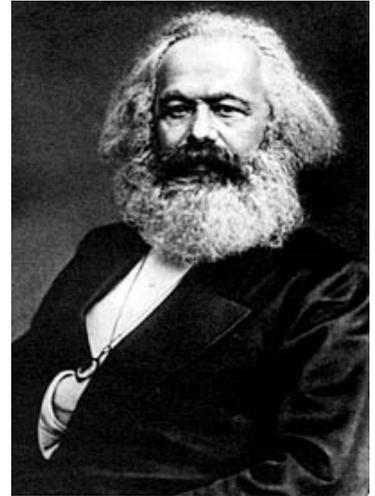


Marxist Literary Criticism



Brief Biography of Karl Marx

- Born in Tier, Germany in 1818
- Family was Jewish, but to avoid anti-Semitism, converted to Protestant faith
- Attended college at Bonn University (where he was wounded in a duel) and Berlin university
- 1840-1844 worked in socialist press; moved to France in 1844 to avoid arrest
- 1844: Marx writes Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts
- 1848: The Communist Manifesto
- 1859: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy
- 1867-1870s: Marx writes his most comprehensive work, Das Kapital.
- Died on 14 March 1883



Core Marxist Principles

Proletariat: that class of society which does not have ownership of the means of production.

Bourgeoisie: wealthy class that rules society.

Power of the Base

- Marx believed that the economic means of production in a society (the base) both creates and controls all human institutions and ideologies (the superstructure). This superstructure includes all social and legal institutions, all political and educational systems, all religions, and all art. These ideologies develop as a result of the economic means of production, not the reverse.

Alienation

- Marx believed that capitalist society created three forms of alienation:
 - First, the worker is alienated from what he produces.
 - Second, the worker is alienated from himself; only when he is not working does he feel truly himself.
 - Finally, in capitalist society people are alienated from each other; that is, in a competitive society people are set against other people.
- Marx believed that the solution was communism, which would allow the development of our full “potentialities as a human”.
- For Marx, the possibility that one may give up ownership of one's own agency -- one's capacity to transform the world -- is tantamount to being alienated from one's own nature; it is a spiritual loss.

False Consciousness

- Because people are conditioned by the material world into which they are born, they come to accept certain ideas and beliefs as objective fact. They misunderstand their position and the meaning of their position.
- This false consciousness is promoted by the dominant class of society, who want to preserve their position. Using religion, culture, and education, they promote false consciousness to justify their power and to convince the working class of its correctness.

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Dialectical Materialism

- Marx believed that communism was a historical inevitability. Society had progressed from one economic system to another—from feudalism to capitalism, for example.
- The contradictions of each system led to its collapse. As history advanced, the failures of the preceding system would lead to the adoption of a new one.
- Marx's version was that human history was a series of steps towards a perfect economic arrangement—an inevitable march. According to Marx, capitalism was the result of conflict between lords and serfs in feudal society and between guild masters and journeymen in precapitalistic society. The resulting conflicts created the capitalist class or bourgeoisie, which owns the means of production, and the wage workers or proletariat class, which has to sell its labor to survive.
- Derived from Hegel's dialectic, the belief that truth (synthesis) emerges from a comparison of a thesis and anti-thesis.

Major Marxist Critics

Georg Lukacs (1885-1971)

- Believed that a detailed analysis of symbols, images and other literary devices (formalism) would expose class conflict and expose the relationship between the superstructure and the base.
- **Reflection Theory:** Belief that texts directly reveal a society's consciousness.
- Approach is largely **didactic**, emphasizing the negativity of capitalism, seen in alienation.



Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)

- Developed theory of **cultural hegemony**, to explain why the "inevitable" revolution of the [proletariat](#) predicted by orthodox Marxism had not occurred by the early 20th century.
- According to Gramsci, capitalism maintained control not just through violence and political and economic coercion, but also ideologically, through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the bourgeoisie became the "common sense" values of all.
- Thus a consensus culture developed in which people in the working class identified their own good with the good of the bourgeoisie, and helped to maintain the status quo rather than revolting.
- The working class needed to develop a "counter-hegemonic" culture, said Gramsci, firstly to overthrow the notion that bourgeois values represented "natural" or "normal" values for society, and ultimately to succeed in overthrowing capitalism.
- In effect, for Gramsci, literature is a tool of the privileged class, and cannot be used to further Marxist revolutions.
- Critics using Gramsci's perspective look for the signs of hegemonic thinking embedded in literary works

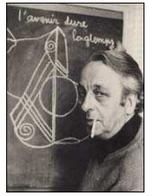


Marxist Literary Criticism



Louis Althusser (1918-1990)

- Rejected a basic assumption of most Marxist critics before him—that the superstructure directly reflects the base. His answer, known as **production theory**, asserts that literature cannot be merely considered a part of the superstructure at all.
 - Art can inspire revolution
 - Althusser argued that the dominant hegemony, or prevailing ideology forms the attitudes of people through a process called **interpellation**, or “hailing the subject.”
 - The worldview of the people is carefully crafted through a complex series of messages sent through the elements of the superstructure, including the arts.
- The dominant class uses this **Ideological State Apparatus**, rather than political or military repression.
- However, Althusser believed that counter-hegemonies can emerge, if the people write their own literature (poems, novels, and dramas), create their own music, and create their own art.



Marxist Literary Analysis: Methodology

General

- Proper critique of a text cannot be separated from the cultural situation in which the text was created.
- Marxist approach deals with more than literary devices and themes—focusing on historical context and the author’s view of life.
- Focuses on exposing class conflict /indoctrination.

Questions for Analysis

- Is there an outright rejection of socialism in the work?
- Does the text raise fundamental criticism about the emptiness of life in bourgeoisie society?
- In portraying society, what approximation of totality does the author achieve? What is emphasized, what is ignored? Why?
- How well is the fate of the individual linked organically to the nature of societal forces?
- At what points are actions or solutions to problems forced or unreal?
- Are the characters from all social levels equally well sketched?
- What are the values of each class in the work?
- What is valued most? Sacrifice? Assent? Resistance? Individuality?
- How clearly do narratives of disillusionment and defeat indicate that bourgeoisie values—competition, acquisitiveness, chauvinism—are incompatible with human happiness?
- Does the protagonist defend or defect from the dominant values of society? Are those values in ascendancy or decay?

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- Ira Shor. ““Questions Marxists Ask About Literature”. *College English*; Volume 34, Number 2, 1974.
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