

1993 HYPERTEXT DATABASE: MARXIST CRITICISM

These materials were created by students back in 1993 as part of an early experiment with hypertext. They were designed to serve as a kind of online reference tool, an electronic database, that would provide information to students who *weren't* taking English 60A. The authors of these materials were Chris Abele, Liz Cronmiller, Allison DeZurik, Josh Hudson, Diana Marinos, Matt Ogborn, and Tamara Pellicier. If they ever visit this site, I hope they'll drop me a line.

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Introduction

Marxist literary criticism is based upon the political and economic theories of the German philosopher Karl Marx. In works like *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto*, written with Frederick Engels, Marx proposes a model of history in which economic and political conditions determine social conditions. Marx and Engels were responding to social hardships stemming from the rise of capitalism. Appropriately, their theories are formulated specifically to analyze how society functions in a state of upheaval and constant change.

A materialist view of history

Using Hegel's theory of dialectic, which suggests that history progresses through the resolution of contradictions within a particular aspect of reality, Marx and Engels posit a materialist account of history that focuses upon the struggles and tensions within society. As society forms more complex modes of production, it becomes increasingly stratified; and the resulting tensions necessitate changes in society. For example, the introduction of heavy machinery into the feudal economic system fragmented existing social structures and necessitated a move towards capitalism.

The base and superstructure model

Within Marx's dialectical account of history is the idea that a given individual's social being is determined by larger political and economic forces. Marx writes that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines consciousness." Simply stated, the social class into which a person is born determines her outlook

and viewpoints.

Marx then expands this concept of determination into one of the central concepts of Marxism--that of base and superstructure. The base is the economic system on which the superstructure rests; cultural activities--such as philosophy or literature--belong in the superstructure. To Marxist critics, a society's economic base determines the interests and styles of its literature; it is this relationship between determining base and determined superstructure that is the main point of interest for Marxist critics.

Ideology

Marx believes that because the superstructure is determined by the base, it inevitably supports the ideologies of the base. Ideologies are the changing ideas, values, and feelings through which individuals experience their societies. They present the dominant ideas and values as the beliefs of society as a whole, thus preventing individuals from seeing how society actually functions. Literature, as a cultural production, is a form of ideology, one that legitimizes the power of the ruling class. In the eighteenth century, for example, literature was used by the English upper classes both to express and transmit the dominant value systems to the lower classes.

Georg Lukacs and the Social Realists

There is a great deal of difference in opinion among Marxist literary critics concerning the relationship between ideology and literature. Since Marx's own writing, theorists such as the Soviet social realists, Georg Lukacs, and Louis Althusser have gradually modified or expanded on Marx's original concepts. The Soviet socialist realists believe that because ideology is part of the superstructure, it must correspond to the economic base of society. In their view, literature inevitably reflects the economic base; there is no way that it can function outside of the strict base/superstructure model. Like the social realists, the critic Georg Lukacs feels that only realistic forms of fiction are artistically and politically valid. But Lukacs and the social realists have a limited perspective. They both fail to recognize that there are legitimate works which fall outside such a literal reading of the base/superstructure model.

It is doubtful that Marx and Engels themselves took such a deterministic approach to literature. In their work, literature is not merely a passive reflection of the economic base. Although they conceded that literature cannot change society, or base, in itself, they suggested that literature can be an active element in such change.

Antonio Gramsci

The Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, with his concept of hegemony, allows for an even more flexible reading of the base/superstructure model. Gramsci believes that ideology alone cannot explain the extent to which people are willing to accept dominant values. He also realizes, along with many other Marxist critics, that the base/superstructure model is much too rigid to account for cultural productions which do not simply reinforce those dominant values.

In a way, Gramsci's notion of hegemony is a continuation of the concepts behind ideology. Hegemony is a sort of deception in which the individual forgets her own desires and accepts dominant values as their own. For example, someone might think that going to college is the right and necessary step in every life, when in reality their belief is socially constructed. Literature, then, may be seen as something that both reinforces dominant values and occasionally calls them into question. For example, nineteenth century women writers of sentimental fiction used certain narrative conventions merely to reinforce dominant values, whereas a writer like Jane Austen used many of the same conventions to undermine the same dominant values.

Louis Althusser

The French theorist Louis Althusser considers the relationship between literature and ideology. For

him, this also includes an understanding of hegemony. Althusser suggests that ideology and hegemony, like literature, present a constructed version of reality, one which does not necessarily reflect the actual conditions of life. Thus, literature neither merely reflects ideology, nor can it be reduced to it. Literature may be situated within ideology, but it can also distance itself from ideology--thereby allowing the reader to gain an awareness of the ideology on which it is based. For example, a novel may present the world in a way that seems to support dominant ideologies, but as a work of fiction it also reveals those ideologies. So, once again, although literature itself cannot change society, it can be an active part of such changes.

Central Marxist concepts

Although Marxist critics have interpreted Marx's theories in several different ways, as Marxists they eventually return to a few central Marxist concepts: the dialectical model of history ; the notion that social being determines consciousness; and the base/superstructure model . For instance, the English critic Raymond Williams uses such terms as residual and emergent cultures to modify the base/superstructure model, not to question it. Similarly, terms like hegemony , which are not a part of Marx's theories, are used by critics to allow a greater application of Marxist concepts.

Marxism and literature

Marxist literary critics tend to look for tensions and contradictions within literary works. This is appropriate because Marxism was originally formulated to analyze just such tensions and contradictions within society. Marxist literary critics also see literature as intimately linked to social power, and thus their analysis of literature is linked to larger social questions. Since Marxism is a belief system which can be used to analyze society at the grandest or most detailed level, Marxist literary criticism is ultimately part of a much larger effort to uncover the inner workings of society.

Marxism and other theories

Marxist literary criticism may be thought of as a reaction to many of the rigid theories of the New Critics. Unlike the New Critics, who saw the text as a self-contained whole, Marxists generally focus upon the unresolved tensions within works of literature.

Similarly, although Marxist criticism has both influenced and been influenced by structuralist criticism and post- structuralist criticism , it greatly differs from them in its refusal to separate literature and language from society. Marxist criticism is materialist, so it has more in common with theories that focus upon how literature functions within social, political, and economic structures, than it does with theories that focus only upon the text. Marxist criticism has had an enormous influence on feminism , new historicism , and most recently, cultural studies .

As a system that looks for causes beneath the surface of society, Marxist criticism has much in common with psychoanalytic criticism . In fact, it is possible to make a rough comparison between the Marxist model of base and superstructure and the Freudian model of unconscious and conscious.

Works Cited

Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. London: Methuen Books, 1976.

Selden, Ramden. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Further reading

Baxandall, et al. *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*. New York: International General, 1973.

Although Marx and Engels didn't concern themselves with literature in their basic theories, they were both very interested and influenced by literature. This book collects some of their writings and comments on literature.

Craig, David, ed. *Marxists on Literature*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975.

This book is a collection of essays by various Marxist critics. It offers a variety of approaches to literature from a Marxist perspective.

Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Ideology*. London: New Left Books, 1976.

Although this book is not specifically about Marxist literary criticism, it offers valuable descriptions of many contemporary theories from a Marxist perspective.

Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1976.

This book is a very clear introduction to the application of Marx's theories to the study of literature.

Forgacs, David. "Marxist Literary Theories." *Modern Literary Theory*, eds. Jefferson and Robey. London: Batsford, 1986.

This book describes many types of literary theory; and its chapter on Marxist theory is a good introduction.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

In this book, Williams tries to modify many of the basic concepts of Marxism to allow for a more complex reading of literature.

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revised October 3, 1997

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