



# Doublethink

## LITERARY THEORIES: MARXISM

### Marxist Ways of Reading

Through Marxist criticism you will see writers looking at texts from a specific political perspective: one which focuses on the struggles between social classes and the struggles between those who oppress and those who are oppressed and between those who have power and those who do not. This particular way of reading literature is based on the theories of Karl Marx who believed that Western capitalist economic systems were designed to increase the wealth of the rich, while oppressing and suppressing the poor. Marxist critics tend to believe that literature is the product of the writer's own class and cultural values and that literary texts are themselves products of a particular ideology. The Marxist critic is a reader who keeps in mind issues of power, work, oppression and money, and in focusing on what the text reveals of the author's values and social context, Marxism questions whether the text supports the prevailing social and economic system or undermines it.

#### THE POLITICS OF CLASS: MARXISM

TAKEN FROM LITERARY THEORY: THE BASICS, BY H. BERTENS<sup>1</sup>:

To discuss Marxism in the early twenty-first century may well seem strangely beside the point. After all, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, one self-proclaimed Marxist regime after the other has been forced to consign itself to oblivion. And the officially Marxist political parties that for a long time were a serious force in Western Europe have either disap-

peared or have become politically marginal. However, Marxism as an intellectual perspective still provides a wholesome counterbalance to our propensity to see ourselves and the writers that we read as completely divorced from socio-economic circumstances. It also counterbalances the related tendency to read the books and poems we read as originating in an autonomous mental realm, as the free products of free and independent minds.

Marxism's questioning of that freedom is now a good deal less sensational than it was in the 1840s and 1850s when Karl Marx (1818–1883) began to outline what is now called Marxist philosophy, although it is still controversial enough. When he noted, in the 'Foreword' to his 1859 *Towards a Critique of Political Economy*, that the 'mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life', the Victorian upper class, if aware of this line of thought, would have been horrified, and certainly by the conclusion that followed: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness'.

What does it mean that the 'mode of production' conditions 'the general process of social, political, and intellectual life'? If people have heard about Marxism they usually know rather vaguely that Marxism is about how your social circumstances determine much, if not all, of your life. This seems reasonable enough. If you work the night shift in your local McDonald's, for instance, you are unlikely to fly business class to New York City for a week in the Wal-

<sup>1</sup> Bertens, H. (2001) *Literary Theory: The Basics*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 81–83.



dorf Astoria or to bid on the next Rembrandt for sale. But this sort of determinism is perfectly compatible with the idea that we are essentially free. Certain politicians would tell you to get out of the night shift, to get an education, to get rid of your provincial accent, to buy the right outfit, and to start exuding self-confidence. In other words, you have options, like everybody else, and all you have to do is to make the right choices and start moving up that social ladder.

This is not what Marx had in mind. Marxist theory argues that the way we think and the way we experience the world around us are either wholly or largely conditioned by the way the economy is organised. Under a medieval, feudal regime people will have thought and felt different from the way that we think and feel now, in a capitalist economy – that is, an economy in which goods are produced (the ‘mode of production’) by large concentrations of capital (old-style factories, new-style multinationals) and then sold on a free, competitive market. The base of a society – the way its economy is organised, broadly speaking – determines its superstructure – everything that we might classify as belonging to the realm of culture, again in a broad sense: education, law, but also religion, philosophy, political programmes, and the arts. This implies a view of literature that is completely at odds with the Anglo-American view of literature that goes back to Matthew Arnold. If the way we experience reality and the way we think about it (our religious, political, and philosophical views) are determined by the sort of economy we happen to live in, then clearly there is no such thing as an unchanging human condition. On the contrary, with, for instance, the emergence of capitalism some centuries ago we may expect to find a new experience of reality and new views of the world. Since capitalism did not happen overnight we will not find a clean break but we certainly should find a gradual transition to a new, more or less collective perspective. The term ‘collective’ is important here. If the economic ‘base’ indeed determines the cultural ‘superstructure’, then writers will not have all

that much freedom in their creative efforts. They will inevitably work within the framework dictated by the economic ‘base’ and will have much in common with other writers living and writing under the same economic dispensation. Traditional Marxism, then, asserts that thought is subservient to, and follows, the material conditions under which it develops. Its outlook is materialist, as opposed to the idealist perspective, whose claim that matter is basically subservient to thought is one of the fundamental assumptions of modern Western culture: we tend to assume that our thinking is free, unaffected by material circumstances. In our minds we can always be free. Wrong, says Marxism, minds aren’t free at all, they only think they are.

Capitalism, Marxism tells us, thrives on exploiting its labourers. Simply put, capitalists grow rich and shareholders do well because the labourers that work for them and actually produce goods (including services) get less – and often a good deal less – for their efforts than their labour is actually worth. Labourers have known this for a long time and have organised themselves in labour unions to get fairer deals. What they do not know, however, is how capitalism alienates them from themselves by seeing them in terms of production – as production units, as objects rather than human beings. Capitalism turns people into things, it reifies them. Negotiations about better wages, no matter how successful, do not affect (let alone reverse) that process. Marx saw it clearly at work in his nineteenth-century environment

in which men whose grandfathers had still worked as cobblers, cabinetmakers, yeoman farmers, and so on – in other words, as members of self-supporting communities who dealt directly with clients and buyers – performed mechanical tasks in factories where they were merely one link in a long chain. However, this process of reification is not limited to labourers. The capitalist mode of production generates a view of the world – focused on profit –



in which ultimately all of us function as objects and become alienated from ourselves.

## MARXIST LITERARY CRITICISM: GENERAL

In fact, though, Marx and Engels themselves did not put forward any comprehensive theory of literature. Their views seem relaxed and undogmatic: good art always has a degree of freedom from prevailing economic circumstances, even if these economic facts are its 'ultimate determinant'. Thus, Engels, writing to the English novelist Margaret Harkness in April 1888, tells her that he is 'far from finding fault with you for not having written a point-blank socialist novel... The more the opinions of the author remain hidden the better the work of art'. As cultured and highly educated Germans, Marx and Engels had that reverence for 'great' art and literature which was typical of their class, and there is an obvious desire in such pronouncements to emphasise the difference between art and propaganda.

All the same, Marxist literary criticism maintains that a writer's social class, and its prevailing 'ideology' (outlook, values, tacit assumptions, half-realised allegiances, etc.) have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class. So instead of seeing authors as primarily autonomous 'inspired' individuals whose 'genius' and creative imagination enables them to bring forth original and timeless works of art, the Marxist sees them as constantly formed by their social contexts in ways which they themselves would usually not admit. This is true not just of the content of their work but even of formal aspects of their writing which might at first seem to have no possible political overtones. For instance, the prominent British Marxist critic Terry Eagleton suggests that in language 'shared definitions and regularities of grammar both reflect and help constitute, a well-ordered political state' (William Shakespeare, 1986, p.1). Likewise, Catherine Belsey, another prominent British left-wing critic, argues that the form of the 'realist' novel contains implicit validation of the existing so-

cial structure, because realism, by its very nature, leaves conventional ways of seeing intact, and hence tends to discourage critical scrutiny of reality. By 'form' here is included all the conventional features of the novel – chronological time-schemes, formal beginnings and endings, in-depth psychological characterisation, intricate plotting, and fixed narratorial points of view. Similarly, the 'fragmented', 'absurdist' forms of drama and fiction used by twentieth-century writers like Beckett and Kafka are seen as a response to the contradictions and divisions inherent in late capitalist society.

However, it is probably true to say (as Ken Newton does, p. 244, *Theory into Practice*) that traditional Marxist criticism tends to deal with history in a fairly generalised way. It talks about conflicts between social classes, and clashes of large historical forces, but, contrary to popular belief, it rarely discusses the details of a specific historical situation and relates it closely to the interpretation of a particular literary text.



## WHAT MARXIST CRITICS DO

TAKEN FROM BEGINNING THEORY, BY P. BARRY<sup>2</sup>:

1. They make a division between the 'overt' (manifest or surface) and 'covert' (latent or hidden) content of a literary work (much as psychoanalytic critics do) and then relate the covert subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes, such as class struggle, or the progression of society through various historical stages, such as, the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. Thus, the conflicts in *King Lear* might be read as being 'really' about the conflicts of class interest between the rising class (the bourgeoisie) and the falling class (the feudal overlords).

2. Another method used by Marxist critics is to relate the context of a work to the social class status of the author. In such cases an assumption is made (which again is similar to those made by psychoanalytic critics) that the author is unaware of precisely what he or she is saying or revealing in the text.

3. A third Marxist method is to explain the nature of a whole literary genre in terms of the social period which 'produced' it. For instance, *The Rise of the Novel*, by Ian Watt, relates the growth of the novel in the eighteenth century to the expansion of the middle classes during that period. The novel 'speaks' for this social class, just as, for instance, Tragedy 'speaks for' the monarchy and the nobility, and the Ballad 'speaks for' the rural and semi-urban 'working class'.

4. A fourth Marxist practice is to relate the literary work to the social assumptions of the time in which it is 'consumed', a strategy which is used particularly in the later variant of Marxist criticism known as cultural materialism.

5. A fifth Marxist practice is the 'politicisation of literary form', that is, the claim that literary forms are themselves determined by political

circumstance. For instance, in the view of some critics, literary realism carries with it an implicit validation of conservative social structures: for others, the formal and metrical intricacies of the sonnet and the iambic pentameter are a counterpart of social stability, decorum, and order.

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<sup>2</sup> Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 167–168.



## MARXIST CRITICISM: AN EXAMPLE

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry<sup>3</sup>:

As an example of Marxist criticism we will take chapter five, on *Twelfth Night*, in Elliot Krieger's *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's comedies* (1979). As it is discussed here, the example mainly shows the first of the five Marxist critical activities just listed. The play centres on the love between the Duke Orsino and the Lady Olivia. His love is extravagantly and persistently expressed but she at first rejects him, having dedicated herself to a period of protracted mourning for her dead father. Subsequently she falls in love with Viola, a young noblewoman who is temporarily disguised as a man and acting as his servant and go-between (under the name Cesario). Olivia is also loved by her steward, the strict and punctilious Malvolio, who is tricked by her uncle, Sir Toby Belch, into believing that his love for her is returned.

The essay begins by citing the dominant critical view of the play, which is that it presents various extremes of self-indulgence (such as Orsino's wallowing in fantasies of romantic love and Toby Belch's self-abandonment to physical appetites) and contrasts these with an extreme puritanism and resistance to pleasure, as seen in Malvolio. The play is seen as recommending a balance and decorum in which these extremes are avoided and proper human fulfilment becomes possible. Krieger points out that this ignores the question of class in the play: when 'order' is restored at the end, the aristocratic characters suffer no particular ill effects, while Malvolio's fate is much more severe, yet Malvolio's self-interest differs from the obviously narcissistic pre-occupations of Orsino and Olivia and the egoistic revelry of Sir Toby only because decorum forbids one of his rank to 'surfeit on himself'. Thus 'only a privileged social class has access to the morality of indulgence'. Indeed, by definition, 'the members of the ruling class find their identities through excessive indulgence in appetite'.

Each of the members of the aristocratic class, he continues, has a private 'secondary world'. For Sir Toby it is the unfettered world he reaches by drink, for he 'forces everyone to care for him while using the enforced incompetence of drunkenness and the willed oblivion of time in order to protect himself from the possibility of caring for others'. Likewise, Olivia protects herself from the needs of others by retreating into a private world of bereavement, and Orsino into a wholly subjective world of love obsession in which everything becomes 'an adjunct of, and accompaniment to, the Duke's psychological condition'. In these 'privatised' 'second worlds', each becomes, not part of a community, but 'one self king'. Viola, too, attempts to retreat into one of these second worlds, but though she is actually aristocratic, the disguise she adopts enables her to choose a temporary non-aristocratic status ('I'll serve this duke'), and she thus becomes 'an object within the second worlds of Orsino, Olivia and Sir Toby', someone they assume is available for their use or manipulation.

Within the world of the servants in the play, there is much emphasis on 'aspiration': the new servant Cesario/Viola displaces Valentine and Curio from their positions of privileged access to Duke Orsino, and in Olivia's household there is a constant struggle for prime position between Maria (another of the servants) and Malvolio. Both, in fact, aim to marry into the family, which Maria eventually achieves by marrying Sir Toby as a reward for her decisive humiliation of Malvolio. Krieger therefore sees her as a significant element in the play:

Maria is hardly a proto-bourgeoise, in that her aspiration supports and confirms rather than challenges the continued validity of aristocratic privilege, but with her abilities to separate self from vocation, to express self apart from imposed duty, and to earn by her actions advancement in social degree, only Maria in *Twelfth Night* indicates the bourgeois and Puri-

<sup>3</sup> Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 168–170.



tan emphasis on independence, competition, and the association of stature with merit.

In contrast, Malvolio is much less of a representative of any kind of change in the social order, since he has an extreme reverence for all the trappings of aristocracy, and attributes the circumstances which, he thinks, have made possible his own elevation to the aristocracy to 'fortune' and his 'stars'. Thus, fortune in the play is a force, like 'nature' which is often an alibi or a rationalisation of inherited aristocratic privilege. For the Marxist critic, then, the play demonstrates the gulf which exists between masters and servants and manifests something of the state of mind that is characteristic of each class. The Marxist feature of this essay is the way it introduces the notion of social class into interpretations of the play: this is its special 'intervention' into the large body of critical writing on the play, in which the topic is never raised. Very little indeed is said in the essay about the specifics of the precise historical moment in which it was written: rather, a subtle and original reading is woven round the generalised notions of social-class conflict, class privilege, and aspirations towards what would now be called upward social mobility.



## MARXIST CRITICISM

TAKEN FROM LITERARY TERMS AND CRITICISMS, BY J. PECK AND M. COYLE<sup>4</sup>:

What a critic says about a book depends to a large extent upon the ideas he or she brings to the text. Sometimes these premises are undeclared or vague, but the Marxist critic is very clear about the stance from which he or she writes: the text has to be read in the light of an all-informing philosophy. It has to be seen in relation to a Marxist view of history, in which the idea of class struggle is central; the connections between literature and the economic structure of society in which it was written must be made evident.

This does not, however, produce a uniform critical response: Marxist criticism is lively and varied, and, despite the collapse of communism throughout Eastern Europe, still evolving.

A crude Marxist might simply dismiss all literature as a bourgeois luxury in which middle-class authors write about their middle-class problems. Such a response, however, has not been widely expressed since the 1930s. Indeed, Marxist critics have often revealed a reverence for art, feeling that, through literature, the writer can stand apart and see the faults of society. The method of much traditional Marxist criticism has been to reconstruct a view of the past from historical evidence, and then to demonstrate how accurate a particular text is in its representation and understanding of this social reality. Not surprisingly, Marxists, such as the best-known Marxist critic, George Lukács, have always been most interested in the realistic novel, which presents a suitably full picture of society. There is, in fact, nothing particularly contentious about much Marxist criticism. F. R. Leavis and the American New Critics focused more on the text than anything else, but there has always been a form of criticism in which the text is seen in context. Traditional Marxist criticism is simply one way of relating the text to a view of the social reality of

the time in which it was written. A very accessible, and influential, example of such criticism is Raymond Williams's *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970).

At the same time, we should recognise that, although the essence of Marxist criticism is a concern with material living conditions, the Marxist critic must consider more theoretical questions about the ideology of texts and the function of art in society. Such concerns have been sharpened with the advent of structuralism. Whereas traditional criticism – even traditional Marxist criticism – has always stressed the fullness and coherence of literary texts, structuralism draws attention to the constructed nature of the literary text; structuralism prompts questions about the nature and function of a text, and more recent Marxist criticism has inevitably taken account of structuralism. The two critics who have been most influential in developing theoretical Marxist thinking about literature have been Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey. Macherey stresses the gaps in a text, arguing that the reader can see what the text is hiding from itself. Althusser sees texts as incomplete and contradictory as their ideology runs into difficulties. Both critics are essentially saying that the issues raised in a text are too complex for the author – or the ideological code of the period in which the text was written – to control and contain. A critical approach this can lead to is one in which the Marxist critic looks searchingly at the contradictions and problems inherent in bourgeois culture, exploring the text to see the way in which ideological values prove inadequate or incomplete or disruptive. This might appear a dismissive approach to literature, and handled crudely it might well be, but it can also prove a rewarding way of exploring both literature and history, making a connection between the text and the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Peck, J. and Coyle, M. (1994) *Literary Terms and Criticisms*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 176–177.