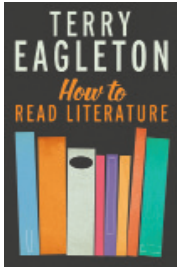


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How to Read Literature by Terry Eagleton Review-The Macro Aspects of Literary Criticism.

Terry Eagleton. 2013. *How to Read Literature*. New Heaven: Yale University Press, 216 pages

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Terry Eagleton, the author of *How to Read Literature*, is a well-known British literary theorist, critic and public intellectual. He is a professor of English Literature at Lancaster University. Among his publications, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) is still the best one till nowadays. In *How to Read Literature*, Eagleton attempts to deal with the challenge of literary criticism at present. It is because students of literature often percept a literary work as what it says. The aspect of 'literariness' which is a work's aesthetic form is not taken into account. A literary work, then, is a mere of writing that shares information to the readers as though a newspaper, text book or manual of computer does. Whereas, focusing on literary forms and directing our sensitivity to language (these are items mostly discussed in this book) can uncover a theoretical and political question of text (ix). What is meant by literary forms are all elements building a body of work such as "tone, mood, pace, genre, syntax, grammar, texture, rhythm, narrative structure, punctuation and ambiguity (2)."

In chapter I, Eagleton draws explanation on what he terms as 'the micro aspects of literary criticism' (43). It comprises various strategies of analysis such as paying close attention to sound-texture of a passage, significant ambiguities, paradox, discrepancies, contradiction and the way grammar and syntax are put to work. He elaborates these strategies by applying them to some prominent literary works such as Novels:

Wuthering Heights, *The Tempest*, *A Passage to India* and *Pride and Prejudice*; Drama: *Macbeth* and *Waiting for Godot*; Poetry: John Keats' *To Autumn*, Phillip Larkin's *The Trees* and *The Whitsun Weddings*, Robert Lowell's *The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket* and John Milton's *Lycidas*.

Chapter II and further discuss issues of 'macro aspects of literary criticism'. The first issue is about 'character' that refers to "figures in novels, plays, movies and the like (49)." Eagleton then elaborates the notion of 'character' in the romantic, realist and modernist context. In Aristotelian perspective, a character is just supporting literary device of the most fundamental aspect in a story-plot or dramatic action (58). The modernist presents the character in unstable and fragmented ways, for instance James Joyce's *Stephen Dedalus* or T.S. Eliot's *Gerontion* (pp.65-69). As an impact of post-Victorian age, modernist characters do not have consistency and continuity due to a conviction that each individual (or author) possesses different character or different idea on character. In contrast, realist character is presented as more "complex, credible and fully rounded individuals (64)." Compared to the modernist, it tends to be stable and unified. A realist character is portrayed as someone who is able to change his/her own destiny. Eagleton emphasizes that a good thing about realist fiction is that it encourages the readers to identify with its characters.

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Another macro aspect of criticism-narrative, is discussed in chapter III. Through narrator, a story is delivered to readers. Some narrators have the 'eye of God' in telling every details of story; they are omniscient (80). Some of them are unreliable narrators, e.g., Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* (84). In addition, there are narrators who cannot make coherent sense of their own experience because they speak through the eyes of children. These narrators are set to have limited vision (86). In his observation of Victorian literature, Eagleton finds almost all novels end in positive and happy note. A novel is a medium to raise people's spirit and not to bear gloomy feeling. Realist novels are those that mostly employ this act of narrating. A story will probably start with an unfortunate situation and then it leads to a fortune end. Nevertheless, in modernist and postmodernist literature, it is difficult to identify a resolved ending. Both modernist and postmodernist are not interested in solution. They believe in partial truths brought by mini narratives. A narrative should not follow a universal rule of 'resolved problem' but it should narrate each individual's experiences which are basically partial. Then, "one might suggest they are more realistic than most realism (105)."

In chapter IV, Eagleton draws our attention to the notion of 'interpretation'. He explicitly supports the elimination of author's authority to determine meanings. In his opinion, the matter of interpretation is not about truth or falsehood but the reader's imaginative logic in dealing with literary work (121). Among literary styles, modernist works are considered difficult to interpret. The readers have to struggle, for example to understand a sentence of Marcel Proust usually stretching for half a page or to decipher complex codes of Henry James. It looks like even the modernist authors themselves do not have meanings and they invite readers working together to determine. It is different with realist literary works where language seems to be transparent and to be clear in meaning. Eagleton emphasizes that although readers are encouraged to make use their creative interpretation, it does not mean they

can interpret works as they like. The works should be interpreted based on probabilities provided by some established rules in literary field (140). As an example, Eagleton demonstrates the explanation in this chapter through Charles Dickens' *Great Expectation* (149-167).

Chapter V, the last chapter, issues intriguing discussion on whether a work is good or bad-valuing literary work. Some critics believe in the sense of originality that breaks from previous tradition (176). In the time of Neo-classic, good literature is literature that obeys social convention. The truth is standardized so that all kinds of creative imaginations are not allowed. When it comes to Romantic age, the human creative spirit shifts rigid conception on reality to more dynamic and fluid one. The modernist then continues this impulse of change to resist all forms of ready-made civilization in order to disrupt our routine perception of reality (178). However, in later development, postmodernist claims that what we consider as change is not change at all. It is a cycle of life that something is not created but transformed from one form to the other. Therefore the notion of novelty or originality is an illusion (180). Eagleton stresses that to enjoy literature is not the same with to admire it because 'enjoying' is a subjective judgment. To prevent this personal judgment, a literary work should be placed in social sphere where it is valued in social practice. Eagleton then elaborates that one of the social practices to value a work is by literary criticism (189).

This book is actually not a very comprehensive writing on how to identify literary elements in a work. It deals mostly with 'the macro aspects' like character, narrative, interpretation, and value. However, it is very good introduction to literary criticism in a simple and persuasive way. Employing easily grasped-sentences accompanied with direct demonstration to several well known works makes this book interesting to read. As the author expects, he proposes this book for those beginners in literary reading or literary students who find difficulties to comprehend some literary concepts.