



Marxist Criticism

Dr. Alex E. Blazer

English 4110/5110

7 January 2020

<https://alexablazer.com>

A Survey of Literary Theory

- ★ Liberal Humanism, the pre-theoretical practice of English studies that views literature as a means of moral and intellectual cultivation
- ★ New Criticism (and Russian Formalism), close reading of the text itself, paying particular heed to its unifying tensions and analysis of internal form.
- ★ Structuralism (and Semiotics and Narratology), the analysis of signs and codes within linguistic systems

Survey

Continued

- ★ Post-Structuralism (and Deconstruction and Post-Modernism), the analysis of a text's plays, slippages, and aporias of meaning
- ★ Psychoanalysis, the analysis of the psyche of the author, text, and culture
- ★ Marxism (and Cultural Studies), socio-economic historical and cultural analyses

Survey

Continued

- ★ **Cognitive Criticism**, analyses of literature from the perspective of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology
- ★ **Existentialism and Phenomenology**, examines the self-conscious subjectivity and free choice of characters, creative writing as meaningful action, and the being of the literary work in the world.
- ★ **Reader-Response Criticism**, analyses based on the transactional, affective, subjective relationship between author, text, and reader.

Survey

Continued

- ★Feminism and Gender Studies, analyses based on the the agency of women in the patriarchy as well as socially constructed gender identity.
- ★Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Theory, analyses of the politics and poetics, consciousness and unconsciousness of (queer) sexuality and identity.
- ★African American Criticism, analyses of African American (literary/aesthetic) history and heritage and the social construction of racial identity.

Survey

Concluded

- ★ Postcolonialism, analyses of colonial ideology (oppression and othering) and postcolonial resistance.
- ★ Ecocriticism, analyses of literature from the ecological, environmental, and natural perspective.

Marxism

Theory

Marxism, named after economic, political, and cultural philosopher Karl Marx, is a school of thought that examines how politically endorsed economic systems structure societies (organized communities) and cultures (the beliefs and values of communities).

Society

According to Marxism, societies are composed of two elements.

- ★ **Base: economics**

- ★ the material modes of production

- ★ **Superstructure: sociopolitical ideology**

- ★ the culture such as education, philosophy, religion, government, arts, and science

Class

Within a society, people are divided into classes.

- ★ (Socio-)economic class: a group of people categorized by a particular relationship to economic and social power, i.e., its relationship to the base and superstructure
- ★ The two basic classes in classical Marxism:
 - ★ bourgeoisie: in a capitalist system, those who own and control the base and implement the superstructure
 - ★ proletariat: in a capitalist system, those who manage (but neither own nor control) the base and are programmed by the superstructure

Class

Continued

- ★ In contemporary America, the classes are more complicated than the bourgeoisie and the proletariat:
 - ★ Lower class, lower-middle class, middle class, upper-middle class, upper class
 - ★ Working class, middle class, affluent professional, executive elite (from Jean Anyon)
 - ★ Working poor
 - ★ Intellectual class (from Antonio Gramsci)
 - ★ The 99% and the 1%

Types of Societies

Marxism predominantly looks at three kinds of societies.

- ★ **Capitalism:** a free-market economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production and distribution of goods
- ★ **Capital:** Money used to make more money, either by purchasing goods or labor to make goods and selling for profit
- ★ The bourgeoisie own the capital while the proletariat hire their bodies for wages (wage labor).

Types of Societies

Continued

- ★ **Socialism:** the stage after the proletarian revolution when a society is changing from capitalism to communism
- ★ The people control the means of production and operate it based on fairness rather than free-market.

Types of Societies

Concluded

- ★ **Communism:** the political theory in which all property and wealth is owned in a classless society by all the members of a community
- ★ Although the former Soviet Union and the present China and Cuba, for example, call themselves communist, they are oligarchies (government by a small group of people) and dictatorships (government by one ruler).
- ★ Although communism is the goal of Marxism, many (Marxists included) consider it a utopian dream, and instead focus on achieving at least class consciousness in the culture and socialism in the government at best.

The Dialectical Materialist View of History

- ★ Materialism: focus on the physical world (for example, wealth and possessions), based on the belief that the mind follows the body
- ★ History: study of the past and how the past progresses into the present and future

Dialectical Materialism

Concluded

- ★ Dialectic: the progressive process by which two opposing thoughts, thesis and antithesis, become combined in a unified whole or synthesis
- ★ Dialectical materialism: the historical process by which opposing forces such as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat or the material reality and a culture's consciousness of its material reality perpetually struggle to bring about a justly organized and self-reflective society
- ★ Praxis: method by which theory is put into practice

Commodity Value

★ Three Types of Value

- ★ Use Value: the utilitarian value of a commodity based on its use (the value of an iPad to an individual user)
- ★ Exchange Value: the market value of a commodity based on its raw material, labor, and production costs (the value of an iPad based on design, material, labor, production, and shipping costs)
- ★ Sign Exchange Value: the value of a commodity based on its status (the value of an iPad based on the coolness, hipness, and hype of Apple iDevices)

Commodification

- ★ **Commodification:** treating objects and people for their economic or social status rather than for their aesthetic or human value
- ★ **Commodification of Desire:** humanity's wants and needs become entangled in conspicuous consumption and commodity fetish such that the ruling class does not need to physically oppress the classes that are under them if those classes purposefully sacrifice themselves as wage-slaves in order to acquire the stuff that the ideology programmed them to fixate on
- ★ **Reification:** the alienating way that commodification reduces social relations, ideas, and people to things

Ideology and Consciousness

- ★ Ideology: in classical Marxism, a belief system brought about by cultural conditioning that portrays arbitrary structures of existence as natural and innate ways of being, such as capitalist ideology or Marxist ideology
- ★ However, in contemporary Marxism, the term has come to mean (because of Althusser) in many instances how the culture blinds an oppressed class to its material conditions of existence by erecting an illusion; common ideologies that operate in the service of American capitalism and those who hold power under capitalism are the American dream, patriotism, religion, individualism, and consumerism.

Ideology and Consciousness

Continued

- ★ Interpellation: from Althusser, the ideological and economic system reproduces itself by implicitly hailing us as subjects who passively and unconsciously support the dominant social assumptions
- ★ Alienation: originally from Marx, meaning the estrangement from one's own labor
 - ★ However, the term now also suggests the estrangement from self and society, and the feeling of not belonging to and subsequent withdrawal from the world.

Ideology and Consciousness

Concluded

- ★ Hegemony (from Antonio Gramsci): domination of one social class over others through the use of cultural power and influence that creates the consent of the masses
- ★ Organic Intellectuals: leaders who rise from within the masses to use civil society to speak for the people
- ★ Class consciousness: awareness of the (alienating and commodified) socioeconomic conditions of one's class
- ★ False consciousness: the lack of awareness or ideological illusions of one's conditions of existence

Marxist Literary Criticism

Marxist literary critics approach a text either as 1) detached scholars, examining economic and class issues both inside and outside of the text, or 2) cultural advocates revealing the text's ideological or revolutionary forces, and/or 3) both.

Marxist Literary Criticism

Inside the Text

- ★ The Marxist critic looks “inside” the content of the text (for example, at the character and plot) for issues, ideas, and themes relating to the materialist history of capitalist socioeconomic class struggle.
- ★ The Marxist critic interprets how the work of literature *either* exposes and challenges *or* manifests and reifies class ideology.

Marxist Literary Criticism

Outside the Text

- ★ The Marxist critic looks “outside” the text at the author’s class, the literary genre and period, the readers’ social assumptions, and the literary form’s politics to determine how the class of text derives from and/or reifies its society’s dominant mode of production.
- ★ The Marxist critic evaluates whether the form employs realism or experimentation, and then she evaluates whether the realist or experimental form serves ideological or revolutionary ends.

MLA Citation

Blazer, Alex E. "Marxist Criticism." English 4 | 10/5 | 10
Literary Criticism, 7 Jan. 2020, Georgia College & State
University, Milledgeville. [alexablazer.com/4|10/20-SP-
Lectures.pdf](http://alexablazer.com/4|10/20-SP-Lectures.pdf). Class Lecture.