



## Marxist Literary Criticism: Brief Guide

Along with psychoanalytical, feminist, and cultural criticism, Marxist literary criticism exemplifies what the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur terms a "hermeneutics of suspicion." These are approaches that concern themselves not with what the text says but what it hides. As Terry Eagleton, a leading Marxist critic, writes, the task of Marxist literary criticism "is to show the text as it cannot know itself, to manifest those conditions of its making (inscribed in its very letter) about which it is necessarily silent."

By its very nature, **ideology** is silent. Like the water in the aquarium breathed by the fish, ideology is virtually invisible. Its invisibility gives it greater power. Ideology - defined in general as the shared beliefs and values held in an unquestioning manner by a culture - exerts a powerful influence upon a culture. Those who are marginalized in the culture are most aware of the ways in which an ideology supports the dominant class in the society. Those who enjoy the fruits of belonging to a dominant group of the society barely generally are filled with what Marx called "**false consciousness**." Since it is not in their interest to notice the ways in which an economic structure marginalizes others, they tend to buy into an ideology that supports that structure.

### Recurrent terms in Marxist literary criticism:

- **Base vs. Superstructure:** Base in Marxism refers to economic base. Superstructure, according to Marx and Engels, emerges from this base and consists of law, politics, philosophy, religion, art.
- **Ideology:** the shared beliefs and values held in an unquestioning manner by a culture. It governs what that culture deems to be normative and valuable. For Marxists, **ideology** is determined by economics. A rough approximation: "tell me how much money you have and I'll tell you how you think."
- **Hegemony:** coined by the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, this "refers to the pervasive system of assumptions, meanings, and values -- the web of ideologies, in other words, that shapes the way things look, what they mean, and therefore what reality *is* for the majority of people within a given culture" (See glossary in case studies in contemporary criticism book).
- **Reification:** often used to describe the way in which people are turned into commodities useful in market exchange. For example, some would argue that the media's obsession with tragedy (e.g. the deaths of Jon Benet Ramsay, Diana, JFK Jr., the murders at Columbine High School in Colorado) make commodities out of grieving people. The media expresses sympathy but economically thrives on these events through ratings boost.

### What do Marxist literary critics do with texts?

- They explore ways in which the text reveals ideological oppression of a dominant economic class over subordinate classes. In order to do this a Marxist might ask the following questions:
  - Does the text reflect or resist a dominant ideology? Does it do both?
  - Does the main character in a narrative affirm or resist bourgeois values?
  - Whose story gets told in the text? Are lower economic groups ignored or devalued?
  - Are values that support the dominant economic group given privilege? This can happen tacitly, in the way in which values are taken to be self-evident.
- They look at the conditions of production for the work of art. For example, they ask
  - What were the economic conditions for publication of a work?
  - Who was the audience? What does the text suggest about the values of this audience?

### **What other approaches resemble Marxist literary criticism?**

- Marxist literary criticism often shares with feminist criticism a desire to challenge the power structures in contemporary society. For feminist, the issue is a marginalized gender; for Marxists, the issue is not gender but economic power, leading to political power.
- Marxist literary criticism can also be viewed as a type of **cultural criticism**, in that it seeks to analyze a discourse (of power) that makes up one of the discourses that determine a text's historical meaning.