

Original Paper

From Form to Deconstruction: The Centennial Evolution of “Literariness” in 20th-Century Literary Theory

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Abstract

Research on the essence and boundaries of literature has been a core concern of literary academics since the 19th century. Taking a diachronic comparative view, this paper traces the century-long evolution of “Literariness” in twentieth-century literary theory from Russian Formalism to Deconstructionism. Jakobson and Shklovsky established the central place of Literariness and stressed the text’s self-sufficiency. Wellek then defined literature’s essence through fictionality, creativity, and imagination, offering a dialectical framework that brings together intrinsic and extrinsic literary studies. Eagleton went further, emphasizing historicity and arguing that Literariness is a product of ideological and power struggles within specific historical contexts. By the late twentieth century, Culler’s deconstructive theory highlighted the plurality of literary features and dismantled the absolute boundary between literature and non-literature. The generation of literary meaning, in this view, depends on readers, texts, and contexts interacting—and that interaction reveals a clear trajectory, that is, Literariness moves from closed self-sufficiency toward openness and plurality.

Keywords

Literariness, Russian Formalism, Deconstructionism, Ren éWellek, Terry Eagleton

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of mass media such as the Internet, social networks and short-video platforms in the 21st century, both the cultural environment and the sense of the public have been changing significantly. Rather than the immersive and in-depth reading experience that traditional literature requires, mass media content has high interactivity and entertainment value, thus meeting the public’s demand for instant gratification more effectively. According to the above study,

the number of people who read books in the United States has fallen by 28 per cent in the last two years. Tom and Bonnie (2004) cite the New York Times as a “national cultural alarm” (p. ix). Based on the above, the influence of traditional literature will continue to decline, and its long-held position in the spiritual life of the people is facing new challenges.

At the same time, the deconstructionists of the late 20th century offered a contrary view. The American postmodernist David Simpson believes that although literature in the narrow sense has gradually moved away from the centre of human life, various forms of literature, such as narrative, fiction and metaphor, have been widely used in the humanities and social sciences. Traces of Literariness can be found everywhere, and “postmodernism is another name for the triumph of literature” (Simpson, 2003, p. 128).

This View has received a lot of attention since its appearance. Some scholars believe that the current academic discussions on the essence of literature have strayed from the basic idea that the core of literariness is special creativity. Due to conceptual confusion and theoretical deficiencies, such discussions have failed to clarify the meaning of literariness and have been unable to address the lack of literariness in contemporary Chinese literature (Wu, 2006, pp. 11-14). Other scholars have also pointed out that the theories advocating for "expansion of literariness" have an ambiguous definition of core concepts. Literariness that appears in commercial and consumer areas serves only to an end, and thus differs fundamentally from the literariness in literary studies that possesses both instrumental and intrinsic value (Wu, 2005, p. 75).

Such disputes clearly show that the meaning, scope and history of literariness have not been fully clarified. Literary Studies has gone through a hundred years of changes: The foundations of Russian Formalism and its initial establishment, the large-scale expansion under Wellek and Eagleton, and now a diverse state in the age of deconstruction. This linear development of literariness responds to the aforementioned controversies and also seeks to uncover the essence and value of literature in recent times.

2. Origin: Construction of Literariness from the Perspective of Formalism

The idea of Literariness was first put forward by Russian Formalists. In the 19th century, the Russian Historical-Cultural School, led by Alexander Petrov and A. N. Veselovsky studied literature only in that one department. Through the lens of history, society, etc., they interpreted the works of literature. Although this way has demonstrated the connections among literature, history and culture, it has failed to regard literary works as autonomous objects. The main components of text structure, language traits and rhetorical devices have been overshadowed by broad historical discussions, and literary and non-literary works have become indistinct. As a response to this tendency, the Russian Formalist School proposed the idea of literariness in the early 20th century and, in this endeavour, established independent research objects and methods for literary studies.

Roman Osipovich Jakobson first systematically elaborated on Literariness in his 1919 work *Russian New Poetry*. Jakobson (2020) believed that the object of literary studies is not literature but rather Literariness—that is to say, the attributes of a work that make it a literary work (p. 140). Jakobson compared the application of literature to interpreting culture, psychology and politics with that of “a policeman arresting the wrong man”, and reduced literary works to “defective second-rate materials” (Jakobson, 2020, pp. 140-141). Such behaviours are no longer distinguished from the works of literature, and it has become difficult to establish the theory of literary education independently. Jakobson’s proposition first proposed that the focus of literary research be turned inward and concentrated on the text itself rather than external factors such as life and times.

Nevertheless, Jakobson’s idea is not merely to criticize the too-emphasis on historical and cultural contexts. It will change its focus to consider the structural features of a work of literature itself. If the literary works are to be arbitrarily appropriated and used instrumentally by the fields of philosophy, psychology and political science, then literature will be confined to a subordinate and auxiliary position, and literary studies can never form an autonomous academic system. Jakobson believed that taking literary quality as the focus of study, one could treat literature as an independent system of knowledge in his literary inquiry system. Literary works do not need to meet the external requirements of society and history. Therefore, they have begun to judge the beauty of life themselves based on their own beliefs. Therefore, literary works are inherently self-aware, continuously innovating and mutually referring. Therefore, the main task of literary research is no longer to find the causes of a work in the external world but to study how a work of poetry or fiction achieves beauty through language and structure.

Viktor Shklovsky’s work is related to Jakobson’s idea of literariness, but it is presented in two different ways: defamiliarisation and familiarisation. The two ideas help distinguish clearly between works of literature and other types. Shklovsky believes that literature does not have to be useful or easy-to-understand in the same way as non-fiction. It has created different ways for people to see. At this time, defamiliarisation is used, that is, the familiar is presented in an unfamiliar way, it does not immediately draw the attention of the audience, and therefore requires prolonged observation to comprehend its beauty (Shklovsky, 2010, p. 277). Shklovsky does not want his works to be clear or practical. He no longer wants to deliver content; now he wants to create forms and experiences. In other words, the first purpose of literary works is to break the habit of daily life through defamiliarisation. It can help people break out of the automatic way of thinking and reexamine the world they live in every day. Shklovsky selects Tolstoy’s works for study. Tolstoy frequently uses the first-person perspective to tell stories as if he were a child, thereby showing that conventional society is strange and that this thinking can inspire readers to question these norms themselves.

Shklovsky lists many means of achieving defamiliarization. Writers may fail to follow grammatical rules, use new vocabulary, and avoid the traditional method of organisation. It is no longer used in daily

life and thus has a special sense of wonder. Devices such as inversion, metaphor and synesthesia move away from ordinary language and reduce the speed of perception. The following is the story unit. Authors may be out of sequence, add suspense, or change the perspective for effect. Therefore, the meaning of this text is to be created by the reader. At the level of figures, one can change or rebuild the original characters and settings to break the conventional and bring a new life to well-known pictures. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is a typical case of defamiliarization, and Gregor has become an insect. Therefore, many people have been inspired to think about the problem of alienation and the life of the lower class in modern society.

Shklovsky proposed that perception itself has an aesthetic function and thus scholars have moved away from the old idea of literary value. Now, they pay more attention to the aesthetic experience and intellectual contemplation that arise from the act of perceiving. At the same time, his works also offered new directions for the exploration of what literature is in twentieth-century literary theory. Shklovsky's idea of separating content from form provided a basis for the school of New Criticism. According to the Formalist theory of literature as an autonomous work of art, the New Critics considered the text an independent system devoid of the author and the audience. Scholars have been studying the internal formal features of tension, paradox and metaphor. Wellek and Warren, in *Theory of Literature*, put forward the concept of "structure" to refer to aesthetic-related factors, and thus extended Shklovsky's idea of form. The use of New Criticism's method of close reading is, in essence, an expansion of Shklovsky's earlier attention to form. Next is French Structuralism. Shklovsky's theories were spread widely by the translations and works of Jakobson and Tzvetan Todorov. Structuralism aimed to make literary studies more scientific by finding universal narrative structures and linguistic rules in individual texts. Therefore, the end of the study should be in line with Shklovsky's method, i.e., formal analysis of literary works. In his translation and compilation of Russian Formalist works, Todorov explicitly pointed out how still relevant Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation is today. Based on this formalist foundation, structuralist research has further investigated the internal laws of literature through the study of narrative types and linguistic sign systems. Marxist criticism also borrowed from Shklovsky. Fredric Jameson supported Shklovsky's idea of criticism originating in form. However, Jameson extended the narrow formal focus of early Formalism by integrating history and ideology. This thus formed a path of aesthetics leading to politics. The above applications show that Shklovsky's theories are flexible and adaptable, and they continue to be used in other areas.

3. Expansion: Dynamic Evolution of Literariness in a Historical Context

Russian Formalism shifted the focus of literary studies away from history and culture towards language and form, and René Wellek extended this trend further. He established a more reasonable and ordered system by considering both internal and external factors. Wellek did not directly use the term "Literariness" in his *Theory of Literature* first. Nevertheless, the main ideas of his are in line with those

proposed by Jakobson, Shklovsky, and other Formalists. All of them are the same kind of question: What is literature, and how is it different from other types of non-literary works? Therefore, the subsequent cross-school comparisons were feasible.

Wellek also believes in formalism and does not study the impact of social conditions, but he does so to some extent. Promote the literary autonomy of the entire work. Literariness has three basic features for him: fictionality, creativity and imagination, and among them, fictionality is the first. He believes that although the world of literature is based on real life, it will never be the same as that world. It is the result of creation and imagination. Therefore, he knows whether something is genuine innovation or artistic truth (Liu, 2005, p. 23). This view is that the two have always been changing, so literature does not need to reproduce the real world. Instead, it is used to reconstruct, refine and enhance reality through creative imagination, thus achieving the ideal of “artistic truth”. In other words, only those works that have fictional narrative systems, creative modes of expression and an imaginative core should be referred to as literature. Breaking free from the limit of Formalism, Wellek refuses to reduce literary qualities to style and rhetoric. Contrary to the idea put forward by the formalists, this author has explored the nature of literature rather than relying solely on the principle of defamiliarization. As a result, Wellek’s system has been allowed to develop more freely in recent years.

Wellek has found the three general features of literature. He believes that fiction is not an imitation of life, and the characters in books are not real people. However, he does not put forward an idea for using literature to reflect life or to integrate fictional worlds with real life aesthetically. Building on Wellek’s arguments, Terry Eagleton has extended the boundaries of Formalism by proposing a non-static, non-historical view of literature. Literary fiction directly relates to the aesthetic reflection of life.

Eagleton believes that we have seen that literature does not exist in the sense that insects do, and that the value judgments by which it is constituted are historically variable. Furthermore, these value judgments are themselves closely connected to social ideologies. They are in fact not just matters of individual taste, but also related to the assumptions that certain social groups use to exercise and maintain power over others (Eagleton, 1987, p. 15). What he means is that Literariness is not an all-or-nothing state for a work of art. Therefore, literature is regarded as the result of the conflict for ideological and social power at a particular time. What is considered literature and at what point that classification ends is not fixed. These are not the fixed qualities of the texts. Eighteenth-century British literature is a typical case; at that time, only formal letters were written, and by the nineteenth century, literature had risen to challenge religion. Such changes are caused by the value systems of a certain time. These values are not merely the people’s wishes. They are based on social ideas and linked to power. At first glance, they appear to be ratings of the quality and aesthetics of the text. However, at the bottom are still the interests and dominant logic of certain social groups. By establishing criteria for what is to be included in the canon (and what is not), the powerful group will promote works that support its rule and marginalize works that question the establishment. Thus, literature will continue to

serve as a means to maintain the current power structure and reinforce hierarchy. The underlying reason for the lack of beauty.

Eagleton's theory of literature is based on the key ideas of Saussurean structural linguistics but expands upon them. Traces the line from Russian Formalism and the Prague School to post-structuralism, and Eagleton also indicates that literature cannot be considered a closed system. Deconstruction and psychoanalytic theory both suggest that the meanings of literary works are unstable and inconsistent. The Creation of literature is not always aesthetically pleasing. It is related to power and ideas. Therefore, what Eagleton is going to say is that literature is not merely a work of art that uses fiction. It is also a medium for specific social power and class interests. Its necessary fictionality is a particular way to interfere in reality and achieve specific goals in a particular historical period.

4. Deconstruction: Meaning Reconstruction of Literariness in a Multicultural Context

René Wellek and Terry Eagleton believe that Literariness has been evolving in both time and space. Jonathan Culler is also a deconstructionist who has proposed this. In terms of Formalism, most scholars aimed to confine literary research within the closed system of language and form. Thus, they removed history, culture and the world of living. They desired an internal mode of study for literature. This way only shows the formal features, and it is also out of touch with real life. Culler's Deconstructionist View is the opposite. It is no longer a closed circle, but rather a gateway to learning about history, culture and society in literature. These are no longer the characteristics of Formalism. The two are thus achieved. It provides a connection for students with real life. It is the demolition of the old walls that once contained what people believed to be literature. Fields that were once considered non-literary, such as history writing, philosophical thought, and even daily life, are now all included in the scope of literariness. Therefore, literary works are no longer the only bearers of literariness. It has become a general feature of all kinds of writings and life in society. Culler has shown that the features one usually thinks are necessary for literature are also required in other types of non-literary discourse and practice (Culler, 1998, p. 19).

Culler's Idea is not the same as the former mode of seeking an ideal form of literature. Before introducing the topics of literature and culture, he begins by asking "What is literature? Does it matter?" His answer is: "You might think this is the central question of literary theory, but in fact it does not matter very much" (Culler, 1998, p. 19). It does not deny the merit of learning to read. On the other hand, from a deconstructive perspective, it can be seen that the long-standing attempt of traditional theory to identify an eternal, universal, and absolute essence of literature will likely fail. Eagleton said that literature does not have a fixed form of being, such as insects. It cannot exist in isolation from history and society. Literature that is regarded as such varies with time. Scholars at different times have used various criteria. For example, in ancient China, novels were considered light entertainment and not suitable for educated people. Only recently has it become popular in society.

Thus, there will be changes in the literary value. Culler believes that, due to the ideology of that time, a work of literature is also constrained in its value. It is also not beautiful. It often has power requirements and cultural spaces for specific social groups. There are no ideologically neutral works or essays. Therefore, any effort to fix the essence of literature in a single, rigid set of standards will be bound to fail.

Drawing on deconstruction and Foucault, Jonathan Culler has departed from the work-centred approach of traditional literary theory and no longer considers only the literary work as the origin of meaning. He does not think that what qualifies as a work of literature or how it produces meaning is due to some inherent qualities of the work itself, but rather the result of all kinds of reasons. One such factor is the reader's literacy in literature; that is, the capacity to learn literary norms, grammatical rules and other creative conventions, and thus to make sense of the language. Another is the trust that readers place in writers to allow them to suspend disbelief and cooperate in reading. Readers expect that a work will generally be well-structured. Even if they encounter confusion or difficulty, they are not willing to study. Other circumstances are also included: norms of literature, changes in the reading environment, and the influence of social culture. All of them are needed to form a comprehensive system for teaching and studying literature. Therefore, the main goal of literary theory should no longer be to seek a universal definition of literature or to determine the final answer to the question of "what is literature". Turn to more practical and open-ended questions: What circumstances make something a work of literature, how is literary meaning generated through the interaction of readers and texts, and what is the function of literature in society and culture?

A change has occurred in the course of twentieth-century literary theory; now, the emphasis is on change rather than on seeking fixed essential features. Deconstruction also breaks down old binary divisions by way of thought. Rigid divisions of form and content, inside and out, are now reversed; the field is now open, diverse and inclusive. Scholars should be encouraged to leave the fixed system and, with a flexible and critical attitude, explore all the links between literature and the world as well as between literature and human life.

5. Conclusion

The research on Literariness in twentieth-century literary theory has developed linearly, going from closed to open, from fixed to fluid, and from single to multiple. They provide various answers to the question of what literature is at different times. Russian Formalism began as a response to reducing literature to history and established literary autonomy. René Wellek and Terry Eagleton later promoted the study of literariness in terms of history. By the end of the 20th century, with the rise of deconstruction, Jonathan Culler went even further. He broke the old idea of what literature is and where it comes from. As a result, Literariness is no longer restricted to literary works but has become an all-encompassing attribute of various other types of texts and social environments. What literature is

and how it produces meaning is no longer restricted to what is in the text. It is the result of the interaction among readers, texts and other factors. Therefore, literary research has moved away from seeking fixed essence and begun to study change; it is open-ended and all-inclusive in nature.

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