

Marxist Criticism

Marxist criticism pays attention to the attitudes and ideas presented in a text as relates to:

- Economic, social and political distribution of power
- How economic systems affect the lives and perspectives of people (characters, the author)
- Socioeconomic class as related to justice and oppression
- The divisive power of class

Identifying features:

Marxism is the theoretical grounding for, among other things, communism as a political movement. **However**, rather than primarily promoting communist ideologies, *Marxist criticism* takes the ideas Marx had and applies them to understanding texts. Marxist critics view texts as material products to be understood as supporting, critiquing, or otherwise commenting on contemporaneous power relationships. In literature, Marxist criticism looks at how the classes interact in a text and how power distribution and class-based prejudice and oppression play out in the story and in the characters. In addition, Marxist criticism interprets symbols and narratives as stemming from economic status—that is, the class of the author and the social, political, and economic realities of his/her world are keenly important to the stories and symbols he/she chooses to present.

Marxist criticism is most concerned about how power (economic, social, political) is distributed within a text, and how those power relationships relate to our own realities. Does the text teach us about a more just or equitable way to imagine our world? Does it point out the problems with the way we distribute power in our own society? Or does it simply reinforce unjust hierarchical power structures?

Connections to other critical lenses:

Like deconstruction, Marxist criticism is also in the business of identifying and critiquing master narratives/binaries; however, Marxist critics are most concerned with master narratives that relate to class and power. Marxist criticism questions master narratives that conceal, promote, justify, or rationalize hierarchy and class-based division or oppression.

Relevant questions to ask of a text from a Marxist critical lens:

- What role does class play in the work; what is the author's analysis of class relations?
- In what ways does the work serve as propaganda for the status quo; or does it try to undermine it?
- What does the work say about oppression—or are social conflicts ignored or blamed elsewhere?
- Who has the power (social, political, economic) in the text? What does this tell you about the text's stance toward power relationships in general?
- Are we meant to sympathize with characters who have less money and power, or are we meant to sympathize with the powerful and/or rich characters? What does this say about the text's attitudes towards class?

To write a literary analysis of a text from a Marxist perspective, start with one (or more) of these questions and try to develop a response to it with evidence from the text.