

Background

Marxism, which emerged in the nineteenth century as a result of the theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, concerns itself with the economic struggles for power between the working class and the ruling class. These two men believed in an eventual classless society with communal ownership of all natural and industrial resources.

When Marxist theories are applied to literature, they provide a means for assessing the social significance of a text. Marxist criticism believes that literature is one form of cultural production of a complex society and, as such, reflects the forces shaping the society's culture. This is to say that literature is not only a mirror, which reflects society. But it is also a dynamic participant in the shaping of a culture.

Here are some points that a Marxist literary critic considers when analyzing a text:

- Literature expresses the ideas, beliefs, and values of a culture.
- Literature of any significance actively engages in controversy or argument.
- Literature reveals power struggles (sexual power, economic power, social power, and so on) and how this operates and with what consequences.
- Literature reveals how the author, reader, and characters demonstrate an awareness or lack of awareness of their economic and social situations and what oppresses them.
- Literature and authors can manipulate readers into sympathizing with rather than critiquing the dominant (and oppressive) social order.

Strengths of This Theory

Like Archetypal criticism, this theory encourages a careful reading of a text. It also does not limit a reader to view the text in isolation, but allows the reader to think about the text in its social, historical, and current contexts.

Weaknesses of This Theory

The main concern some readers may have about this theory is that it only examines a limited aspect of the text. Some people feel threatened by the focus on "ideology." It dismisses the beauty of writing and does not allow the reader to simply enjoy the text.

Demonstrating an Understanding

Check off the thesis statements below that lend themselves to an essay, which might apply a Marxist approach to examining literature.

1. ___ Huckleberry Finn and Jim need to escape from their homes in order to recognize the oppressiveness of their lives.
2. ___ Three symbols that represent youth and immaturity in the story "Groom Service" are the charcoal drawing, the beaver tail, and the eagle feathers.
3. ___ In David French's play *Leaving Home*, Jacob, Mary, and Kathy are unable to find true happiness because of the limitations of their economic situations.
4. ___ The snowball incident at the start of *Fifth Business* controls the lives of Dunstable Ramsay, Percy Boyd Stanton, and Paul Dempster.
5. ___ Romeo and Juliet might have lived if they had not been controlled by various societal pressures.
6. ___ The novel *Animal Farm* demonstrates that a society cannot succeed if it maintains a formal class structure.

Applying This Theory to a Text in the Anthology

Use these questions to respond to an assigned text from the student anthology:

1. What or whose ideological values structure the text? How are these evident?
2. Who has power (and of what sorts) in the text? How does this power operate and change as the text progresses?
3. What "master" or dominant social narratives are perpetuated or critiqued and disrupted in the text? (For example, the American dream, whereby, with hard work and individual effort, a poor woman can achieve success.)
4. To what degree does the protagonist or other characters believe in and live by the prevailing social order?
5. At what point(s) do characters recognize the oppressiveness of the prevailing social order?
6. How do they respond? What affects their options for changing things?
7. How is social objectification evident and how does it operate in the text?
8. What are the social forces that affect the author's writing or the text's marketing and reception?

Background

Feminist literary criticism was launched in the twentieth century with Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in which the author examines why there was no female Shakespeare by highlighting the social and political conditions that made writing for women difficult or impossible. In 1969, Kate Millett examined, in *Sexual Politics*, how women are represented in famous texts by men. Since then, in conjunction with Feminist theory itself, Feminist literary critics have also examined

- how women write their own experiences and representations.
- how women read about themselves.
- how to make feminist readings visible to readers.
- how women writers have themselves fared in given eras (often they weren't published if their own sexual conduct was "transgressive").
- how traditional texts by women are subversive of the social order.

Strengths of This Theory

For centuries, women in literature, the roles of both men and women, and how they were represented was not a focus of literary criticism. This theory finally examines how women and men are represented and deals with the importance of women in literature.

Weaknesses of This Theory

If this theory is the only one applied to a text, it can be rather limiting. It only examines one element of the text.

Demonstrating an Understanding

Read the following three paragraphs from "A Pair of Silk Stockings" (*Imprints 12*, p. 86) and answer the question that follows.

Little Mrs. Sommers one day found herself the unexpected possessor of fifteen dollars. It seemed to her a very large amount of money, and the way in which it stuffed and bulged her worn old *porte-monnaie* gave her a feeling of importance such as she had not enjoyed for years.

The question of investment was one that occupied her greatly. For a day or two she walked about apparently in a dreamy state, but really absorbed in speculation and calculation. She did not wish to act hastily, to do anything she might afterward regret. But it was during the still hours of the night when she lay awake revolving plans in her mind that she seemed to see her way clearly toward a proper and judicious use of the money.

A dollar or two should be added to the price usually paid for Janie's shoes, which would insure their lasting an appreciable time longer than they usually did. She would buy so and so many yards of percale for new shirt waists for the boys and Janie and Mag. She had intended to make the old ones do by skilful patching. Mag should have another gown. She had seen some beautiful patterns, veritable bargains in the shop windows. And still there would be left enough for new stockings—two pairs a piece—and what darning that would save for a while! She would get caps for the boys and sailor-hats for the girls. The vision of her little brood looking fresh and dainty and new for once in their lives excited her and made her restless and wakeful with anticipation.

What would a Feminist literary critic note about these paragraphs?

Applying This Theory to a Text in the Anthology

Use these questions to respond to an assigned text from the student anthology:

1. What is the protagonist's attitude toward the male and female characters in the text? How is this evident? How does this affect your response to the characters?
2. How are women represented in the text?
3. What roles do both men and women play within family, work situations, et cetera (for example, hero, breadwinner, friend, helper, cook, servant, sex object, et cetera)?
4. What were the social and historical conditions for women in this period that might help us understand their roles and desires in the text?
5. How do women exercise their power in the text? With what consequences?
6. If you were to rewrite the text's ending, what would happen to the female protagonist? The male protagonist?
7. How and to what degree are the women's lives limited or restricted in this text?