Good morning! Today, I take up the unit: “What is Literature?"(by Terry Eagleton). For your convenience of understanding the text, I have underlined a few lines of the essay, which I would like to present to you, as below. These are excerpts from the essay and are found to be important for getting an overall idea of Eagleton’s striving to define **literature. He** in this essay introduces a multitude of definitions to readers on literature and also refutes each definition. He claims that essentially, **literature** is too broad and subjective to define in concrete terms.

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Literature is a kind of writing which, in the words of the Russian critic Roman Jacobson, represents  an 'organized violence committed on ordinary speech'.  Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech. This, in effect, was the definition of the 'literary' advanced by the Russian formalists, who included in their ranks Viktor Sh1ovsky, Roman Jakobson, Osip Brik, Yury Tynyanov, Boris Eichenbaum and Boris Tomashevsky..

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Literature was not pseudo-religion or psychology or sociology but a particular organization of language.

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The Formalists passed over the analysis of literary 'content' (where one might always be tempted into psychology or sociology) for the study of literary form. Far from seeing form as the expression of content, they stood the relationship on its head: content was merely the 'motivation' of form, an occasion or convenience for a particular kind of formal exercise. Don Quixote is not 'about' the character of that name: the character is just a device for holding together different kinds of narrative technique.

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'Devices' included sound, imagery , rhythm, syntax, metre, rhyme, narrative techniques, in fact the whole stock of formal literary elements;

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…it ‘deformed' ordinary language in various ways. Under the pressure of literary devices, ordinary language was intensified, condensed, twisted, telescoped, drawn out, turned on its head. It was language 'made strange'; and because of this estrangement, the everyday world was also suddenly made unfamiliar.

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Literature, by forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language, refreshes these habitual responses and renders objects more 'perceptible'.

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The story, as the Formalists would argue, uses impeding' or 'retarding' devices to hold our attention;

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The Formalists, then, saw literary language as a set of deviations from a norm, a kind of linguistic violence: literature is a special' kind of language, in contrast to the 'ordinary' language we commonly use.

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Any actual language consists of a highly complex range of discourses, differentiated according to class, region, gender, status and so on, which can by no means be neatly unified into a single, homogeneous linguistic community.

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Even the most 'prosaic' text of the fifteenth century may sound 'poetic' to us today because of its archaism. If we were to stumble across an isolated scrap of writing from some long-vanished civilization, we could not tell whether it was 'poetry'..

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It is not that the Russian Formalists did not realize all this. They recognized that norms and deviations shifted around from one social or historical context to …

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…it was estranging only against a certain normative linguistic background, and if this altered then the writing might cease to be perceptible as literary. If everyone used phrases like 'unravished bride of quietness' in ordinary pub conversation, this kind of language might cease to be poetic. For the Formalists, in other words, 'literariness' was a function of the differential relations between one sort of discourse and another; it was not an eternally given property. They were not out to define 'literature', but 'literariness' -special uses of language, which could be found in 'literary' texts but also in many places outside them.

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Significantly, when the Formalists came to consider prose writing, they often simply extended to it the kinds of technique  they had used with poetry. But literature is usually judged o contain much besides poetry -to include, for example, realist or naturalistic writing which is not linguistically self-conscious or self-exhibiting in any striking way.

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When the poet tells us that his love is like a red rose,  we know by the very fact that he puts this statement in metre that we are not supposed to ask whether he actually had a lover, who for some bizarre reason seemed to him to resemble a rose. He is telling us something about women and love in general. Literature, then, we might say, is 'non-pragmatic' discourse: unlike biology textbooks and notes to the milkman it serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to , general state of affairs.

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In much that is classified as literature the truth-value and practical relevance of what is said is considered important to the overall effect But even if treating discourse 'non-pragmatically' is part of what is meant by literature', then it follows from this 'definition' that literature cannot in fact be 'objectively' defined.

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I might well read Gibbon's account of the Roman empire not because I am misguided enough to believe that it will be reliably informative about ancient Rome but because I enjoy Gibbon's prose style, or revel in images of human corruption whatever their historical source.

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It is true that many of the works studied as literature in academic institutions were 'constructed' to be read as literature, but it is also true that many of them were not.

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Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust upon them.

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If I pore over the railway timetable not to discover a train connection but to stimulate in myself general reflections on the speed and complexity of modern existence, then I might be said to be reading it as literature.

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Reading a novel for pleasure obviously differs from reading a road sign for information, but how about reading a biology textbook to improve your mind? Is that a 'pragmatic' treatment of language or not? In many societies, 'literature' has served highly practical functions such as religious ones; distinguishing sharply between 'practical' and 'non- practical' may only be possible in a society like ours, where literature has ceased to have much practical function at all.

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We have still not discovered the secret, then, of why Lamb, Macaulay and Mill are literature but not, generally speaking, Bentham, Marx and Darwin.

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I may consider Lamb and Macaulay overrated, but that does not necessarily mean that I stop regarding them as literature.

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Value-judgements would certainly seem to have a lot to do with what is judged literature and what isn't -not necessarily in the sense that writing has to be 'fine' to be literary , but that it has to be of the kind that is judged fine: it may be an inferior example of a generally valued mode.

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Literature, in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties, does not exist. When I use the words 'literary' and literature' from here on in this book, then, I place them under m invisible crossing-out mark, to indicate that these terms will not really do but that we have no better ones at the moment.

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The reason why it follows from the definition of literature as highly valued writing that it is not a stable entity is that value-judgements are notoriously variable.

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It does mean that the so-called 'literary canon', the unquestioned 'great tradition' of the 'national literature', has to be recognized as a construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time. There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable in itself, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it. 'Value' is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes. It is thus quite possible that, given a deep enough transformation of our history , we may in the future produce a society which is unable to get anything at all out of Shakespeare. His works might simply seem desperately alien, full of styles of thought and feeling which such a society found limited or irrelevant. In such a situation, Shakespeare would be no more valuable than much present-day graffiti. And though many people would consider such a social condition tragically impoverished, it seems to me dogmatic not to entertain the possibility that it might arise rather from a general human enrichment. Karl Marx was troubled -by the question of why ancient Greek art retained an 'eternal charm', even though the social conditions which produced it had long passed; but how do we know that it will remain 'eternally' charming, since history has not yet ended? Let us imagine that by dint of some deft archaeological research we discovered a great deal more about what ancient Greek tragedy actually meant to its original audiences, recognized that these concerns were utterly remote from our own, and began to read the plays again in the light of this deepened knowledge. One result might be that we stopped enjoying them. We might come to see that we had enjoyed then previously because we were unwittingly reading them in thc light of our own preoccupations; once this became less possible the drama might cease to speak at all significantly to us.

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'Our Homer is not identical with the Homer of the Middle Ages, no 'our' Shakespeare with that of his contemporaries; it is rather that different historical periods have constructed a 'different Homer and Shakespeare for their own purposes, and found in these texts elements to value or devalue, though, not necessarily the same ones. All literary works, in other words, are 'rewritten' if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed there is no reading of a work which is not also a 're-writing'. No work, and no current evaluation of it, can simply be extended to new groups of people without being changed, perhaps almost unrecognizably, in the process; and this is one reason why what counts as literature is a notably unstable affair .

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Facts are public and impeachable, values are private and gratuitous. There is an obvious difference between recounting a fact, such as 'This cathedral was built in 1612,' and registering a value-judgement, 1 as 'This cathedral is a magnificent specimen of baroque architecture.'

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It may well be that a liking for bananas is a merely private matter, though this is in fact questionable. A thorough analysis of my tastes in food would probably reveal how deeply relevant they are to certain formative experiences in early childhood, to my relations with my parents and siblings and to a good many other cultural factors which are quite as social and 'non- subjective' as railway stations. This is even more true of that fundamental structure of beliefs and interests which I am born into as a member of a particular society, such as the belief that I should try to keep in good health, that differences of sexual role are rooted in human biology or that human beings are more important than crocodiles. 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. Nobody will penalize me heavily if I dislike a particular Donne poem, but if I argue that Donne is not literature at all then in certain circumstances I might risk losing my job.

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The largely concealed structure of values which informs and underlies our factual statements is part of what is meant by 'ideology'. By 'ideology' I mean, roughly, the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in.

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I do not mean. by 'ideology' simply the deeply entrenched, often unconscious beliefs which people hold; I mean more particularly those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power.

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In his famous study Practical Criticism (1929), the Cambridge critic I. A. Richards sought to demonstrate just how whimsical and subjective literary value-judgements could actually be by giving his undergraduates a set of poems, withholding from them the titles and authors' names, and asking them to evaluate them. The resulting judgements, notoriously, were highly variable: time-honoured poets were marked down and obscure authors celebrated.

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All the participants in this experiment were, presumably, young, white, upper- or upper middle- class, privately educated English people of the 1920s, and how they responded to a poem depended on a good deal more than purely 'literary' factors. Their critical responses were deeply entwined with their broader prejudices and beliefs. …socially structured way of perceiving the world.

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There is nothing at all whimsical about such kinds of value-judgement: they have their roots in deeper structures of belief which are as apparently unshakeable …

#Well, today, I would not proceed further. For today, please go through the original text yourself on the basis of the excerpts as above. Bye, -and take care!#