moving Plants." Apparently "plants" are forms of heavy equipment or machinery. For Brits, this sign is rather literal, but I enjoyed the figurative language. I won't think of machinery or flowers in quite the same way.

(3) Finally, the sentence above "This is awfully squiggly handwriting!" doesn't sound literary, but it comes from Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger*. Therefore, what is literary depends upon the context. Anything read in an English class could count as literature simply because it is read for English.

Literature Is Pragmatic
Speech

Perhaps literature is “non-useful” writing, writing that doesn’t help us do something pragmatic. There are still several problems.

(1) One could read anything as “non-useful.” That is, I could easily read a shopping list and point out the interesting metaphors, beautiful sounds, imagery, etc. or ...

(2) I could read *Moby Dick* to find out how to kill whales. In fact, I have used a novel about sled dogs to train my own dogs. Is that book no longer “literature” once I turn it into a “how-to” book?

Literature Is “Good”
Writing

Perhaps something is literary because the text is the kind of writing we like to read; it’s a highly valued kind of writing. In this case, anything can be literature, and anything can stop being literature. The important implication is that we don’t get to decide what is literature because our parents, teachers, exams, textbooks, etc. define that for us. We are trained to value the kind of writing that they value. This doesn’t mean that we are empty vessels with no ability to think for ourselves. However, our “personal” values and criteria are not personal, but social. These social institutions provide us with a range of possibilities, and social values are notoriously difficult to change.

Conclusions

“Literature” and the “literary” then are highly subjective categories. We can’t decide whether or not something is “literature” or “literary” simply by looking at its form or language. Shakespeare’s works have not always been valued as literature, and his works may not be valued in the future.

Disappointed?

You may feel dissatisfied because we will never come up with a concrete definition, but that is the point. As Terry Eagleton points out, “we can drop once and for all the illusion that the category “literature” is objective in the sense of being eternally given and immutable” (10). He goes on to say that our opinions and value-judgments are not neutral either, that “the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in” (14). In other words, your opinions about literature and literariness are not just your opinions. They are related to how and where you were raised and educated. Importantly, our environment encourages us to accept some values but not others, support the activities of some groups but not others, or exclude some choices as unacceptable. Therefore, how we define literature reveals what we have been taught to value and what we have been taught to reject. This is important for you because you are encouraged (perhaps even coerced) to learn what other people value and at the very minimum, what other people have made available for you to read.

This last insight is particularly important if you plan on teaching, for you will help shape the perceptions of your students. Again, have you ever had a teacher tell you that the novel you are reading is “not literature,” “escapist,” or just “fun reading”? Can you see the potential problem here, especially when it comes to passing tests, getting into college, and pleasing others, including yourself? Do you recognize that the source of your values may not even be you?

Another way to frame this insight is to say that I tried to encourage you to ask different questions, questions that I have found far more useful. Asking “Is it literature?” or “Is it good literature?” is not as productive or interesting as asking...

- What does one’s definition of “literature” reveal about one’s attitudes, beliefs, values, training, or socialization (in short, one’s ideological affiliation)?
- How do definitions and categories of “literature” and especially definitions of “good literature” coincide with specific political issues like “Who should govern?” “Who should have what role or function in society?” “What kinds of behaviors and belief should be excluded or included?”

For example, Plato wanted to ban poetry from his ideal republic, save for “hymns to the gods and praises of famous men.”

Put yet another way, I would encourage you to look at definitions, reading lists, evaluations, etc. as a way to learn about your own set of values, your own particular school system, and your culture at large. As you will discover, a quick glance at the race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and time period of authors you have had to read in school will reveal something about whose ideology (system of values, beliefs, and history) is valorized, privileged, and passed on to other generations. Therefore, what and how you read is a political issue because it has to do with relations and structures of power. Lists of “masterpieces,” “essentially reading,” or tables of contents in anthologies are not benign and innocent. Instead, they display cultural values. We need to take them seriously, for they tell us in their own way a lot about ourselves and our society.
