

LITERARY THEORY

MARXIST CRITICISM

Definition and Description:

What Marxist critics are going to look for are all the ideas literature might have that could spark a revolutionary moment within a nation, specifically for the proletariat to overcome the bourgeoisie. How Marxists will find these ideologies will be to look at the many factors that could be overcome to help a dream government arise: oppression, the working class being stuck, the bourgeoisie taking advantage of the proletariat, etc. Basically a Marxist approach exposes the dominant class, demonstrates how the bourgeoisie's ideology controls and oppresses the working class, and highlights elements of society most affected by such oppression leading to action, social change, and revolution.

Marxism is a cultural theory that embodies a set of social, economic, and political ideas that its followers believe will enable them to interpret and change their world. Marxist critics are going to look at literature as a means of seeing historical and economic forces that hold information that will help the common man to overcome the bourgeoisie. By doing so, the Marxist critic will also be able to find the author's *weltanschauung*, or world view, which helps in understanding the government established at the time and whether or not people, or just the author, really supported it or not.

The aspects of literature Marxist critics will look at are political, ideological, economical, and/or oppressive situations that exist in a text and by finding hope to create some sort of balance that makes the world a better, more secure place for those who have been oppressed and controlled. Proper critics of a text cannot exist in isolation from the cultural situation in which the text evolved, meaning that critics will need to understand the time period involved instead of just looking at the text.

Key People:

- Fredric Jameson
- Friedrich Engels
- Georg Lukács
- Herbert Marcuse
- Karl Heinrich Marx
- Louis Althusser
- Terry Eagleton
- Theodor Adorno
- Walter Benjamin

Websites:

- <http://www.answers.com/topic/marxist-literary-criticism>
- <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Academy/4573/Lectures/marxism.html>
- <http://www.lawrence.edu/dept/ENGLISH/COURSES/60A/marxist.html>
- <http://www.sou.edu/english/idtc/timeline/uslit.htm>
- <http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/phil/philo/phils/marx.html>

Key Terms:

- **Base:** the methods of production
- **Bourgeoisie:** those who own property and control the means of production
- **Classism:** an ideology that equates one's values as a human being with the social class to which one belongs
- **Commodification:** the attitude of valuing things not for their utility but for their power to impress other or for their resale possibilities
- **Conspicuous consumption:** the obvious acquisition of things only for their sign value and/or exchange value
- **Dialectic:** A form of logical argumentation involving conflicting ideas and propositions
- **Dialectical Criticism:** all critics must be aware of their own ideology when analyzing a text, possessing dialectical self-awareness
- **Dialectical materialism:** (a core belief of Marxism) our ideas and concepts about ourselves are fashioned in every day discourse in the language of real life and are not derived from any spiritual reality. The basis of reality is material, no spiritual reality exists
- **Exchange value:** an assessment of the worth of something based on what it can be traded or sold for
- **False consciousness:** when a cultural conditioning leads the people to accept a system that is unfavorable for them without protest or questioning; to accept the logical way for things to be
- **Fragmentation:** fractured and fragmented society
- **Hegemony:** the assumptions, values and meanings that shape meaning and define reality for the majority of people in a given culture
- **Historical situation:** the ideological atmosphere material circumstances generate
- **Ideology:** a belief system or a product of cultural conditioning
- **Imperialism:** the military, economic, and/or cultural domination of one nation by another for the financial benefit of the dominant nation with little or no concern for the welfare of the dominated
- **Interpellation:** a term used by Louis Althusser to refer to the process by which the working class is manipulated to accept the ideology of the dominant one
- **Material circumstances:** the economic conditions underlying the society
- **Political Unconscious:** the repressed conditions of exploitations and oppression
- **Production theory:** the name given to Louis Althusser's ideas about the ability of literature and art to change the base of a society.

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- **Proletariat:** the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions who have always performed the manual labor that fills the coffers of the rich
- **Reflection theory:** a text directly reflects a society's consciousness
- **Reflectionism:** a theory that the superstructure of a society mirrors its economic base and, by extension, that a text reflects the society that produced it
- **Religion:** helps to keep the faithful poor satisfied with their lot in life
- **Rugged individualism:** an ideology that keeps the focus on "me" instead of on "us," thus working against class action and giving us the illusion that we make our own decisions and are not influenced by ideology
- **Sign value:** an assessment of something based on how impressive it makes a person look
- **Superstructure:** emerge from the factors of the base into such things as law, politics, jurisprudence, art, morality, and religion
- **Use value:** an appraisal of something based on what it can do
- **Verhältnisse:** (reality) nothing exists in isolation or just "is". Everything is interrelated and exists in a dynamic relationship (vermittlung) with a variety of social forces
- **Vulgar Marxism:** another name for *reflectionism*. Those who practice it try to determine the true and complete nature of a given society
- **Weltanschauung:** The worldview of the author
- **Worker's paradise:** when society reaches the goal of becoming a communist society from a capitalist

Questions:

- What class structures are established in the text?
- Which characters or groups control the economic means of production?
- What class conflicts are exhibited?
- Which characters are oppressed, and to what social classes do they belong?
- Which characters are the oppressors?
- What is the hegemony established in the text?
- What social conflicts are ignored?
- Who represents the status quo?
- Does the work suggest a solution to a society's class conflicts?
- What is the dominant ideology revealed in the text?
- Did the main character support or defy the dominant ideology?
- Is the narrator a member of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat?

- Whose story gets told in the text? Whose story does not get told?
- When and where was the text published?
- Is the author's stated intention for writing the work known or public?
- What were the economic issues surrounding the publication of the text?
- Who are the powerful people in the society depicted in the text? Who are the powerless people? Are they depicted with equal attention?
- Why do the powerful have that power? Why is it denied to others?
- Do you find evidence of class conflict and struggle?
- Do you find repression and manipulation of workers by owners?
- Is there evidence of alienation and fragmentation?
- Does the bourgeoisie in the text, either consciously or unconsciously, routinely repress and manipulate less powerful groups? If so, what are the tools they use? News? Media? Religion? Literature?
- What does the setting tell you about the distribution of power and wealth?
- Is there evidence of conspicuous consumption?
- Does the society that is depicted value things for their usefulness, for their potential resale or trade, or for their power to convey social status?
- Do you find in the text itself evidence that it is a product of the culture in which it originated?
- Does this text make you aware of your own acceptance on any social, economic, or political practices that involve control or oppression of others?
- What are the values of the author's time and place? Where are they reflected in the text?
- What biographical elements of the author's life can account for his ideology? Where are they reflected in the text?
- What are the socioeconomic conditions of the writer's culture? Where are they reflected in the text?
- Who read the work when it was first published? How was it initially received?
- Does the work reinforce (intentionally or not) capitalist, imperialist, or other classist values?
- How might the work be seen as a critique of capitalism, imperialism, or classism? In what ways does the text reveal, and invite to condemn, oppressive socioeconomic forces?
- Does the work in some ways support a Marxist agenda but in other ways (perhaps unintentionally) support a capitalist, imperialist, or classist agenda? Is the work ideologically conflicted?
- How does the literary work reflect (intentionally or not) the socioeconomic conditions of the time in which it was written and/or the time in which it is set, and what do those conditions reveal about the history of class struggle?