

Marxist Theory

Learning Goals and Objectives

- Make students familiar with Marxist terminology
- To understand the kind of influence a socioeconomic system exerts over its members
- To Discuss oppressive ideologies that keep the nations of this world bound within socioeconomic systems in which a relatively small number of people are extremely wealthy while most people are struggling.

Marxist theory—which is drawn from the economic, social, and political theories of the late 19th century economist Karl Marx—is among the most popular, influential, and controversial theories of literature currently practiced throughout the Western academic world.

The fundamental premises of Marxism

For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on. Thus, economics is the *base* on which the *superstructure* of social/political/ideological realities is built. Economic power therefore always includes social and political power as well, which is why many Marxists today refer to *socioeconomic class*, rather than economic class, when talking about the class structure.

From a Marxist perspective, differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. For the real battle lines are drawn, to put the matter simply, between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” between the *bourgeoisie*—those who control the world’s natural, economic, and human resources—and the *proletariat*, the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor—the mining, the factory work,..etc

Unfortunately, those in the proletariat are often the last to recognize this fact; they usually permit differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender to separate them into warring factions that accomplish little or no social change. Few Marxists today believe, as Marx did, that the proletariat will one day spontaneously develop the class consciousness needed to rise up in violent revolution against their oppressors and create a classless society.

The role of ideology :

For Marxism, an *ideology* is a belief system, and all belief systems are products of cultural conditioning. For example, capitalism, communism, Marxism, patriotism, religion, ethical systems, humanism,... are all ideologies and not all ideologies are equally productive or desirable. Undesirable ideologies promote repressive political agendas and, in order to ensure their acceptance among the citizenry, pass themselves off as natural ways of seeing the world instead of acknowledging themselves as ideologies. “It’s natural for men to hold leadership positions because their biological superiority renders them more physically, intellectually, and emotionally capable than women” is a sexist ideology that sells itself as a function of nature, rather than as a product of cultural belief. Marxism, a nonrepressive ideology works to make us constantly aware of all the ways in which we are products of material/historical circumstances and of the repressive

ideologies that serve to blind us to this fact in order to keep us subservient to the ruling power system. Although Marxist theorists differ in their estimation of the degree to which we are “programmed” by ideology, all agree that the most successful ideologies are *not* recognized as ideologies but are thought to be natural ways of seeing the world by the people who subscribe to them. To cite one simple example, the middle class tends to resent the poor because so much middle-class tax money goes to government programs to help the poor. However, the middle class fails to realize two important socioeconomic realities:

(1) that it is the wealthy in positions of power who decide who pays the most taxes and how the money will be spent (in other words, it is the wealthy who make the middle class support the poor), and (2) that the poor receive but a small portion of the funds because so much of it goes into the pockets of the wealthy who control the social services and the middle-class employees who administer them. What is the ideology that blinds the middle class to the socioeconomic inequities in contemporary America? In large part, the middle class is blinded by their belief in the *American dream*, which tells them that financial success is simply the product of initiative and hard work. Therefore, if some people are poor, it is because they are shiftless and lazy. Marxist analysis reveals that the American dream is an ideology, a belief system, not an innate or natural way of seeing the world. And like all ideologies that support the socioeconomic inequities of capitalist countries — that is, countries in which the means of production (natural, financial, and human resources) are privately owned and in which those who own them inevitably become the dominant class—the American dream blinds them to the enormities of its own failure, past and present: the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans...etc

In other words, the success of the American dream—the acquisition of a wealthy lifestyle for a few—rests on the misery of the many. And it is the power of ideology, of our belief in the naturalness and fairness of this dream, that has blinded us to the harsh realities it masks.

Patriotism is an ideology that keeps poor people fighting wars against poor people from other countries (one way or another, sufficient money can generally keep one out of the armed forces during war time or, at least, out of the combat units) while the rich on both sides rake in the profits of war-time economy. Because patriotism leads the poor to see themselves as members of a nation, separate from other nations, rather than as members of a worldwide oppressed class opposed to all privileged classes including those from their own country, it prevents the poor from banding together to improve their condition globally.

Religion, which Karl Marx called “the opiate of the masses,” is an ideology that helps to keep the faithful poor satisfied with their lot in life, or at least tolerant of it, much as a tranquilizer might do. The question of God’s existence is not the fundamental issue for Marxist analysis; rather, what human beings do in God’s name—organized religion—is the focus. For example, while many Christian religious groups work to feed, clothe, house, and even educate the world’s poor, the religious tenets that are disseminated along with the food and clothing include the conviction that the poor, if they remain nonviolent, will find their reward in heaven. Obviously, the 10 percent (or less) of the world’s population who own 90 percent (or more) of the world’s wealth have a vested interest in promoting this aspect of Christian belief among the poor and historically have exploited Christianity for just this purpose. Indeed, the Bible has been used successfully to justify and

promote the enslavement of Africans in America and the subordination of women and nonstraight people.

Rugged individualism, which, as we have seen, is a cornerstone of the American dream, is an ideology that romanticizes the individual who strikes out alone in pursuit of a goal not easily achieved, a goal that often involves risk and one that most people would not readily undertake. In the past, such a goal would have been, for example, the rush for gold and silver on the American frontier, an attempt in which many individuals risked losing their lives. Today, such a goal might be the undertaking of a high-risk business, in which one risks losing all one's money. Although it may sound like an admirable character trait, Marxist thinkers consider rugged individualism an oppressive ideology because it puts self-interest above the needs—and even above the survival—of other people.

By keeping the focus on “me” instead of on “us,” rugged individualism works against the well-being of society as a whole and of underprivileged people in particular. Rugged individualism also gives us the illusion that we make our own decisions without being significantly influenced by ideology of any sort when, in fact, we're all influenced by various ideologies all the time, whether we realize it or not.

Consumerism, or shop-'till-you-drop-ism, is another cornerstone of the American dream. Consumerism is an ideology that says “I'm only as good as what I buy.” Thus, it simultaneously fulfills two ideological purposes: it gives me the illusion that I can be “as good as” the wealthy if I can purchase what they purchase or a reasonable facsimile thereof (albeit on credit) and it fills the coffers of the wealthy who manufacture and sell the consumer products I buy and who reap the 15–20 percent interest on my credit-card bills.

Human behavior, the commodity, and the family Although the later works of Karl Marx focus on economics, on the workings of society as a whole, rather than on the individual, it is important to remember that he began as a student of human behavior—we might even say a social psychologist—in his own right. For example, his concern over the rise of industrialism in the mid-nineteenth century was a concern for the effects of factory work on people who were forced to sell their labor to the industries that were replacing independent artisans and farmers. Because factory workers produced such large quantities of products, none of which bore their names or any other mark of their individual contributions, Marx observed that they became disassociated not only from the products they produced but from their own labor as well, and he noted the debilitating effects of what he called alienated labor on the laborer and on the society as a whole.

Similarly, Marx's concern over the rise of a capitalist economy was a concern for the effects of capitalism on human values. In a capitalist economic system, an object's value becomes impersonal. Its value is translated into a monetary “equivalent”—the word capital means money—and determined solely in terms of its relationship to a monetary market. The question becomes, How many people will buy the object, and how much money will they be willing to pay for it? Whether or not people really need the object in question and whether or not it is really worth its

assigned price are irrelevant issues. In Anglo-European culture, capitalism replaced a barter economy in which labor or goods were exchanged for other labor or goods, depending on the abilities and needs of the individuals involved in the exchange. The focus of many later Marxists on the ways in which ideology is transmitted through popular culture and operates in our emotional lives is thus a natural extension of Marx's own interest in human behavior and experience.

Of course, many Marxist insights into human behavior involve the damaging effects of capitalism on human psychology, and those damaging effects often appear in our relationship to the commodity. For Marxism, a commodity's value lies not in what it can do (use value) but in the money or other commodities for which it can be traded (exchange value) or in the social status it confers on its owner (sign-exchange value). An object becomes a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign-exchange value, and both forms of value are determined by the society in which the object is exchanged. For example, if I read a book for pleasure or for information, or even if I use it to prop up a table leg, the book has use value. If I sell that same book, it has exchange value. If I leave that book out on my coffee table to impress my date, it has sign-exchange value. Commodification is the act of relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value. I commodify a work of art when I buy it as a financial investment, that is, with the intention of selling it for more money, or when I buy it to impress other people with my refined tastes. If I purchase and display costly goods or services excessively in order to impress people with my wealth, I am guilty of conspicuous consumption, as when I buy a full-length, white mink coat (or even a pair of \$100 designer sunglasses), not just for the object's usefulness or beauty but in order to show the world how much money I have.

Finally, I commodify human beings when I structure my relations with them to promote my own advancement financially or socially. Most of us know what it means to treat a person like an object (for example, a sex object). An object becomes a commodity, however, only when it has exchange value or sign-exchange value. Do I choose my dates based on how much money I think they will spend on me (their exchange value) or on how much I think they will impress my friends (their sign-exchange value)? If so, then I'm commodifying them.

From a Marxist perspective, because the survival of capitalism, which is a market economy, depends on consumerism, it promotes sign-exchange value as our primary mode of relating to the world around us. What could be better for a capitalist economy than for its members to be unable to "feel good about themselves" unless they acquire a fashionable "look" that can be maintained only by the continual purchase of new clothing, new cosmetic products, and new cosmetic services? In other words, in economic terms, it's in capitalism's best interests to promote whatever personal insecurities will motivate us to buy consumer goods. (Are my teeth not white enough? Should my hair be blonder? Should my muscles bulge more? Is my breath fresh enough?) And because the kinds of personal insecurities that make us buy consumer products are produced by comparing ourselves with other people (Are my teeth as white as his? Is my hair as blond as hers?),

competition is promoted not just among companies who want to sell products but among people who feel they must “sell” themselves in order to be popular or successful.

Capitalism’s constant need for new markets in which to sell goods and for new sources of raw materials from which to make goods is also responsible for the spread of imperialism: the military, economic, and/or cultural domination of one nation by another for the financial benefit of the dominating nation with little or no concern for the welfare of the dominated. Spain’s rule of Mexico, England’s domination of India, Belgium’s exploitation of the Congo region of Africa, and U.S. efforts to subordinate native populations in North, Central, and South America are but a few examples of imperialist activities. When the imperialist nation establishes communities in an “underdeveloped” country, those communities are called colonies, as were the American Colonies before the American Revolution, and it uses those colonies to extend its economic interests. For the motive of all imperialist endeavor, no matter what positive influence the conquering nation claims to have on the local population, is economic gain for the “mother country.”

Less clear cut, perhaps, but equally important for our understanding of capitalism today, is the way in which consciousness can be “colonized” by imperialist governments. To colonize the consciousness of subordinate peoples means to convince them to see their situation the way the imperialist nation wants them to see it, to convince them, for example, that they are mentally, spiritually, and culturally inferior to their conquerors and that their lot will be improved under the “guidance” and “protection” of their new leaders. Antebellum slave owners, for example, tried to convince African slaves that they were uncivilized, godless savages who would revert to cannibalism without the constant vigilance of their white masters. In reality, of course, African slaves came from ancient cultures that could boast many forms of art, music, religion, and ethics.

This same attempt to colonize consciousness along racial lines continued into the twentieth century through, for example, stereotypes of black Americans in the media, the inadequate representation of African American experience in American history books, and the promotion of an Anglo-Saxon ideal of beauty. Thus, the attempt to colonize consciousness can be practiced against us by our own culture. Indeed, the promotion of consumerism discussed earlier is just such another example.

2. Marxism and Literature

The fact that literature grows out of and reflects real material/historical conditions creates at least two possibilities of interest to Marxist critics: (1) the literary work might tend to reinforce in the reader the ideologies it embodies, or (2) it might invite the reader to criticize the ideologies it represents. Many texts do both. And it is not merely the content of a literary work—the “action” or the theme—that carries ideology, but the form as well or, as most Marxists would argue, the form primarily. Realism, naturalism, surrealism, symbolism, romanticism, modernism, postmodernism, tragedy, comedy, satire, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and other genres and literary devices are the means by which form is constituted. If content is the “what” of literature, then form is the “how.”

Realism, for example, gives us characters and plot as if we were looking through a window onto an actual scene taking place before our eyes. Our attention is drawn not to the nature of the words on the page but to the action those words convey. Indeed, we frequently forget about the words we're reading and the way the narrative is structured as we "get lost" in the story. Part of the reason we don't notice the language and structure, the form, is because the action represented is ordered in a coherent sequence that invites us to relate to it much as we relate to the events in our own lives, and the characters it portrays are believable, much like people we might meet. So we get "pulled into" the story. In contrast, a good deal of postmodern literature (and nonrealistic, experimental literature of any kind) is written in a fragmented, surreal style that seems to defy our understanding and serves to distance or estrange us from the narrative and the characters it portrays.

For some Marxists, realism is the best form for Marxist purposes because it clearly and accurately represents the real world, with all its socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions, and encourages readers to see the unhappy truths about material/historical reality, for whether or not authors intend it they are bound to represent socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions if they accurately represent the real world.

3. Some Questions Marxist Critics Ask about Literary Texts

The following questions are offered to summarize Marxist approaches to literature.

1. Does the work reinforce (intentionally or not) capitalist, imperialist, or classist values?
2. How might the work be seen as a critique of capitalism, imperialism, or classism? That is, in what ways does the text reveal, and invite us to condemn, oppressive socioeconomic forces (including repressive ideologies)? If a work criticizes or invites us to criticize oppressive socioeconomic forces, then it may be said to have a Marxist agenda.
3. 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?