

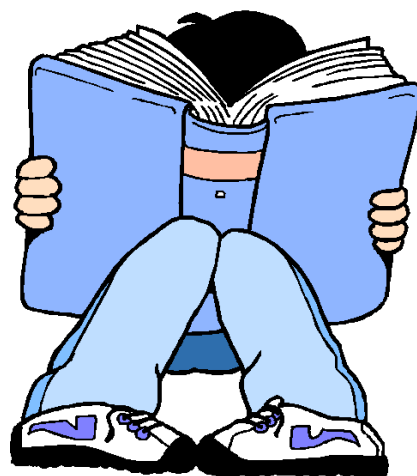
An Introduction to Literary Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts and the world around them. Some lenses will be more appropriate for particular works than others at times and it is your job to discern when to use a particular lens. The following theories are just that, *theories*. Approach them as you would a scientist, without any emotional attachment to any particular one. You do not have to believe or agree with a theory to understand and correctly apply it. Your goal is to understand the literary theories below.

Marxist Literary Theory

✓ Marxist Literary Theory Explained

- The German philosopher Karl Marx argued that the way people think and behave in society is determined by basic economic factors.
- In his view, the populace was controlled by those who owned and operated major industries through conditions of employment and by forcing their own values and beliefs onto other social groups.
- Marxist criticism applies these arguments to the study of literary texts.
- Proper critique of a text cannot be separated from the cultural situation in which the text was created.
- Marxist approach deals with more than literary devices and themes—focusing on historical context and the author's view of life.
- Focuses on exposing class conflict /indoctrination.



✓ Brief Biography of Karl Marx

- Born in Tier, Germany in 1818
- Family was Jewish, but to avoid anti-Semitism, converted to Protestant faith
- Attended college at Bonn University (where he was wounded in a duel) and Berlin university
- 1840-1844 worked in socialist press; moved to France in 1844 to avoid arrest
- 1844: Marx writes Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts
- 1848: The Communist Manifesto
- 1859: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy
- 1867-1870s: Marx writes his most comprehensive work, Das Kapital.
- Died on 14 March 1883

✓ Core Marxist Principles

- Proletariat: that class of society which does not have ownership of the means of production.
- Bourgeoisie: wealthy class that rules society.

➤ Power of the Base

1. Marx believed that the economic means of production in a society (the base) both creates and controls all human institutions and ideologies (the superstructure). This superstructure includes all social and legal institutions, all political and educational systems, all religions, and all art. These ideologies develop as a result of the economic means of production, not the reverse.

➤ Alienation

1. Marx believed that capitalist society created three forms of alienation:

- First, the worker is alienated from what he produces.
- Second, the worker is alienated from himself; only when he is not working does he feel truly himself.
- Finally, in capitalist society people are alienated from each other; that is, in a competitive society people are set against other people.

2. Marx believed that the solution was communism, which would allow the development of our full "potentialities as a human".

3. For Marx, the possibility that one may give up ownership of one's own agency -- one's capacity to transform the world -- is tantamount to being alienated from one's own nature; it is a spiritual loss.

➤ False Consciousness

1. Because people are conditioned by the material world into which they are born, they come to accept certain ideas and beliefs as objective fact. They misunderstand their position and the meaning of their position.

2. This false consciousness is promoted by the dominant class of society, who want to preserve their position. Using religion, culture, and education, they promote false consciousness to justify their power and to convince the working class of its correctness.



✓ **Dialectical Materialism**

➤ Marx believed that communism was a historical inevitability. Society had progressed from one economic system to another—from feudalism to capitalism, for example.

➤ The contradictions of each system led to its collapse. As history advanced, the failures of the preceding system would lead to the adoption of a new one.

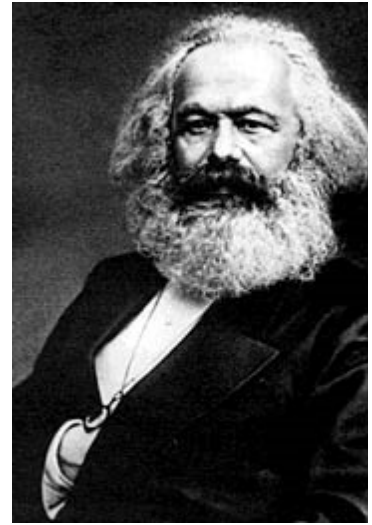
➤ Marx's version was that human history was a series of steps towards a perfect economic arrangement—an inevitable march. According to Marx, capitalism was the result of conflict between lords and serfs in feudal society and between guild masters and journeymen in precapitalistic society. The resulting conflicts created the capitalist class or bourgeoisie, which owns the means of production, and the wage workers or proletariat class, which has to sell its labor to survive.

➤ Derived from Hegel's dialectic, the belief that truth (synthesis) emerges from a comparison of a thesis and anti-thesis.

✓ **Example of Marxist Criticism**

➤ "The earliest documentation of the sinking R.M.S. Titanic paints the picture of noble aristocracy choosing to go down with the ship, giving life boats over to all the women and children, and maintaining civilized order in the midst of disaster. Most recent studies that document actual eye-witness accounts show quite a different image. In

truth, those in steerage (the poor) were barricaded from the decks and ultimately prevented from boarding any of the life boats, many of which were not filled to their maximum capacity. Though there were instances of noble behavior John Jacob Astor announced he was dressed in his best and he'd go down with the ship, or a woman who refused to leave behind her dog, the majority of people acted deplorably: fighting to get to life boats, refusing entrance to certain people, and ultimately neglecting to come back for survivors floundering in the water. Looking at earlier works through the Marxist lens, it is evident that the writers wrote from the privileged perspective, shedding only light on their peers. The plight of the immigrants trapped below was kept hidden, the information controlled by the "ruling power," i.e. the white upper class.



✓ **Strategies for Marxist Criticism**

- Explore the way different groups of people are represented in texts, and evaluate how society is portrayed.
- Determine the ideological stance of the text - as in what world view does it represent.
- Consider how the text itself reproduces certain social beliefs and practices, and analyzed what social effect it may have.
- Is there an outright rejection of socialism in the work?
- Does the text raise fundamental criticism about the emptiness of life in bourgeoisie society?
- In portraying society, what approximation of totality does the author achieve? What is emphasized, what is ignored? Why?
- How well is the fate of the individual linked organically to the nature of societal forces?
- At what points are actions or solutions to problems forced or unreal?
- Are the characters from all social levels equally well sketched?
- What are the values of each class in the work?
- What is valued most? Sacrifice? Assent? Resistance? Individuality?
- How clearly do narratives of disillusionment and defeat indicate that bourgeoisie values—competition, acquisitiveness, chauvinism—are incompatible with human happiness?
- Does the protagonist defend or defect from the dominant values of society? Are those values in ascendancy or decay?