Marxist Criticism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of Marxist Criticism:
Marxist Criticism examines the importance and impact of the economic or class system on the society represented in the text, particularly its characters. In particular, it focuses on the oppression of the society/characters by the ideologies about class and (economic) success that are used to maintain the status quo, not just keeping the power in the hands of the “haves” and out of the hands of the “have-nots” but also keeping the system of “haves” and “have-nots” in place. Thus the central focus of Marxist Criticism is often the power inherent in the class system, what confers or symbolizes it, who has it, who wants it, how it’s demonstrated, wielded, sought after, struggled over as well as its effects on human nature or psychology and interactions, etc.

Marxist Criticism has often (though not always) placed emphasis on the oppressed or have-nots as historically this perspective has been underrepresented or ignored entirely. Marxist Criticism historically has sought to “correct” and challenge the status quo, which it sees as too often perpetuated by ignorance or silence.

It can be difficult to notice class in literature as it is rarely announced, often identified subtly or obliquely in descriptions of setting or characters, in dialogue (characters’ speech patterns, dialect, idiomatic expressions), in characters’ desires, actions, and motivations. Uncovering these signs of class and class conflict thus requires close reading/explication and the tools and practices of New Criticism. The list of key terms and questions on the following pages can give you an idea of what to focus on while reading texts and thinking about writing a response paper or essay using the lens of Marxist Criticism.

While Marxist Criticism had its origins in the theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and the social revolution they inspired, the focus of current Marxist (Literary) Criticism and our purpose in this course is not to use literature to question and overturn current class systems or to see literature as a tool for or against such a social revolution. Instead, our purpose is to focus on and analyze the texts themselves in order to reveal their depiction of and commentary on the class systems represented within them. Thus the author’s class or beliefs about class are only tangentially relevant. This information might help support an argument claiming that the text’s purpose is to condemn a certain class system, for example, but is not enough in and of itself without textual evidence to prove such an argument.

While research is not excluded from Marxist Criticism, the way it is from New Criticism and Deconstruction, it is not mandatory as it is in New Historicism. However, as with New Historicism, if you elect to do research, you are, nevertheless, expected to focus your argument on close reading/analysis of the text, using the research to support or deepen your argument and interpretation (not simply alongside or in place of your argument/interpretation). In addition, if you elect to do research, you are obligated to avoid plagiarism by following the conventions of MLA Style research when quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing primary and secondary sources and to select and evaluate secondary sources according to their validity and appropriateness so that they strengthen rather than weaken your argument and credibility.
Final note:
A successful argument based on Marxist Criticism requires more than identifying the class characters belong to or even the class conflict. It requires one to identify, prove, and explain the impact or implications of belonging to a particular class or the outcome of class conflict and the implications of this outcome, etc., in essence to point out the text’s argument—its meaning and/or purpose—about the class system reflected in it. As with any good claim, the claim of your Marxist Criticism response paper or essay should focus on a single specific, unified argument. Note: Meaning refers to what the text reveals about the class system; purpose refers to what the text is doing, whether it’s upholding, reflecting, questioning, challenging, condemning, etc., the meaning (class system) it reveals.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of the terms and concepts associated with Marxist Criticism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:

Excerpted and edited from Ann Dobie’s “Glossary of Terms Used in Literary Criticism” in Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism (except where noted):

Key Terms/Concepts:

Base: The methods of production in a given society.

Bourgeoisie: The name given by Marx to [the social class that owns property and controls the means of producing wealth] in a society. It is a term taken from French, used to refer to members of the middle class, that is, the shopkeepers and merchants.

Class Consciousness: Awareness of one’s self as belong[ing] to a class that is, itself, a part of a class system which privileges members of upper classes and imposes burdens upon members of lower classes. In Marxist ideology, until class consciousness has been achieved, individuals are doomed to wander in the “false consciousness” induced by various ideological processes which keep them unaware of their true condition. (Arnie Sanders)

Commodification: The attitude of valuing things not for their utility but for their power to impress others or for their resale possibilities.

Conspicuous Consumption – The obvious acquisition of things only for their sign value and/or exchange value

Dialectical Materialism – The theory that history develops neither in a random fashion nor in a linear one but instead as struggle between contradictions that ultimately find resolution in a synthesis of the two sides. For example, class conflicts lead to new social systems.

Exchange Value: An assessment of the worth of something based on what it can be traded or sold for. The amount of human labor contained in it is the basis for establishing the value of a commodity.
**False Consciousness:** A state [in which one] accepts ["without protest or questioning" (Dobie)] the "naturalness" of ["an unfavorable social system" (Dobie) or] ideologies that really are the products of material historical circumstances and that disguise their control over one's thought by pretending to [be] the "natural order of things." Such ideologies draw one's attention away from the socio-economic facts governing one's condition and toward the pursuit of notions like "the American Dream" of self-improvement achieved solely by individualistic effort, pursuit of temporary satisfaction of falsely constructed needs by means of Consumerism, or belief in false ideological systems like "Patriotism," "Classism," and "Religion." While one pursues the mythic satisfactions of the "Dream," placates one's true desires with purchases [which] advertising conditions one to desire, or chants the slogans of Patriotism, Classism, or Religion, the people who really run the culture, like politicians, business owners, aristocrats, and religious leaders, grow richer and more powerful. (Arnie Sanders)

**Hegemony:** Dominance of one state or group over another.

**Historical Situation:** The ideological atmosphere generated by material circumstances. To understand social events, one must have a grasp of the material circumstances and the historical situation in which they occur. [Note: One can apply this to literature by examining the society represented in the text and looking for the ideological atmosphere generated by its material circumstances.]

**Ideology:** A belief system. It is a set of values and ways of thinking through which people see the world they live in[, of which they are often unaware, and which they accept without questioning as truth].

**Interpellation:** A term used by Louis Althusser to refer to the process by which the working class is manipulated to accept the ideology of the dominant one.

**Material Circumstances:** The economic conditions underlying the society. To understand social events, one must have a grasp of the material circumstances and the historical situation in which they occur. [Note: One can apply this to literature by examining the society represented in the text and looking for the economic conditions underlying it.]

**Proletariat:** The name given by Marx to the workers in a society. Its members have nothing but their labor to sell to survive. [They have no control over the means of production. The proletariat is traditionally controlled by the bourgeoisie, and it is the labor of the proletariat that produces the wealth (power/control) of the bourgeoisie.]

**Reflectionism:** A theory that the superstructure of a society mirrors its economic base and, by extension, that a text reflects the society that produced it.

**Revolutionary Consciousness:** In Marxist thinking, the stage of awareness which follows class consciousness and is stimulated by perception of the cultural forces that construct class relations, and their vulnerability to consciously directed overthrow to bring about social change. Early Marxists tended to believe that historical forces alone, inevitably and without the need for intervention, eventually would bring about the social changes Marxist theory predicted (e.g., the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat). Later thinkers held that this process could be stimulated and sped up by the education of workers to bring them first to class consciousness, and then to revolutionary consciousness. (Arnie Sanders)

**Sign Value:** An assessment of something based on how impressive it makes a person look.
Subaltern: A person of inferior status. The subordinate position of subalterns may be based on gender, class, race, ethnicity or culture. Subaltern writers seek to make their marginalized cultures which are largely unrecognized by history known and valued for their past and present.

Superstructure: The social, political, and ideological systems and institutions – for example, the values, art, and legal processes of a society – that are generated by the base.

Use Value: An appraisal of something based on what it can do.

Weltanschauung: The worldview of the author. A German word that refers to an individual's philosophy, how he or she views civilization and his or her relationship to it.
READING FROM A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

To understand the discussion that follows, you will need to read the short story “The Diamond Necklace,” by Guy de Maupassant, which begins on page 338.

Many of the principles of Marxism, and the approach to literary criticism that it spawned, have already been mentioned in the brief historical survey you just read. Now it will be helpful to examine them in more detail and to see how they can be applied to literary texts.

Economic Power

According to Marx, the moving force behind human history is its economic systems, for people’s lives are determined by their economic circumstances. A society, he says, is shaped by its “forces of production,” the methods it uses to produce the material elements of life. The economic conditions underlying the society are called material circumstances, and the ideological atmosphere they generate is known as the historical situation. This means that to explain any social or political context, any event or product, it is first necessary to understand the material and historical circumstances in which they occur.

In Guy de Maupassant’s short story “The Diamond Necklace,” we are given a clear picture of a society that has unequally distributed its goods or even the means to achieve them. Madame Loisel has no commodity or skills to sell, only her youth and beauty to be used to attract a husband. Without access to those circles where she can find a man with wealth and charm, she is doomed to stay in a powerless situation with no way to approach the elegant lifestyle she desires. The material circumstances of her society have relegated her to a dreary existence from which she can find no exit. Her husband is so conditioned to accept the situation that he does not understand her hunger to be part of a more glamorous and elegant world. He is content with potpie for his supper because he has been socially constructed to want nothing more.

If a society is shaped by its “forces of production,” the way in which society provides food, clothing, shelter, and other such necessities creates among groups of people social relations that become the culture’s foundation. In short, the means of production structure the society. Capitalism, for example, has a two-part structure consisting of the bourgeoisie, who own property and thereby control the means of production, and the proletariat, the workers controlled by the bourgeoisie and whose labor produces their wealth. (Although in American society today, we have come to use the term bourgeoisie to mean “middle class,” it originally designated the owners and the self-employed as opposed to wage earners.) Because those who control production have a power base, they have many ways to ensure that they will maintain their position. They can manipulate politics, government, education, the arts and entertainment, news media—all aspects of the culture—to that end.

The division of the bourgeoisie and proletariat in the society depicted in “The Diamond Necklace” is firmly established and maintained. Mme.

Loisel’s husband is a “petty clerk,” and although she has a wealthy friend from her convent days, she has none of the accoutrements that would fit her to attend a reception to which her husband has (with some manipulation) managed to be invited. In this story the haves are separated from the have-nots by what they own and what they lack and by their ample or limited opportunity to acquire wealth and power. The division grows more apparent and unbridgeable as the couple works at increasingly demeaning jobs to acquire the money to pay off their loans. Because of the debts owed to the bourgeoisie, incurred because of the loss of the necklace owned by Mme. Loisel’s well-to-do friend, they sink lower and lower on the social scale, losing what little hold they once had on social position or physical comfort. In the end, Mme. Loisel has become old and unkempt, unrecognizable to her friend. And in the most unjust irony of all, she learns after ten years that her efforts have been in vain. The bourgeoisie has tricked her once again by lending her a necklace not of diamonds but of cut glass.

Marx saw history as progressive and inevitable. Private ownership, he said, began with slavery, then evolved into feudalism, which was largely replaced by capitalism by the late eighteenth century. Evident in small ways as early as the sixteenth century, capitalism became a fully developed system with the growing power of the bourgeoisie in the mid-nineteenth century. At every stage, it had negative consequences because it was a flawed system that involved maintaining the power of a few by the repression of many. The result was ongoing class struggle, such as the one depicted in the “The Diamond Necklace” between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The Marxists, then, work to reveal the internal contradictions of capitalism so that the proletariat will recognize their subjugation and rise up to seize what is rightfully theirs. As Marx stated in a famous passage from The Communist Manifesto, “Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!” Although Mme. Loisel makes no move to create a revolution, she is keenly aware of the source of her sufferings. As she tells her affluent friend, “I have had some hard days since I saw you; and some miserable ones—and all because of you.” The fall of the bourgeoisie and the victory of the proletariat Marx deemed to be “equally inevitable,” and the new system born of such a revolution would be a classless society in which everyone has equal access to its goods and services, such as food, education, and medical care.

Some of the damage caused by the economics of capitalism, according to Marxists, is psychological. In its need to sell more goods, capitalism preys on the insecurities of consumers, who are urged to compete with each other in the number and quality of their possessions: a newer car, a bigger diamond engagement ring, a second house. The result is commodification, an attitude of valuing things not for their utility (use value) but for their power to impress others (sign value) or for their resale possibilities (exchange value). Both Mme. Loisel and her wealthy friend are victims of their society’s emphasis on sign value. The former is so dazzled by the glitter of jewels and gowns and fashionable people that she can find little happiness in the humble attentions of her husband-clerk, and her friend’s interest in the necklace apparently extends no further than the fact
that it is impressive evidence of her wealth, for she substitutes glass for the real thing. When the acquisition of things that possess sign value and/or exchange value becomes extreme, an individual can be said to be practicing conspicuous consumption.

Because the economic system shapes the society, the methods of production are known as the base. The social, political, and ideological systems and the institutions that they generate—the values, art, legal processes—are known as the superstructure.

Because the dominant class controls the superstructure, it is, by extension, able to control the members of the working classes. Marxists are not in complete agreement as to whether the superstructure simply reflects the base or whether it can also affect the base. The group known as reactionists (who subscribe to the vulgar Marxism mentioned earlier) sees the superstructure as being formed by the base, making literature (and other such produce) a mirror of society's consciousness. In a capitalist society, for example, the superstructure would exhibit the alienation and fragmentation that, according to the Marxists, the economic system produces. Controlled by the bourgeoisie, texts may, at least superficially, glamorize the status quo in order to maintain a stable division of power and means. Readers may not be aware of manipulation, especially when it appears in the form of entertainment, but it is less effective for its subtle presentation.

Other Marxists, who assume that the superstructure is capable of shaping the base, recognize that literature (as well as art, entertainment, and such) can be a means for the working class to change the system. By promoting their own culture, they can create a new superstructure and eventually a different base. Even Marx and Engels admitted that some aspects of the superstructure, such as philosophy and art, are "relatively autonomous," making it possible to use them to alter ideologies.

The economic base in "The Diamond Necklace" is significant to all that is depicted in the story. Mme. Loisel's husband is a clerk whose employers have power over his professional life and over their social relationships with him. He and his employers lead very different kinds of lives. The bourgeoisie give elegant parties, while the clerk and his wife eat poqie. The "petty clerk" is not expected to fraternize with his betters except by the rare invitation (so eagerly sought after by him) that comes his way. And on such occasions, it is with difficulty that Mme. Loisel can achieve the appropriate appearance—dress, jewels, wrap. As they take on less attractive jobs to pay back what is owed, they are even less acceptable in the corridors of wealth and power. In the end, as noted, Mme. Loisel's friend does not even recognize her.

To examine the economic forces in a narrative, you can begin by asking questions such as these:

- Who are the powerful people in the society depicted in the text?
- Who are the powerless people?
- Are the two groups depicted with equal attention?
- Which groups are you encouraged to admire?

Materialism versus Spirituality

Marx maintained that reality is material, not spiritual. Our culture, he said, is not based on some divine essence or the Platonic forms or on contemplation of timeless abstractions. It is not our philosophical or religious beliefs that make us who we are, for we are not spiritual beings but socially constructed ones. We are not products of divine design but creations of our own cultural and social circumstances.

To understand ourselves, we must look to the concrete, observable world we live in day by day. The material world will show us reality. It will show us, for example, that people live in social groups, making all of our actions interrelated. By examining the relationships among socioeconomic classes and by analyzing the superstructure, we can achieve insight into ourselves and our society. For example, the critic who looks at instances of class conflict or at the institutions, entertainment, news media, legal, and other systems of a society discovers how the distribution of economic power undergirds the society. Such analyses uncover the base (the economic system) and the social classes it has produced. Because the base and the superstructure are under the control of the dominant class, the people's worldview is likely to be false; the critic's obligation is to expose the oppression and consequent alienation that have been covered over. The Marxist is rarely content simply to expose the failings of capitalism and often goes on to argue for the fair redistribution of goods by the government.

It is the material world that has created Mme. Loisel, for example, and it is the material world that destroys her. Her desires for expensive objects and the circles in which they are found, generated by the capitalist system she lives in rather than by any character flaw, leads her to make a foolish request of a friend. When she loses the "diamond" necklace, she, too, is lost. Her relationship with her friend, as well as any hope for a return to the glittering world of the reception, is shattered. She is destroyed not by spiritual failure but by an economic system that has created a superstructure that will not allow her to have a better life. She is trapped by material circumstances, and the final revelation about the false jewels will only deepen her sense of alienation and powerlessness, according to a Marxist perspective.

Such insights come from asking questions such as the following:

- What does the setting tell you about the distribution of power and wealth?
- Is there evidence of conspicuous consumption?
- Does the society that is depicted value things for their usefulness, for their potential for resale or trade, or for their power to convey social status?
Do you find in the text itself evidence that the work is a product of the culture in which it originated?

Where do you see characters making decisions based on abstract principles, but on the economic system in which they live?

**Class Conflict**

One of the basic assumptions of Marxism is that the "forces of production," the way goods and services are produced, will, in a capitalist society, inevitably generate conflict between social classes created by the way economic resources are used and who profits from them. More specifically, the struggle will take place between the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production by owning the natural and human resources, and the proletariat, who supply the labor that allows the owners to make a profit. The conflict is sometimes realized as a clash of management and labor, sometimes simply as friction between socioeconomic classes. They are two parts of a whole that struggle against each other, not just physically but also ideologically. Marx referred to this confrontation as dialectical materialism. Actually the term includes more than class conflict, for it refers to the view that all change is the product of the struggle between opposites generated by contradictions inherent in all events, ideas, and movements. A thesis collides with its antitheses, finally reaching synthesis, which generates its own antithesis, and so on, thereby producing change.

The Marxist is aware that the working class does not always recognize the system in which it has been caught. The dominant class, using its power to make the prevailing system seem to be the logical, natural one, entraps the proletariat into holding the sense of identity and worth that the bourgeoisie wants them to hold, one that will allow the powerful to remain in control. Monsieur Loisel, for instance, is content with his lot. He aspires to be nothing more than what he is and has difficulty understanding his wife's dreams. As for Mme. Loisel, she longs for things that "most other women in her situation would not have noticed." She believes herself born for luxuries—that is, born as a misplaced member of the middle class. They both experience the consequent debilitation and alienation described by Marx. Before the loss of the necklace, M. Loisel is given little credit for what he does. As a "petty clerk," he has little personal connection to his labor and is given no credit for what he produces. After the loss of the necklace, the situation is intensified, for the couple is finally shut out of all social contact with bourgeois society. In the end, Mme. Loisel moves to carry out what Marx calls upon the proletariat to do. She realizes that her life has been controlled by others. Freed of the debt she has owed her wealthy friend, she determines to free herself of the social entanglement to her friend by speaking openly and honestly at last. In doing so, she becomes painfully aware of the unsuspected depth of the control the latter has had over her. The necklace is false. She has been stripped of her dreams and forced to suffer for nothing. Finally, by speaking clearly, she engages in revolution by refusing to want any longer what the bourgeoisie values.

You can find evidence of class conflict and its repercussions by asking some of the following questions about the text you are analyzing:

- How many different social classes do the characters represent?
- Where do they struggle with each other?
- Do you find repression and manipulation of workers by owners?
- Is there evidence of alienation and fragmentation?
- Does the bourgeoisie in the text, either consciously or unconsciously, routinely repress and manipulate less powerful groups? If so, what are the tools they use? News media? Religion? Literature? Art?
- Do the working-class characters realize their lack of power?
- Does the work of literature advocate reform or revolution, either overtly or obliquely?

**Art, Literature, and Ideologies**

Ideology is a term that turns up frequently in Marxist discussions. It refers to a belief system produced, according to Marxists, by the relations between the different classes in a society, classes that have come about because of the society's modes of production. An ideology can be positive, leading to a better world for the people, or it can be negative, serving the interests of a repressive system. The latter rarely presents itself as an ideology, however. Instead, it appears to be a reasonable, natural worldview because it is in the self-interest of those in power to convince people that it is so. Even a flawed system must appear to be a success. An ideology dictated by the dominant class functions to secure its power. When such cultural conditioning leads the people to accept a system that is unfavorable for them without protest or questioning—that is, to accept it as the logical way for things to be—they have developed a false consciousness. Marxism works to rid society of such deceptions by exposing the ideological failings that have been concealed. It takes responsibility for making people aware of how they have unconsciously accepted the subservient, powerless roles in their society that have been prescribed for them by others.

Marx himself was a well-educated, widely read German intellectual who could discourse on the poetry, fiction, and drama of more than a single culture. He enjoyed the theater and frequently made references to literature of all kinds. He was aware, however, that art and literature are an attractive and effective means of convincing the proletariat that their oppression is just and right. Literature is a particularly powerful tool for maintaining the social status quo because it operates under the guise of being entertainment, making it possible to influence an audience even when its members are unaware of being swayed. Because it does not seem to be didactic, it can lead people to accept an unfavorable socioeconomic system and to affirm their place in that system as the proper one. By doing so, it serves the economic interests of those who are in power. Marx points out that controlling what is produced is not difficult because those who create art must flatter (or not offend) their clients who pay for it—the bourgeoisie.
Although Marxist views about literature coexist comfortably with the principles of some other schools of criticism, they stand in direct opposition to the concerns of the formalists. Marxist critics see a literary work not as an aesthetic object to be experienced for its own intrinsic worth but as a product of the socioeconomic aspects of a particular culture. In general, Marxists accept that critics must do more than explain how a work conforms to certain literary conventions or examine its aesthetic qualities. Marxist critics must be concerned with identifying the ideology of a work and pointing out its worth or its deficiencies. The good Marxist critic is careful to avoid the kind of approach that concerns itself with form and craft at the expense of examining social realities. Instead, the Marxist critic will search out the depiction of inequities in social classes, an imbalance of goods and power among people, or manipulation of the worker by the bourgeoisie and will then point out the injustice of that society. If a text presents a society in which class conflict has been resolved, all people share equally in power and wealth, and the proletariat has risen to its rightful place, then the critic can point to a text in which social justice has taken place, citing it as a model of social action.

In the former instance, the Marxist critic operates a warning system that alerts readers to social wrongs; in the latter, he is a mentor to the proletariat, pointing out how they can free themselves from the powerless position in which they have been placed. The intent of both approaches is highly political, aimed as they are at replacing existing systems with socialist ones. The function of literature is to make the populace aware of social ills and sympathetic to action that will wipe those ills away.

The ideology that a text inevitably carries can be found in either its content or its form. That is, a text has both subject matter and a manner of presentation that can either promote or criticize the historical circumstance in which it is set. To many Marxists, it is content that is the more significant of the two; the "what" is more revealing than the "how."

The "what" is important because it overtly expresses an ideology, a particular view of the social relations of its time and place. It may support the prevailing ideology of the culture, or it can actively seek to show the ideology's shortcomings and failings. It can strengthen a reader's values or reveal flaws through characters and events and editorial comment.

If the subject matter is presented sympathetically, then it depicts the social relationships—laws, customs, and values—that are approved by that society in a way that legitimates them and, by extension, the underlying economic system that has produced them. If, on the other hand, it criticizes the prevailing ideology, it can be equally powerful and persuasive. By depicting the negative aspects of a socioeconomic system—inequity, oppression, and alienation—literature can awaken those who are unfavorably treated by that system. It can make them aware that they are not free, that they (members of the working class) are controlled by the oppressive bourgeoisie (a self-appointed elite). It can be a means of changing the superstructure and the base because it can arouse people to resist their treatment and overthrow unfair systems. At the very least, it can make social inequities and imbalances of power public knowledge.

What is the ideology expressed by the content of "The Diamond Necklace"? It is doubtful that de Maupassant wrote the story to foment revolution among his countrymen. Yet, in it the destructive power of the bourgeoisie's cool lack of concern for the proletariat is unmistakably depicted. The minor clerk and his wife are almost beneath notice to those who employ them, and the lower the couple falls in their ability to live well, or comfortably, or to survive at all, the less visible or recognizable they become. The denial of beautiful clothes and jewels to Mme. Loisel (while they are available to others no more deserving than she) and the suffering that such inequities cause her carry with them a clear social commentary. Such a society is uncaring and unjust. It exists on assumptions that allow the powerful to keep their comfortable positions only if the powerless remain oppressed and convinced that it is right that they are oppressed.

The manner of presentation (the "how") can also be instrumental in revealing the ideology of a text, especially when it brings the reader close to the people and events being depicted. For that reason, realistic presentations that clearly depict the time and place in which they are set are preferable to many a Marxist reader because they make it easier to identify with an ideology or to object to it. However, others find in modern and postmodern forms evidence of the fragmentation of contemporary society and the alienation of the individual in it. Although the narrative that is presented in an unrealistic manner—that is, through stream of consciousness or surrealism—may make a less overt identification with the socioeconomic ills of capitalism or with socialist principles, it can nevertheless criticize contradictions and inequities found in the world that capitalism has created. The effect of forms on the development of social commentary in a text can be understood by imagining how "The Diamond Necklace" would be changed if, instead of being a realistic depiction given by an omniscient narrator, the story were presented as an internal monologue taking place in the mind of Mme. Loisel or that of her husband or even that of her convent friend. In that presentation, the ideology would shift with each one's perception of what the social system is and should be, as well as what each has to lose or gain by changing it.

Believing that all products of a culture, including literature, are the result of socioeconomic and ideological conditions, the Marxist critic must have not only an understanding of the subject matter and the form of a work but also some grasp of the historical context in which it was written. The critic must also be aware of the worldview of the author, who wrote not as an individual but as one who reflects the views of a group of people. Such grounding helps the reader identify the ideology that inevitably exists in a text, so that he or she can then analyze how that ideology supports or subverts the power structure it addresses.

Asking some of the following questions will lead you to a deeper understanding of the work you are analyzing. Your answers should lead you to insights about the ideology expressed in the text and perhaps about yourself.

- What ideology is revealed by your examination of economic power, materialism, and class conflict in a given work?
WRITING A MARXIST ANALYSIS

There is no prescribed form for writing a Marxist analysis. Doing so is simply a matter of applying Marxist principles in a clearly ordered manner. As a result, one such written critique may look quite different from another but be equally Marxist in its content.

Prewriting

If you have thoughtfully answered the questions listed in the previous section, you will have material to begin your prewriting. If you take those items that yielded the most information or generated your strongest opinions and use them as the basis of a free-write, your thinking will begin to develop along some identifiable lines. It may be that you need only see where the responses you made to some of the questions are evident in the text. Those passages should provide you with examples of your generalizations.

Some questions that will require you to go outside the text for answers, but that can be rewarding to pursue, are those that deal with the historical circumstances of the writer and the text. You may want to take time to do some library work to examine the following topics:

- What are the values of the author's time and place? Where are they reflected in the text?
- What biographical elements of the author's life can account for his or her ideology? For example, to what social class did the author's family belong? Where is that evident in the text?
- What are the socioeconomic conditions of the writer's culture? Where are they reflected in the text?
- Who read the work when it was first published? How was it initially received? Was it widely read? Banned? Favorably or unfavorably reviewed?
- What were the circumstances of its publication? Was it quickly accepted, widely distributed, highly promoted? Or was it published with difficulty? Was it given limited distribution?
Regardless of which topics you ultimately decide to develop, the four most important goals of your prewriting are (1) to clarify your understanding of the ideology of the work; (2) to identify the elements of the text that present the ideology; (3) to determine how those elements promote it—that is, convince the reader to accept it; and (4) to assess how sympathetic or opposed it is to Marxist principles. It is important to remember that a text does not have to be Marxist in its orientation to yield itself to an interesting reading from this perspective. Even one that is capitalist or sexist in its outlook can be fruitfully examined to determine how it attracts the reader into accepting its ideology.

It is also reassuring to recognize that Marxist critics do not always agree with each other’s reading of a given text. If your interpretation differs from that of others, it is not necessarily wrong because no single Marxist reading of a work results even when the same principles are applied. In the same manner, Marxism lends itself to combination with other schools of criticism, giving it even more possibilities for variation.

**Drafting and Revising**

**The Introduction** In a Marxist analysis, it can be effective to announce the ideology of the text and its relationship to Marxist views at the outset. Because the rest of your essay will be concerned with where and how the ideology is worked out, it is important that your reader share your understanding of the stance taken by the text. If you find this approach to be too dry, boring, and didactic, you might begin with a summary of an incident in the work that illustrates the social relationships of the characters or other socioeconomic aspect of the society as preparation for your statement of the work’s overall worldview.

**The Body** The central part of your essay will demonstrate the acceptance or rejection of Marxist principles in the text you are analyzing. It is in this part that the organizational principles will be of your own design. That is, you may choose to discuss each major character, assess the nature of the social institutions depicted, or point out the struggles between groups of people. The approach you take will in large part be dictated by the work itself. For example, an analysis of "The Diamond Necklace" could be built around the decline of the power and place of M. and Mme. Loisel as they are forced to repay the cost of the necklace, or it could illustrate the unjust treatment they receive from those in the powerful, controlling classes of society. It could even compare and contrast the differences between the lives of the Loisels and those of the rich and powerful. Of course, these are overlapping issues, and it is difficult to focus on one without noting the other. Once you have addressed any such topic, you will quickly find yourself with comments to make about others that are related to it.

Because there is no particular form to follow in writing a Marxist analysis, you may fall back on some of the techniques discussed in Chapter 2, “Familiar Approaches.” It might be helpful to think about the usefulness of explication, comparison and contrast, and analysis. In any case, during revision you will want to be sure that each of your points is equally developed and that all are linked together in a logical sequence. Making an outline (after drafting) to check whether you have managed to provide adequate coverage and coherence is helpful because it can give you an overview of what you have done. If the parts are not balanced in length, depth, or content, you will need to make adjustments.

**The Conclusion** The conclusion of a Marxist analysis often takes either the form of an endorsement of classless societies in which everyone has equal access to power and goods or of criticism of repressive societies when that is not the case. The conclusion may once again make a case for social reform, pointing out where the literary work under consideration has either supported or rejected social change. In either case, to write the conclusion you will need to consider how the ideology in the text affirms or conflicts with your own.

That assessment may lead to a second possibility for your conclusion. That is, you may find it interesting to reflect on what the work has revealed to you about your own ideology. Perhaps you discovered that you have uncritically accepted the principles of socioeconomic-political movements that are controlling and oppressive. Perhaps your analysis has made you aware that principles you took as "given" or "natural" or "just the way things are" are actually socially constructed and can be changed in ways that make society more just and balanced. If so, explaining your realization can provide a powerful ending to your analysis.
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Sample Response Paper: Applying Marxist Criticism to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”
19 Aug. 2014

Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. Examined through the lens of Marxist Criticism, Jackson’s story “The Lottery” reveals how the economic and social wellbeing of the community is linked to its rituals, which in turn paint a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

While the villagers do not seem to know precisely why the annual ritual sacrifice is necessary, nor does Jackson choose to reveal the rationale to the reader, suggesting that religious rites and brutality have no reason and need no reason to exist, it is believed by the villagers to be necessary for the continuing economic and social wellbeing of the community. Old Man Warner, the oldest resident, reminds the others of the saying, “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (967), which makes the most direct connection between the ritual and prosperity, suggesting that the villagers or their ancestors, rather, believed that a good harvest was made possible by this ritual sacrifice. The fact that the village is still a farming community makes it
clear that this ideology linking the ritual and its effect is still relevant and pervasive even if the majority of the community cannot remember or recite it. Their livelihood is clearly foremost on their minds as the men, who are responsible for providing that livelihood, talk about “planting and rain, tractors and taxes” (964), all of which play a role in their collective and individual economic wellbeing, whether to distract themselves from the horror or to remind themselves of why they participate in it. Tessie Hutchinson’s explanation of her lateness being due to not wanting to leave her unwashed dishes in the sink adds to this picture of economic wellbeing; after all, for there to be dishes to wash, there must have been food to dirty them with. While it is men’s role to provide sustenance, it is women’s to receive and prepare it, so they are all participants in and contributors to the daily rituals of their survival and wellbeing, and they are all, therefore, also participants in and perpetuators of the annual ritual sacrifice. As long as they cling to the ideology that their wellbeing is dependent on this ritual savagery, they will all also participate in and perpetuate it.

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human
tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson's appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.