The Rise of English: A Critical Analysis of Terry Eagleton

In Literary Theory: An Introduction, Terry Eagleton opens with the influential chapter "The Rise of English," which traces the historical, ideological, and institutional origins of English literary studies. Far from viewing English as a neutral or purely aesthetic discipline, Eagleton argues that it emerged as a social and ideological project, shaped by class interests, moral anxieties, and political needs. His central contention is that English literature became a surrogate for religion and a means of cultural regulation in modern capitalist society. Through a Marxist critical lens, Eagleton exposes how English studies functioned to cultivate moral consensus, social discipline, and ideological stability.

Eagleton begins by challenging the common assumption that English literature has always occupied a central place in education. In fact, he notes that English as an academic discipline is relatively recent, gaining prominence only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He famously remarks that "English literature did not become a university subject until the late nineteenth century", underscoring that its institutional rise coincided with major social transformations such as industrialisation, urbanisation, and the decline of religious authority. This historical timing, Eagleton suggests, is not accidental but deeply ideological.

One of Eagleton's most significant arguments is that English literature replaced religion as a moral and cultural force in an increasingly secular society. As traditional religious beliefs weakened, literature was recruited to perform similar functions—shaping values, emotions, and ethical sensibilities. Eagleton asserts that literature was seen as "a vital means of moral instruction" and a source of spiritual refinement. The study of canonical texts was expected to instil virtues such as sympathy, self-restraint, and respect for social order. Thus, English became a form of "secular theology," providing moral coherence without overt religious doctrine.

This moral function of English was particularly important in the context of class conflict. Eagleton highlights how the ruling classes feared the unrest and radicalism of the working class in industrial Britain. English literature was introduced into educational institutions partly to civilise and pacify the masses. He observes that literature was believed to "humanise" the working class, offering them a refined emotional life while discouraging political rebellion. In this sense, English studies served as an instrument of social control, promoting harmony and obedience under the guise of cultural enrichment.

Eagleton also draws attention to the role of Matthew Arnold, one of the key figures in the rise of English. Arnold's belief in culture as "the best that has been thought and said" exemplifies how literature was invested with almost sacred authority. For Arnold,

culture could rescue society from what he called "anarchy". Eagleton critically notes that this notion of culture was deeply elitist, privileging the values of the ruling class while presenting them as universal. The canon of English literature thus became a selective tradition, masking power relations behind claims of timeless greatness.

Another important aspect of Eagleton's analysis is his critique of aesthetic humanism, the belief that literature speaks to universal human values beyond history and politics. He argues that such claims are ideological, since what counts as "universal" is often shaped by specific class interests. Eagleton famously writes that "literature is not innocent", emphasising that texts are produced within concrete social and historical conditions. By treating literature as timeless and apolitical, English studies conceal the material forces that shape both texts and their interpretation.

Eagleton further examines how practical criticism, associated with critics like I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, reinforced the ideological function of English. Close reading, while seemingly objective and text-centred, trained students in habits of discipline, sensitivity, and emotional control. According to Eagleton, such methods encouraged readers to focus on internal harmony and moral balance within texts, subtly discouraging broader social or political critique. Thus, even critical techniques carried ideological weight.

A central Marxist insight in Eagleton's argument is that English studies are bound up with the needs of capitalism. Literature offers an imaginary resolution to real social contradictions. While capitalism produces alienation and inequality, literature provides a realm of shared values and emotional unity. Eagleton notes that literature creates the illusion of common humanity in a society deeply divided by class. This ideological function helps maintain social stability without directly addressing material injustices.

However, Eagleton does not dismiss literature itself; rather, he challenges the institutional uses of literature. He insists that the problem lies not in reading literary texts but in treating them as sacred objects detached from history. His critique opens the possibility of a more politically aware and theoretically informed approach to literature—one that recognises its role in power structures while also acknowledging its capacity for critique and resistance.

In conclusion, "The Rise of English" is a foundational essay that radically rethinks the origins and purposes of English literary studies. Terry Eagleton demonstrates that English did not emerge simply because literature is inherently valuable, but because it served specific moral, cultural, and ideological functions in modern society. By revealing how English replaced religion, disciplined the working class, and upheld bourgeois values, Eagleton compels readers to question the neutrality of literary education. His analysis remains highly influential, encouraging students and scholars

to view literature not as an isolated aesthetic domain but as a practice deeply embedded in history, ideology, and power.