Marxist Theory

Marxist theory—which is drawn from the economic, social, and political theories of the late 19th century economist Karl Marx—is among the most popular, influential, and controversial theories of literature currently practiced throughout the Western academic world.

The fundamental premises of Marxism

For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on. Thus, economics is the base on which the superstructure of social/political/ideological realities is built. Economic power therefore always includes social and political power as well, which is why many Marxists today refer to socioeconomic class, rather than economic class, when talking about the class structure.

From a Marxist perspective, differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. For the real battle lines are drawn, to put the matter simply, between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” between the bourgeoisie—those who control the world’s natural, economic, and human resources—and the proletariat, the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor—the mining, the factory work,...etc

Unfortunately, those in the proletariat are often the last to recognize this fact; they usually permit differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender to separate them into warring factions that accomplish little or no social change. Few Marxists today believe, as Marx did, that the proletariat will one day spontaneously develop the class consciousness needed to rise up in violent revolution against their oppressors and create a classless society.

The role of ideology:

For Marxism, an ideology is a belief system, and all belief systems are products of cultural conditioning. For example, capitalism, communism, Marxism, patriotism, religion, ethical systems, humanism,... are all ideologies and not all ideologies are equally productive or desirable. Undesirable ideologies promote repressive political agendas and, in order to ensure their acceptance among the citizenry, pass themselves off as natural ways of seeing the world instead of acknowledging themselves as ideologies. “It’s natural for men to hold leadership positions because their biological superiority renders them more physically, intellectually, and emotionally capable than women” is a sexist ideology that sells itself as a function of nature, rather than as a product of cultural belief. Marxism, a nonrepressive ideology works to make us constantly aware of all the ways in which we are products of material/historical circumstances and of the repressive ideologies that serve to blind us to this
fact in order to keep us subservient to the ruling power system. Although Marxist theorists differ in their estimation of the degree to which we are “programmed” by ideology, all agree that the most successful ideologies are not recognized as ideologies but are thought to be natural ways of seeing the world by the people who subscribe to them. To cite one simple example, the middle class tends to resent the poor because so much middle-class tax money goes to government programs to help the poor. However, the middle class fails to realize two important socioeconomic realities:

(1) that it is the wealthy in positions of power who decide who pays the most taxes and how the money will be spent (in other words, it is the wealthy who make the middle class support the poor), and (2) that the poor receive but a small portion of the funds because so much of it goes into the pockets of the wealthy who control the social services and the middle-class employees who administer them.

What is the ideology that blinds the middle class to the socioeconomic inequities in contemporary America? In large part, the middle class is blinded by their belief in the American dream, which tells them that financial success is simply the product of initiative and hard work. Therefore, if some people are poor, it is because they are shiftless and lazy. Marxist analysis reveals that the American dream is an ideology, a belief system, not an innate or natural way of seeing the world. And like all ideologies that support the socioeconomic inequities of capitalist countries—that is, countries in which the means of production (natural, financial, and human resources) are privately owned and in which those who own them inevitably become the dominant class—the American dream blinds them to the enormities of its own failure, past and present: the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans…etc

In other words, the success of the American dream—the acquisition of a wealthy lifestyle for a few—rests on the misery of the many. And it is the power of ideology, of our belief in the naturalness and fairness of this dream, that has blinded us to the harsh realities it masks.

Patriotism is an ideology that keeps poor people fighting wars against poor people from other countries (one way or another, sufficient money can generally keep one out of the armed forces during war time or, at least, out of the combat units) while the rich on both sides rake in the profits of war-time economy. Because patriotism leads the poor to see themselves as members of a nation, separate from other nations, rather than as members of a worldwide oppressed class opposed to all privileged classes including those from their own country, it prevents the poor from banding together to improve their condition globally.

Marxism’s concern with human psychology overlaps with that of psychoanalysis: both disciplines study human behavior and motivation in psychological terms. However, while psychoanalysis focuses on the individual psyche and its formation within the family, Marxism focuses on the material/historical forces—the politics and ideologies of socioeconomic systems—that shape the
psychological experience and behavior of individuals and groups. For Marxism, the family is not the source of the individual’s psychological identity, for both the individual and the family are products of material/historical circumstances. The family unconsciously carries out the cultural “program” in raising its children, but that program is produced by the socioeconomic culture within which the family operates. While it is our parents who read us bedtime stories, take us to movies, and, in these and other ways, form our morals, it is our social system that provides the stories, movies, and morals, all of which ultimately serve the economic interests of those in control of that social system. Thus, while psychoanalytic critics examine the family conflicts and psychological wounds that determine individual behavior, Marxist critics examine that same behavior as a product of the ideological forces carried, for example, by film, fashion, art, music, education, and law. Indeed, the Marxist critic will show us the ways in which family dysfunctions are themselves products of the socioeconomic system and the ideologies it promotes.

The fact that literature grows out of and reflects real material/historical conditions creates at least two possibilities of interest to Marxist critics: (1) the literary work might tend to reinforce in the reader the ideologies it embodies, or (2) it might invite the reader to criticize the ideologies it represents. Many texts do both. And it is not merely the content of a literary work—the “action” or the theme—that carries ideology, but the form as well or, as most Marxists would argue, the form primarily. Realism, naturalism, surrealism, symbolism, romanticism, modernism, postmodernism, tragedy, comedy, satire, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and other genres and literary devices are the means by which form is constituted. If content is the “what” of literature, then form is the “how.”

Realism, for example, gives us characters and plot as if we were looking through a window onto an actual scene taking place before our eyes. Our attention is drawn not to the nature of the words on the page but to the action those words convey. Indeed, we frequently forget about the words we’re reading and the way the narrative is structured as we “get lost” in the story. Part of the reason we don’t notice the language and structure, the form, is because the action represented is ordered in a coherent sequence that invites us to relate to it much as we relate to the events in our own lives, and the characters it portrays are believable, much like people we might meet. So we get “pulled into” the story. In contrast, a good deal of postmodern literature (and nonrealistic, experimental literature of any kind) is written in a fragmented, surreal style that seems to defy our understanding and serves to distance or estrange us from the narrative and the characters it portrays.

For some Marxists, realism is the best form for Marxist purposes because it clearly and accurately represents the real world, with all its socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions, and encourages readers to see the unhappy truths about material/historical reality, for whether or not authors
intend it they are bound to represent socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions if they accurately represent the real world.

**Some questions Marxist critics ask about literary texts:**

The following questions are offered to summarize Marxist approaches to literature.

1. Does the work reinforce (intentionally or not) capitalist, imperialist, or classist values?

2. How might the work be seen as a critique of capitalism, imperialism, or classism? That is, in what ways does the text reveal, and invite us to condemn, oppressive socioeconomic forces (including repressive ideologies)? If a work criticizes or invites us to criticize oppressive socioeconomic forces, then it may be said to have a Marxist agenda.

3. How does the literary work reflect (intentionally or not) the socioeconomic conditions of the time in which it was written and/or the time in which it is set, and what do those conditions reveal about the history of class struggle?