MARXISM

For Marxism is as inseparable from modern civilization as Darwinism or
Freudianism, as much part of our "historical unconscious" as Newton was for the
Enlightenment.

Terry Eagleton, Marxist Literary Theory

With the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s,
many heard the death knell loudly pronouncing the demise of
Marxism and its accompanying political and ideological structures. Down
came the Berlin Wall, down came the Iron Curtain, and supposedly, down
came Marxism as an alternative form of government to capitalism and as an
acceptable worldview. Many capitalists rejoiced because Marxism had
fallen. Seemingly, Marxists had only the glorious memories of the earlier
decades of the twentieth century in which to rejoice—a time when Stalin
ruled Russia, Marxist theory dominated both English and American writ-
ings, and college campuses both in the East and the West were led and
taught by intellectuals who committed themselves to Marxist ideology.
Many now believed that such ideology was finally dead!

Performing only a limited Internet search under the keyword "Marxism"
results in a listing of more than 20,000 sites, with titles such as "Marxism and
Utopian Vision: El Salvador," "Marxism and the National Question,"
"Marxism and Problems of Linguistics," "Rethinking Marxism," "Marxism,
Psychoanalysis, and Labor Competition," and "Baha’s Future and Marxism,"
proving that Marxist theories and criticism are not only alive but may also
even be prospering. Announcements for newly published texts advocating
sympathy for and support of Marxist ideology in all academic disciplines
appear regularly. College courses in Marxist political theory, sociology, litera-
ture, and literary theory abound. Perhaps the death knell for Marxism was
struck prematurely.

What is it that fascinates intellectuals, politicians, and others about
Marxism? Why did it not disappear with the death of communism in the East?
Perhaps the answer lies in some of the core principles of Marxist thought:

- Reality itself can be defined and understood.
- Society shapes our consciousness.
Social and economic conditions directly influence how and what we believe and value.

Marxism details a plan for changing the world from a place of bigotry, hatred, and conflict because of class struggle to a classless society in which wealth, opportunity, and education are accessible for everyone.

By articulating a coherent, clear, and comprehensive worldview and plan of action for implementation of its ideas, Marxism asserts that it provides answers to many of the complex questions about how life is and ought to be experienced while simultaneously challenging other ideologies to provide their pragmatic answers for these same concerns.

The self-same problems that gave rise to Marxism exist today. Despite its glory decades of the early 1900s and its present-day seemingly embattled position, Marxism declares that it provides a comprehensive, positive view of human life and history and attempts to show how humanity can save itself from a meaningless life of alienation and despair. A worldview that affords a bright promise for the future and a transformation of society will not vanish with the knocking down of a wall or the collapse of the former USSR. Borrowing Mark Twain's phraseology, “Announcements of Marxism's death have been exaggerated.”

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

Unlike many schools of literary criticism, Marxism did not begin as an alternative, theoretical approach to literary analysis. Before many twentieth-century writers and critics embraced the principles of Marxism and used these ideas in their theory and criticism, Marxism had flourished in the nineteenth century as a pragmatic view of history that offered the working classes an opportunity to change their world and their individual lives. By providing both a philosophical system and a plan of action to initiate change in society, Marxism offered a social, political, economic, and cultural understanding of the nature of reality, society, and the individual, not a literary theory. These and other similar ideas have become the basis of what we know today as socialism and communism.

Marxist literary theory has its roots in the nineteenth-century writings of the German social critic and philosopher Karl Heinrich Marx (1818–1883). Many believe Marx himself said little about the relationship of his ideas to literary theory. Surprisingly, however, in the standard German edition of the collected works of Engels and Marx, these critics' philosophers' comments on literature and art fill almost two volumes. Because neither clearly articulates a
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literary theory or methodology of criticism, Marxist criticism does not develop until the twentieth century. Using Marx's philosophical assumptions, twentieth-century critics developed a variety of Marxist approaches to textual analysis that focus on the study of the relationship between a text and the society that reads it. At the core of all these diverse approaches are Marx and his philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality itself.

Marx articulates his views on the nature of reality in two works, *The German Ideology* (1845) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), a work Marx coauthored with Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). In *The German Ideology*, Marx develops what has become known as dialectical materialism, a core belief of Marxism. Originally, the word dialectic was used by the Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato to describe a form of logical argumentation involving conflicting ideas, propositions, or both. The German philosopher Georg W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) redefines the term as a process whereby a thesis is presented, followed by a counterstatement, the antithesis. What develops from the ensuing debate or discussion is a new idea called the synthesis. Engels and Marx adapt Hegel's concept of synthesis in formulating dialectical materialism, their understanding of how workers can lead a class war and establish a new social order. Both Engels and Marx assert that "consciousness does not determine life; life determines consciousness." A person's consciousness is not shaped by any spiritual entity; through daily living and interacting with each other, humans define themselves. To Engels and Marx, our ideas and concepts about who we are fashioned in everyday interactions and in the language of real life. They are not derived from some Platonic essence or any other spiritual reality. Marx argues that the economic means of production within a society—what he calls the base—both engenders and controls all human institutions and ideologies—the superstructure—including all social and legal institutions, all political and educational systems, all religions, and all art. These ideologies and institutions develop as a direct result of the economic means of production, not the other way around.

Marx maintains that all societies are progressing toward communism. Believing progress is reactionary or revolutionary, Marx asserts that as a society progresses in its economic mode of production from a feudal system to a more market-based economy, the actual process for producing, distributing, and consuming goods becomes more complex. Accordingly, people's desires and expectations of the various social classes clash. Such clashes or class conflicts lead to a radical change in the economic base of society from a feudal system of power based on inherited wealth and status to a capitalist system based on the ownership of private property. This shift entails innumerable changes in a society's laws, customs, and religions. According to Marx, four historical periods developed as a result of these forces: feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and communism. Marx believes that socialism is not
a true historical period but a transitional stage between capitalism and society’s ultimate goal, communism. When society reaches this goal—what Marx called the worker’s paradise—then and only then will benevolent self-rule be established.

In their coauthored text The Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels continue to develop their ideas. They maintain that the capitalists, or the bourgeoisie, have successfully enslaved the working class, or the proletariat, through economic policies and production of goods. The proletariat must revolt and strip the bourgeoisie of their economic and political power and place the ownership of all property in the hands of the government, which will then fairly distribute the people’s wealth.

In a later work, Das Kapital (1867), authored by Marx, Marx enunciates the view of history that has become the basis for twentieth-century Marxism, socialism, and communism. History and a corresponding understanding of people and their actions and beliefs are determined by economic conditions. Marx maintains that an intricate web of social relationships emerges when any group of people engage in the production of goods. A few, for example, will be the employers, but many more will be the employees. The employers (the bourgeoisie) have the economic power and gain social and political control of their society. Eventually, this upper class will control the dominant discourse and formalize and articulate its beliefs, values, and arts to develop its ideology. Coincided by the French rationalist philosopher Destutt de Tracy in the late eighteenth century, the word ideology refers to the “science of ideas” as opposed to metaphysics. Engels and Marx borrow this term and use it pejoratively to refer to the bourgeoisie’s ruling ideas, customs, and practices. Consciously and unconsciously, the ruling class forces its ideology on the working class or the proletariat, also called the wage slaves. In effect, the bourgeoisie develops and controls the superstructure. In such a system, the rich become richer, and the poor become poorer and increasingly more oppressed. The bourgeoisie’s ideology effectively works to perpetuate the system upon which it was founded. By controlling material relationships, the bourgeoisie control a society’s ideology. The average worker, however, assumes that the material relationships are the expression of the ruling ideas. Engels and Marx call this negative sense of ideology false consciousness, which describes the way that the dominant social class shapes and controls each person’s self-definition and class consciousness.

Marx believes that in a capitalist society, such an ideology leads to fragmentation and alienation of individuals, particularly those of the proletariat. As a direct result of division of labor within the capitalist society, workers no longer have contact with the entire process of producing, distributing, and consuming material goods. Individuals are cut off from the full value of their work as well as from each other, each performing discrete functional roles assigned to them by the bourgeoisie. To rid society of this situation, Marx believes that the government must own all industries and control the
economic production of a country to protect the people from the oppression of the bourgeoisie.

Taken together, *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital* develop a theory of history, economics, politics, sociology, and metaphysics. In these writings, little or no mention of literature, literary theory, or practical analysis of how to arrive at an interpretation of a text emerges. The link between the Marxism of its founders and literary theory resides in Marx’s concept of history and the sociological leanings of Marxism itself. Marx believed that the history of a people is directly based on the production of goods and the social relationships that develop from this situation. He also assumed that the totality of a people’s experience—social interactions, employment, and other day-to-day activities—is directly responsible for the shaping and development of an individual’s personal consciousness. The idea that our place in society and our social interaction determine our consciousness or who we really are is a theme Marx highlighted throughout his writings.

During Marx’s lifetime, the acceptable literary approach to textual analysis was grounded in sociological assumptions similar to those held by Marx. Marx, then, had no difficulty accepting his literary peers’ methodology (hermeneutics) for interpreting a text. Known today as the *traditional historical approach*, this methodology declares that critics should place works in their historical setting, paying attention to the author’s life, the time period in which the work was written, and the cultural milieu of both the text and the author—all of these concerns being related to sociological issues. To these criteria, Marx and Engels add another: the economic means of production. This factor addresses, for example, who decides what texts should be published, when a text should be published, or how a text is to be distributed. Such concerns require an understanding of the social forces at work at the time a text is written or is being interpreted. In addition, these concerns force the critic to investigate the intricate web of social relationships not only within the text itself but also outside the text and within the world of the author. In adding this sociological dimension, Marxism expands the traditional, historical approach to literary analysis by dealing with sociological issues that concern both the characters in a work of fiction as well as the authors and the readers. This added dimension, Marx believed, links literature and society and shows how literature reflects society and how literary texts can reveal truths about our social interactions.

**Russia and Marxism**

Thanks to Georgi K. Plekhanov’s Russian translation of *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx’s theories soon gained wide exposure and prominence. Plekhanov (1856–1918), author of such works as *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (1908) and *Art and Social Life* (1912), is the founder of the Russian
Social Democratic Party and is considered by some scholars to be the founder of Russian Marxism. In his writings, Plekhanov argues that great historical figures like Napoleon Bonaparte appear in history only when an intricate web of social conditions coalesce, directly facilitating their development. Every gifted person that affects society is a product of such social relations. Artists, asserts Plekhanov, best serve society and promote social betterment when their art and societal concerns intersect. For Plekhanov, the then-prospering “art for art’s sake” movement signaled a disturbing rift between artists and their social environment. Emphasizing an artist’s important role in society, Russian Marxism and the Russian leadership at the beginning of the twentieth century insisted that writers should also play a political role. Embracing Marx’s theories, Russia became the first nation to promote Marxist principles as both aesthetic and literary guidelines.

Even before the Russian Revolution of 1917, Communist Party leaders insisted that literature promote the standards set forth by the Party. For example, in 1905, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924) wrote *Party Organization and Party Literature*, a work in which he directly links good literature with the working-class movement, claiming that literature “must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, a ‘cog and screw’ of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism.” Lenin’s works defend all kinds of literature, believing that something can be gleaned from any kind of writing. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Lenin amends his literary theory and criticism, arguing that the Party could not accept or support literary works that blatantly defied established Party policies.

Soon after the Russian Revolution, the revolutionary Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) authored *Literature and Revolution* (1924), the first of his many pivotal texts. Trotsky is considered the founder of Marxist literary criticism. Advocating a tolerance for open, critical dialogue, Trotsky contends that the content of a literary work need not be revolutionary. To force all poets to write about nothing but factory chimneys or revolts against capitalism, he believed, was absurd. The Party, asserted Trotsky, can offer direct leadership in many areas, but not all. The Party’s leadership in art, he claimed, must be indirect, helping to protect, but not dominating it. Furthermore, the Party must give what Trotsky called “its confidence” to those non-party writers—who he called “literary fellow-travelers”—who are sympathetic to the revolution.

The Soviet Union’s next political leader, Joseph Stalin (1879–1953), was not as liberal as Lenin or Trotsky in his aesthetic judgments. In 1927, Stalin established the RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) to guard against liberal cultural tendencies. This group proved to be too tolerant for Stalin. In 1932, he abolished all artists’ unions and associations and established the Soviet Writers’ Union, a group that he also headed. The Union decreed that all literature must glorify Party actions and decisions. In addition, literature should exhibit revolutionary progress and teach the spirit of socialism that revolves around Soviet heroes. Such aesthetic commandments
quickly stifled many Russian writers because the Union allowed only “politically correct” works to be published. Not surprisingly, Stalin soon banished Trotsky, with the result that increasingly, most Russian critics and writers succumbed to Stalin’s guidelines rather than follow Trotsky’s public (and dangerous) example. It was left to critics outside Russia to explore and develop other Marxist approaches to literary criticism.

Georg Lukács

The first major branch of Marxist theory to appear outside Russia was developed by the Hungarian Georg Lukács (1885–1971). Lukács and his followers borrowed and amended the techniques of Russian Formalism, believing that a detailed analysis of symbols, images, and other literary devices would reveal class conflict and expose the direct relationship between the economic base and the superstructure reflected in art. Known as reflection theory, this approach to literary analysis declares that a text directly reflects a society’s consciousness. Reflection theorists such as Lukács are necessarily didactic, emphasizing the negative effects of capitalism such as alienation. Known today as vulgar Marxism, reflectionists support a form of Marxism in which a one-way relationship exists between the base and the superstructure. For these theorists, literature is part of the superstructure and directly reflects the economic base. By giving a text a close reading, these critics believe they can reveal the reality of the text and the author’s Weltanschauung, or worldview. It is the critic’s job to show how the characters within the text are typical of their historical, socioeconomic setting and the author’s worldview.

The Frankfurt School

Closely allied to Lukács and reflection theory, another group of theorists emerged in Germany, the Frankfurt school, a neo-Marxist group devoted to developing Western Marxist principles. Included in this group are Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), and Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), among others. Agreeing with Lukács that literature reveals a culture’s alienation and fragmentation, the Frankfurt school critics such as Benjamin assert that a text is like any other commodity produced by capitalism. The market—that is, how well a commodity sells—ultimately determines which texts are published and when. There can exist, then, no purely aesthetic activity that relates directly to human consciousness. That a text reveals a culture’s fragmentation, not its wholeness, is for Benjamin a useful bit of knowledge for promoting socialist ideals. Having stripped literature of what Benjamin calls
its "quasi-religious aura," a Frankfurt school critic is able to resist the bourgeois ideology embedded within a text and does not mindlessly acquiesce to the inane images, thinking, and desires depicted in some literary works.

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), a close friend of Benjamin, applies this new way of thinking directly to the theater. According to Brecht, dramatists use the theater to express their ideas, but the theater actually controls them. Instead of blindly accepting bourgeois conventionality as established through dramatic conventions, dramatists must revolt and seize the modes of production. Applying this principle to what became known as the epic theater, Brecht advocated an abandonment of the Aristotelian premise of unity of time, place, and action, including the assumption that the audience should be made to believe that what they are seeing is real. By deliberately seeking to abolish the audience's normal expectations when viewing a drama, Brecht hopes to create the alienation effect. For instance, in his dramas, he frequently interrupted the drama with a direct appeal to the audience via a song or speech to keep the audience constantly aware of the moral and social issues to which they were being exposed in the drama. Dissolving Aristotle's concept of catharsis, Brecht argued that the audience must be forced into action and be forced to make decisions, not revel in emotions. In the hands of Brecht, the epic theatre became a tool for exposing the bourgeois ideology that had permeated the arts.

Antonio Gramsci

Unlike Georg Lukács and his followers who assert that the superstructure reflects the economic base, the Italian Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) declares that a complex relationship exists between the base and the superstructure. How Gramsci asks, is the bourgeoisie able to control and maintain its dominance over the proletariat? His answer: the bourgeoisie establish and maintain what he calls hegemony, which is the assumptions, values, and meanings that shape meaning and define reality for the majority of people in a given culture. Because the bourgeoisie actually control the economic base and establish all the elements that comprise the superstructure—music, literature, art, and so forth—they gain the spontaneous accolades of the working class. The working people themselves give their consent to the bourgeoisie and adopt bourgeois values and beliefs. As sustainers of the economic base, the dominant class enjoys the prestige of the masses and controls the ideology—a term often used synonymously with hegemony—that shapes individual consciousness. This shaping of a people's ideologies is, according to Gramsci, a kind of deception whereby the majority of people forget about or abandon their own interests and desires and accept the dominant values and beliefs as their own.
If literature, however, is only a part of the superstructure, then all literature actually concerns itself with the bourgeoisie. In effect, literature becomes a tool of the privileged class, preventing its use in further Marxist revolutions. Why write and study literature if it is only a reflection of the superstructure, which is, in itself, the reflection of bourgeois ideas established in the economic base? Although Gramsci pondered such questions, it is one of his followers who provides the answer.

**Louis Althusser**

In seeking an answer to the question of why anyone should write and study literature, Louis Althusser (1918–1990) rejects the basic assumption of reflection theory: namely, that the superstructure directly reflects the base. His answer, known today as production theory, asserts that literature should not be strictly relegated to the superstructure. In his works, especially *For Marx* (1965) and *Reading “Capital”* (1970), Althusser argues that the superstructure can and does influence the base. Art, then, can and does inspire revolution.

Althusser believes that the dominant hegemony, or prevailing ideology, forms the attitudes of people through a process he calls *interpellation* or *hailing the subject*, which is ideology’s power to give individuals identity by the structures and prevailing forces of society. A society’s worldview is crafted by a complex network of messages sent through the structures contained in the superstructure, including the arts. Although the dominant class can use military and police force to repress the working class to maintain its dominance and achieve interpellation, it more frequently than not chooses to use the *Ideological State Apparatus*, or the hegemony. In effect, the dominant class’s hegemony prevents the insurrection of the working class.

The dominant class’s hegemony is never complete. Such incompleteness suggests that alternative hegemonies exist and are competing with the dominant hegemony for supremacy. If the dominant class’s interpellation or hailing the subject fails, then another hegemony can triumph and revolution can occur. Such a revolution can begin if working-class people write their own literature—dramas, poems, and novels—create their own music, and paint their own paintings. If they do so, the working class can establish an alternate hegemony to challenge the bourgeoisie’s hegemony. It is not through guns or battles or the shedding of blood, but through artistic expression of their own cultural activities that the working classes can successfully revolt and usurp the hegemony of the dominant class.

After Althusser, a number of post-Althusserian critics, including Pierre Macherey and Raymond Williams, develop various neo-Marxist concepts and theories. A former student of Althusser, Pierre Macherey (1938–) is a pioneer French Marxist critic, developing Marxist theories by using the concepts of
poststructuralism. In his most significant work, *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), Macherey challenges the traditional way readers read texts. Most readers consider a text as an isolated, factual entity that is to be read, described, and critiqued through the methodologies of literary criticism. Macherey declares that reading is actually a form of production and produces many meanings, not simply one. A gap exists, he asserts, between what we as readers and critics say about a text and what the work itself is saying, each being separate discourses. Furthermore, the author’s text is not precisely the text being explicated by the critic. What authors mean to say and what they actually write and say are different. The various meanings of their texts continuously escape writers because they themselves do not recognize the multiple ideologies at work in them and in their texts. What Macherey calls an **attentive reading** of texts reveals these ideologies operating in a given text, ideologies that often directly work against what authors assume they are writing.

Another post-Althusserian Marxist critic, Raymond Williams (1921–1988) develops Marxist ideology and theory in **cultural studies**, a late twentieth-century school of criticism whose name was not yet coined nor its tenets codified when Williams began his innoative criticism. In works such as the post World War II journal Politics and Letters and his critique of literary traditions and forms commencing with the British Romantics to mid-twentieth century literature in *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, Williams evidences his chief interest: the relationship between ideology and culture. Literature and all cultural forms are intricately intertwined. Authorial ideology, cultural and social institutions, and aesthetic forms as related to the different genres are all manifestly involved in a complex series of relationships that shape and develop each other. Emphasizing the symbolic nature of these relationships, Williams demonstrates how culture and the arts weave their way into the lived experience of a person’s everyday life.

**MARXIST THEORISTS TODAY**

Since the 1960s, the Anglophone Fredric Jameson (1934–) and Terry Eagleton (1943–) in Great Britain dominate Marxist criticism. Jameson develops **dialectical criticism**. In *Marxism and Form* (1971), a text revered by American Marxists, Jameson asserts that all critics must be aware of their own ideology when analyzing a text, possessing what he calls **dialectical self-awareness**. In a later work, *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson merges psychoanalytic and Marxist theories. Borrowing Freud’s idea of a repressed unconscious, Jameson discovers a **political unconscious**, the repressed conditions of exploitation and oppression. The function of literary analysis, Jameson believes, is to uncover the political unconscious present in a text.

In 1991, Jameson continues Marxist theory and criticism’s evolution with the publication of *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,*
a work in which he argues that cultural logic itself encodes the classical Marxist dialectic of base and superstructure in every object in society. To read and understand Jameson’s text is no easy assignment because his complex and sometimes abstruse sentence structure embodies his postmodern, critical methodology, one that attempts through a Marxist lens to reconfigure present-day political and world systems.

Perhaps the most influential contemporary Marxist critic is the British scholar Terry Eagleton (1943–), author of numerous works, including *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), and *Marx* (1997). Believing that literature is neither a product of pure inspiration nor the product of the author’s feelings, Eagleton holds that literature is a product of an ideology that is itself a product of history. This ideology is a result of the actual social interactions that occur between people in definite times and locations. One of the critic’s tasks is to reconstruct an author’s ideology and the author’s ideological milieu.

Throughout his long and prestigious career, Eagleton, like most critics, develops, changes, and redirects his own literary theory. At times, he employs a variety of critical approaches to texts, including the scientific approach of Louis Althusser, the psychoanalytic ideas of Lacan, and the poststructuralism of Jacques Derrida. All of his diverse approaches to textual analysis attack the bourgeois dominance of the hegemony and advocate revolution against such values.

From the mid-1970s to the present, Marxism continues to challenge what it deems the bourgeois concerns of its literary counterparts through the voices of a variety of Marxist critics, including Renée Balibar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Toril Moi, and Donna Landry. Critical movements and theories such as structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, new historicism, cultural materialism, and postcolonialism have all examined Marxism’s basic tenets and share some of its social, political, and revolutionary nature. Like Marxism, these contemporary schools of criticism want to change the way we think about literature and life. Likewise, from these various schools of thought, present-day Marxism borrows many ideas and has now evolved into an array of differing theories, so much so that there no longer exists a single school of Marxist thought but a variety of Marxist critical positions. Common to all these theoretical positions is the assumption that Marx, no matter how he is interpreted, believed that change for the good in society is possible if we will simply stop and examine our culture through the eyes of its methods of economic production.

**ASSUMPTIONS**

Marxism is not primarily a literary theory that can be used to interpret texts. Unlike other schools of criticism, it is a cultural theory that embodies a set of social, economic, and political ideas that its followers believe will enable
them to interpret and, more importantly, change their world. Although a variety of Marxist theories exist, most Marxists posit a few core ideas. Ultimate reality, declares Marxism, is material, not spiritual. Our existence precedes our consciousness or our essence. What we know is that human beings exist and live in social groups. All our actions and responses to such activities as eating, working, and playing are related in some way to our culture and society. In order to understand ourselves and our world, we must first acknowledge the interrelatedness of all our actions. If, for example, we want to know who we are and how we should live, we must stop trying to find answers by looking solely to religion or philosophy and begin by examining all aspects of our daily activities within our own culture. Upon examining our daily routines, including our beliefs and values, we will discover that our cultural and social circumstances determine who we are. What we believe, what we value, and even what we think are direct results of our culture and society, not our religion, our supposed philosophy of life, or our worldview.

Nothing, Marxists assert, exists in isolation, including our social life. Everything must be understood to exist in a dynamic historical process, what Engels and Marx call relations or Verhältnisse—that is, nothing exists in isolation or just “is.” Everything is interrelated and exists in a dynamic relationship (Vermittlung) with a variety of social forces. For example, when we speak about the “worker,” we must also speak about the employer, economics, social class, social conflict, morality, values, and a host of other concerns. Everything, claim Marxists, is in a state of becoming, of being transformed. Nothing exists in static isolation.

When we examine our society, declares Marxism, we discover that its structure is built upon a series of ongoing conflicts between social classes. The chief reason for these conflicts is the varying ways the members of society work and use their economic resources. The methods of economic production and the social relationships they engender form the economic structure of society, the base. In the United States, for example, the capitalists exploit the working classes, determining for them their salaries and their working conditions, among a host of other elements of their lives. From this base arises the superstructure, or a multitude of social and legal institutions, political and educational systems, religious beliefs, values, and a body of art and literature that the one dominant social class (e.g., the capitalists in the United States) uses to keep in check members of the working classes.

The exact relationship between the base and the superstructure, however, is not easily defined. Some Marxists believe that the base directly affects the superstructure and determines its existence. Other Marxists assert that the elements in the superstructure have a reality of their own, with each element affecting the other elements of the superstructure while simultaneously affecting the base. Whatever the position held by Marxist theorists, most agree that the relationship between the base and the superstructure is a complex one that will continue to remain a contentious point in Marxist criticism.
The relationship between the base and the superstructure becomes clearer when we consider the capitalistic United States. Marxism declares that in the United States the capitalists hold the economic purse strings, and because they do, they control the base, making the capitalists the center of power. The capitalists decree what beliefs are acceptable, what values are to be held, and what laws are to be formed. In other words, the capitalists, not the working classes, control society's ideology (its hegemony) and its social consciousness. It is they who determine the acceptable standards of behavior and thoughts in their society.

Consciously and unconsciously, this social elite inevitably forces its ideas on the working classes. Almost without their knowing it, the working classes have become trapped in an economic system that decrees how much money they will earn, when they will take vacations, how they will spend their leisure time, what entertainment they will enjoy, and even what they believe concerning the nature of humanity itself.

Marxism addresses its rallying cry to the working classes. All working peoples can free themselves from the chains of social, economic, and political oppression if they will recognize that they are presently not free agents, but individuals controlled by an intricate social web dominated by a self-declared, self-empowered, and self-perpetuating social elite.

Because this social elite shapes a society's superstructure and ideology, the bourgeoisie control its literature, for literature is one of the many elements contained within the superstructure. From this perspective, literature, like any other element of the superstructure, becomes involved in a social process whereby the bourgeoisie indoctrinate the working classes with their self-proclaimed acceptable ideology, as reflected in bourgeois literature. What becomes natural and acceptable behavior in society is now pictured in its literature and, in essence, controlled by the bourgeoisie, who also control the economic means of production.

Because literature is part of a society's superstructure, its relationship to the other elements of the superstructure and the base becomes the central focus in varying Marxist literary theories. If, for example, a Marxist holds to the reflection theory, then such a theorist posits that the economic base directly determines the literature. For this critic, literature will mirror the economic base. On the other hand, if a Marxist theorist believes that elements of the superstructure have realities of their own and affect each other and also affect the base, a text may be responsible for altering not only other elements within the superstructure but also the base. Even the critics who give allegiance to this position hold differing opinions concerning the definition of a text and its relationship to other elements of the superstructure and to the base.

Although Marxists assert that a text must be interpreted in light of its culture, how they define a text and its web-like social relationships provides us with an array of Marxist literary theories and differing methods of analyses. There exists, then, not one Marxist theory of literature, but many, each hoping to change society.
METHODOLOGY

As an approach to literary analysis, Marxism’s methodology is a dynamic process that maintains that a proper critique (proper defined as that which agrees with socialist or Marxist beliefs) of a text cannot exist in isolation from the cultural situation in which the text evolved. Necessarily, Marxists argue, the study of literature and the study of society are intricately bound. Such a relationship demands that a Marxist approach to texts must deal with more than the conventional literary themes, matters of style, plot, or characterization and the usual emphasis on figures of speech and other literary devices used by other approaches to literary analysis. Marxist theory moves beyond these literary elements and uncovers the author’s world and worldview. By placing the text in its historical context and analyzing the author’s view of life, Marxist critics arrive at one of their chief concerns: ideology. The ideology expressed by the author, as evidenced through his or her fictional world, and how this ideology interacts with the reader’s personal ideology interests these critics. Studying the literary or aesthetic qualites of a text must include the dynamic relationship of that text to history and the economic means of production and consumption that helped create the text and the ideologies of the author and the readers.

This kind of an ideological and political investigation exposes class conflict, revealing the dominant class and its accompanying ideology being imposed either consciously or unconsciously upon the proletariat. It also reveals the workers’ detachment not only from that which they produce but also from society and from each other, a process called alienation, revealing what Marxists dub fragmentation, a fractured and fragmented society. The task of the critic is to uncover and denounce this antiprolletariat ideology and show how such an ideology entraps the working classes and oppresses them in every area of their lives. Most importantly, through such an analysis, Marxist critics wish to reveal to the working classes how they may end their oppression by the bourgeoisie through a commitment to socialism.

A Marxist critic may begin such an analysis by elucidating how an author’s text reflects the writer’s ideology through an examination of the fictional world’s characters, settings, society, or any other aspect of the text. From this starting point, the critic may launch an investigation into that particular author’s social class and its effects on the author’s society. Or the critic may choose to begin by examining the history and culture of the times reflected in the text and how the author either correctly or incorrectly pictures this historical period.

Whatever method the critic chooses, 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. Such an analysis, Marxist critics hope, will lead to action, social change, revolution, and the rise of socialism.
QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

To gain a working understanding of a Marxist approach to literary analysis, we can ask questions of any text that will enable us to see the Marxist concerns that are evidenced or ignored in the text by its author. The following questions provide a working framework for a close analysis of a text through the lens of Marxism and demonstrate Marxism's concern for the interactive relationship between literature and society.

- 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 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 is the audience?
- Who is the ideal reader? Virtual reader? Real reader?

CRITIQUES AND RESPONSES

Like psychoanalytical and feminist criticisms, Marxist criticism concerns itself not only with what a text says but also what it does not say. In the opening chapter of Criticism and Ideology, Terry Eagleton, one of Marxism's most prominent contemporary critics, states that the task of Marxist criticism "is to show the text as it cannot know itself, to manifest those conditions of its making about which it is necessarily silent." Texts, like all elements of social life, cannot be analyzed in isolation because they do not exist as isolated entities; rather, they are part of a complex web of social forces and structures. Texts must be understood as part of the dynamic, ever-evolving historical processes of social relations. Included within these social relations are the ongoing, ever-present societal conflicts and clashes, the struggles between the have-nots and
the haves. Maintaining their positions of power by controlling a society’s hegemony and thereby creating false consciousness, capitalists suppress the working classes, coercing them to accept the capitalists’ vision of reality. Literary criticism’s objective is to reveal the class struggle evidenced in texts, either through what a text says or by its silence, the silence of oppression. From a Marxist perspective, all texts are ideological, and the ideologies contained within them must be exposed to challenge the prevailing social order.

Although Marxism’s internal consistency and the sheer breadth of its critique are impressive, critics of Marxist theory abound. Whereas Marx and his adherents call their beliefs a theory and a form of criticism, others dub it a philosophy of life that codifies a quasi-religious worldview. Such a worldview, say some critics, demands a total commitment and devotion, as does any religion. But this religion, they assert, is devoid of God because it is thoroughly atheistic. The god of this religion is found in the mirror and in humankind’s imagination. Rejecting spiritual values, the concept of the soul, immortality, and a belief in God, this religion, which goes under the name of theory and criticism, is materialistic. Ultimately, say these critics, an acceptance of Marxist principles denies human worth. Those who stand in the way of Marxism’s goal—to change society—will and must be eliminated. Such a worldview, they argue, will lead to a form of totalitarianism that rests upon a subjective understanding of reality, not objective, absolute truths.

Other critics assert that Marxist economic theory is simplistic and cannot provide either the correct lens or the correct solution for contemporary societies’ economic ills. Clinging to its basic tenets, orthodox Marxism ignores the multifaceted nature of societies that contain a multiplicity of social groups, each possessing its own understanding of human nature and social institutions. And above all, Marxism either dismisses or simply ignores personal freedom, emphasizing in its place economic concerns.

However an individual critic views Marxism, its theories and criticisms continue to develop and shape our social and cultural institutions.

FURTHER READING


