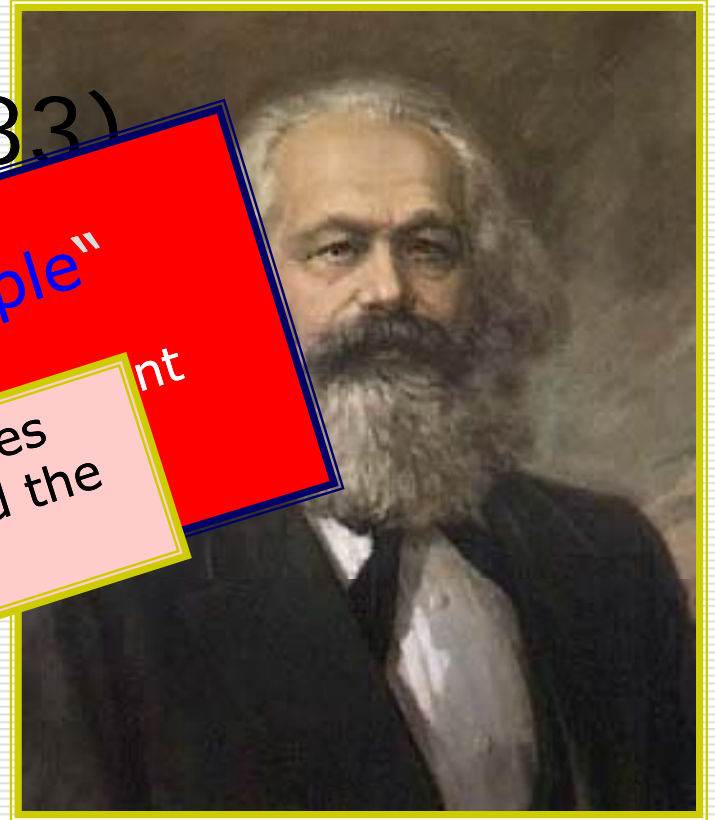


# MARXIST LITERARY CRITICISM

---

Literary Theories  
Session 4

# Karl Marx (1818-1883)



The son

**"Religion is the opiate of the people"**

Human history consisted of a series of struggles between classes—between the oppressed and the oppressing.

The ultimate driving force was "historical materialism", a notion involving the distribution of resources, gain, production, and such matters

Cf. Freud

"sexual energy" is the motivating factor behind human endeavor

# DEVELOPMENT STAGES OF HUMAN CULTURE

---

POST POST-INDUSTRY

POST-INDUSTRY

INDUSTRY

AGRICULTURE

HUNTING

---

# HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

---

to develop from  
by and

COMMUNISM

SOCIALISM

CAPITALISM

FEUDALISM

PRIMITIVE

---

# PRIVATE OWNERSHIP AND INEQUALITY

---

Ideal equality

State ownership

The Age of Inequality

Early Inequal Private Ownership

Communal Ownership

---

# CLASS STRUGGLE

OPRESSED VS OPRESSING

...consisted of a series of  
...classes—between the

FULLY EQUAL

STATE ADMINISTERED

PROLETARIAT > < BOURGEOISE

WORKER > < LANDLORD

SLAVE > < MASTER

# Religion the opiate of the masses"

- ❑ "religion was revealed as the fatal self-projection of mankind, for mankind though its concept of God had alienated itself from its own essence" (Demetz 59)
  - ❑ "religion and its institutions were merely puppets of the upper classes"
  - ❑ "religion was used to keep the lower classes in line by promising them a better life in heaven if they accepted the hierarchical, oppressive economic paradigm in this life".
-

**MATERIALISM:** Matter is the only true phenomenon; idea (including justice, culture, and religion) is nothing but epiphenomenon

---

**HISTORICAL MATERIALISM:** Human society tends to develop from the simpler to the more complex and progressive social systems

**DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM:** Human history develop because of the tension between thesis and antithesis resulting in synthesis

**ALIENATION:** The separation of the labors from their products

**CLASSLESS SOCIETY:** a society where there is no bourgeoisie and proletariat; everybody is just like everybody else

---



# MARXIST VIEW ON LITERATURE

- ❑ According to Marxists, and to other scholars in fact, literature reflects those social institutions out of which it emerges and is itself a social institution with a particular ideological function.
- ❑ Literature reflects class struggle and materialism: think how often the quest for wealth traditionally defines characters. So Marxists generally view literature "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams 149).
- ❑ Literature reflects an author's own class or analysis of class relations, however piercing or shallow that analysis may be.

# Marxist Literary Criticism

- ❑ What role does class play in the work; what is the author's analysis of class relations?
- ❑ How do characters overcome oppression?
- ❑ In what ways does the work serve as propaganda for the status quo; or does it try to undermine it?
- ❑ What does the work say about oppression; or are social conflicts ignored or blamed elsewhere?
- ❑ Does the work propose some form of utopian vision as a solution to the problems encountered in the work?

# Marxist Keyterms

---

- ❑ **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".
  - **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.
-

- 
- **“Religion** the opiate of the masses”: Marx took Hegel's theory of religion (that “religion was revealed as the fatal self-projection of mankind, for mankind though its concept of God had alienated itself from its own essence” (Demetz 59)) even further saying that religion, and its institutions, were merely puppets of the upper classes, and that religion was used to keep the lower classes in line by promising them a better life in heaven if they accepted the hierarchical, oppressive economic paradigm in this life.

# 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.
    - 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?
-

# MARXIST ANALYSIS

	BOURGEOISE	PROLETARIAT
DOMINANT IDEOLOGY	<input type="checkbox"/> REFLECT (SUPPORT) <input type="checkbox"/> RESIST	<input type="checkbox"/> REFLECT (SUPPORT) <input type="checkbox"/> RESIST
VALUES	<input type="checkbox"/> AFFIRM <input type="checkbox"/> RESIST	<input type="checkbox"/> AFFIRM <input type="checkbox"/> RESIST
ECONOMIC BASE & SUPERSTRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVILEGE <input type="checkbox"/> DISADVANTAGES (IGNORED)	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVILEGE <input type="checkbox"/> DISADVANTAGES (IGNORED)
OPPRESSION	<input type="checkbox"/> OPPRESSOR (OPPRESSING) <input type="checkbox"/> OPPRESSEE (OPPRESSED)	<input type="checkbox"/> OPPRESSOR (OPPRESSING) <input type="checkbox"/> OPPRESSEE (OPPRESSED)
RELIGION	<input type="checkbox"/> SUPPORT <input type="checkbox"/> OPPRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> SUPPORT <input type="checkbox"/> OPPRESS



- 
- ❑ 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.
-

# Other approaches

---

- ❑ 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.
-