

globe. Through a study of postcolonial literature our students can be reminded of our fascinating and precious local differences as well as the human family's comforting essential commonalities. As Naomi Shihab Nye noted on the cover of *This Same Sky*, her wonderful anthology of poems from around the world, "Listen to their words which join [these poets] one to another, for this same sky joins them to us."

→ **Marxist criticism** is based on the ideas of German philosopher Karl Marx (1818—1883), who maintained that economic systems ultimately structure all human relations and societies. From the first line of his explosive 1848 *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx conceived of human history as the history of struggles between economic classes. Where Darwin saw biological imperatives and Freud saw psychological drives as primary motivators of human behavior, Marx saw *materialism*—the complex economics and sociology surrounding the production and distribution of resources—as the main force behind our behavior and our history. And he believed the long, seesawing historic march from feudalism to bourgeoisie capitalism to socialism could lead in only one inevitable direction: to a utopian communist state.

Given the break-up of the communist bloc in Europe and the frequency of communism's connection to oppressive regimes, it's reasonable to ask why this approach is considered viable at all. (Students of mine have asked me this.) To many, especially in the United States with its enduring belief in capitalism, Marxism seems a failed theory. The topic is anathema to many Americans, and I imagine in some school situations even broaching the subject might be troublesome for a teacher. Marxist critics answer that this theory, regardless of its use and misuse in the political sphere, still gives us a thought-provoking and meaningful way to analyze and understand history, current events, and artistic products, including literature. Marx noted that art has a place in the revolutionary process of improving the human condition by showing how humans have experienced their conditions in life and protested against them.

Some Marxist analyses have dealt with the pure economics of literary production—viewing literature as not only creative activity but also as an industry, books as not only artifacts of meaning but also commodities sold for a profit, writers as not only creators but producers. When I'm rapt in the pages of a novel that I feel I have chosen freely to buy and read, captured by the free-flowing imagination of a favored writer, I don't usually care to think about this aspect of the book, but a Marxist would say that nothing in a capitalist system is free. (This point of view might best be expressed by the old American saying that of course the press is free here, to anyone who owns one.) Part of a book's existence is inextricably tied up with the organization of the publishing industry, the cultivation and manipulation of reading audiences, the calculated privileging of some voices and suppressing of others. In this analysis, we have to acknowledge the *commodification* of literature—that is, the fact that there's a system considering its market value above all others and confusing the critical question, "Is it a good book?" with the marketing question, "Will it sell?" (Note how often in the chapter on political criticism that I fell prey to this habit by mentioning the best-selling status of books I

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discuss as a way to legitimize them.) This topic is not one that has ever gotten much traction in my classroom, however. It has tended to take the discussion away from the individual texts at hand toward shorter, less-engaging conversations about economics, politics, advertising, and manufactured tastes that have never gotten too far.

Let's focus more on what Marxist criticism has to say about individual literary works, particularly how a text can be both a product of its culture and a comment on its culture.

One kind of chirping from this critical perch is to consider how a society's values—what longtime Duke University professor Fredric Jameson has called *the political unconscious*—are embedded in a text. The central assumption is that a book cannot be separated from its historical context. The notion that the art of a given era reflects its dominant ideology, called *reflection theory* by some Russian scholars, has long been a cornerstone of Marxist literary criticism. For example, as I noted in the chapter on historical criticism, the Hungarian thinker Georg Lukács (1885–1971) described how the rise of the novel, the literary form that celebrates the individual protagonist, reflects the rise of individual-oriented middle-class bourgeois culture in Europe.

But there's more to the process: as any literary work reflects a certain ideology, it also often promotes it, whether consciously or not. In analyzing why the supposedly inevitable proletariat revolution predicted by Marxists wasn't occurring everywhere in the early twentieth century, Italian communist and political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) decided that capitalism's durability was not only maintained by economic and political coercion but maybe even more powerfully by cultural factors. Using all the artifacts of culture—education, religion, art—the bourgeois middle class was able to inculcate a sense of capitalist values (such as the “American dream” that promises riches to everyone who works hard) even among the proletariat working class left behind by those values. Gramsci called this indoctrination *cultural hegemony*, the attempt by a dominant class to seize the defining cultural narrative. Our notions of what is objective, true, natural, and right are just that—socially constructed notions rather than universal realities, notions promoted by those who want to preserve their positions of privilege. Writers are no less captives of this cultural narrative than anyone else. Thus, their creations will usually reinforce the status quo.

In light of this class analysis, one of the critic's main jobs is to analyze the historical and ideological subtexts of a book's content, structure, and language—an act of historical criticism with a bite. So we find Mike Gold (1893–1967), the sharp-tongued author, literary critic, and communist, criticizing many of the icons of American literature. From his position as editor of the leftist publication *The New Masses* in the 1930s or as a columnist for the Communist Party USA's newspaper *Daily Worker*, Gold lambasted authors that he felt betrayed the working class, glorified the upper class or capitalism, or concentrated on aesthetic issues rather than social issues. Among others, he derided Gertrude Stein as a “literary idiot” whose experimental writing was irrelevant to working people (Gold 1936, 23), slammed Ernest Hemingway as a bourgeois writer who ignored social problems for “the amours and drinking bouts of Americans of income who rot in

European cafes,” and described a Thornton Wilder novel as peopled with “wan ghosts” undergoing “little lavender tragedies”—thus totally disconnected from the suffering of most Depression-era folks (Murphy 1991, 65).

Marxists are obviously clear that literary study as well as literature should be deeply engaged in the social, political, and economic realities surrounding the works that we read, though scholars and teachers and even readers often act as if these aspects are irrelevant or nonexistent. For example, when my classes read Arthur Miller’s great 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*, the student-led discussions often seem to center first on Willy Loman’s personality—his grandiose dreams, his stubbornness, his deluded misperception of himself—and on the complex web of interactions within his family. Willy’s knotted relationships with his two sons seem to have a particularly strong effect on many high school readers. I just checked out some commercial materials about *Death of a Salesman* available to teachers, and they were all focused on the same psychological and familial themes with some discussion of the play’s innovative structure and setting.

A Marxist reading of *Death of a Salesman* would stretch the discussion considerably, asking us to consider the play in its wider social context. No work of art is marooned from its history. Thus, students would be asked to ponder also the material and historic realities of the society in which the Loman family drama plays out. What powerful social forces cause Willy to believe his entire identity and self-worth are a matter of his economic success—to the extent that he overlooks entirely how much his wife and children need and love him? Why is his version of the American dream so focused on hitting it rich, on getting ahead even if it’s by unethical means, on being like his predatory brother Ben who has purportedly built his fortune on some kind of crooked scheme in Africa? What can we say about an economic system that allows the Lomans to run up their credit on things they can’t afford, about a company that has so little loyalty to Willy after thirty years that it puts him on commission and eventually fires him, about a society that is so dog-eat-dog as to put a mentally disintegrating man into a tailspin without a pension? For a Marxist critic, the literary text is an opportunity for a critique of the damaging effects of a materialist society.

We’re not limited to more contemporary works, either. We can explore an older work such as *Hamlet* through a Marxist lens, examining social hierarchies and class roles in Shakespeare’s play. We can talk about the ideologies the play promotes—for example, as one of my students said once, “Royalty really ruled in those days!” We can look at the gravediggers’ besotted conversation about the special privileges of the well born in relation to everyday folk. In all literature, even that which doesn’t directly address class and power concerns, there’s a dialogue at play about these issues that will unearth social conditions worth discussing.

In some works of literature, of course, the status quo is challenged, the dominant ideology is confronted, the point of view of the working class is thoroughly and fairly presented. These works, from writers who have committed their art to the cause of

the proletariat, are to be prized. Terry Eagleton says that the best realistic fiction, in its commitment to conveying the living sniff of humankind, encourages us to become vitally engaged in other people's predicaments. If the material conditions of characters are presented fully, the novel has moral force—that is, the potential to raise readers' consciousness about issues of class and injustice and to move readers to political action to improve those conditions. Thus, literature has a utilitarian purpose—it is practical. Criticism that ignores literature's usefulness, that skirts political issue, and that accepts the status quo, is useless.

In the final analysis, then, Marxist critics judge the quality of a work on the extent to which it promotes or impedes progress toward a just, equitable society, which from this point of view is a socialist society.

They ask questions like these: Does this work of literature show how characters have been shaped by their economic conditions? What is the role of power and money in the work? What does it reveal about the social and economic conditions of the time in which it was written and the time in which it is set? Does it reveal and condemn oppressive social and economic forces and ideologies? Does it raise our consciousness about the plight of workers, about class issues, about power relations, about injustice? Are characters from all social levels equally well portrayed? Does the protagonist defend the dominant values of society or rebel against them? Does the work critique inhumane social conditions or reinforce them, consciously or otherwise? Does it present any solutions, any alternate visions? How might this work affect or improve society?

As Eagleton says in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, “unless we can relate past literature, however indirectly, to the struggle of men and women against exploitation, we shall not fully understand our own present and so will be less able to change it effectively . . . [and] less able to *read* texts or to produce those art forms which might make for a better art and a better society. Marxist criticism is not just an alternative technique for interpreting *Paradise Lost* or *Middlemarch*. It is part of our liberation from oppression” (1976, 76).

The idealistic goal of this form of political criticism is this liberation.

Lesbian, gay, and queer criticisms are angles of literary approach that emerged in the 1990s. As with other forms of political criticism, these ideas may be difficult for some teachers to introduce into high school classrooms, depending on the policies of the school and attitudes of the community. However, they do offer another set of insights into literary texts. In addition, they have the goal of fighting bigotry.

Ken Lindblom, editor of *English Journal*, the monthly magazine of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), addressed this in his introduction to a recent issue devoted to “Sexual Identity and Gender Variance.” (This issue—a superb resource for classroom ideas, by the way—was a response to the 2007 resolution by NCTE to strengthen teacher knowledge of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, issues.)