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Marxist criticism

Students new to the study of critical theory often ask why we study Marxist criticism now that the Communist Bloc in Europe has failed, thereby proving that Marxism is not a viable theory. In addition to ignoring the existence of China, among other communist countries, such a question overlooks two important facts. First, beyond some relatively small and relatively short-lived communes, there has never been, as far as we know, a true Marxist society on the face of the earth. Communist societies, though they claim to be based on the principles developed by Karl Marx (1818–1883), have been, in reality, oligarchies in which a small group of leaders controls the money and the guns and forces its policies on a population kept in line through physical intimidation. Second, even if communist countries were true Marxist societies and even if all of them had failed, Marxist theory would still give us a meaningful way to understand history and current events. Indeed, one could use Marxism to interpret the failure of Marxist regimes. However, before we can attempt a Marxist interpretation of such political events, or of events of any kind, we must first, of course, understand Marxist theory.

The fundamental premises of Marxism

What exactly is Marxist theory? Let's begin to answer that question by answering another: what would Marxist critics say about the preceding chapter on psychoanalytic criticism? They would say that, by focusing our attention on the individual psyche and its roots in the family complex, psychoanalysis distracts our attention from the real forces that create human experience: the economic systems that structure human societies. Indeed, Marxist critics would have the same complaint, more or less, about all the other theories discussed in this book. If a theory does not foreground the economic realities of human culture, then it misunderstands human culture. For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education,

philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on. Thus, economics is the *base* on which the *superstructure* of social/political/ideological realities is built. Economic power therefore always includes social and political power as well, which is why many Marxists today refer to *socioeconomic class*, rather than economic class, when talking about the class structure.

In Marxist terminology, economic conditions are referred to as *material* circumstances, and the social/political/ideological atmosphere generated by material conditions is called the *historical* situation. For the Marxist critic, neither human events (in the political or personal domain) nor human productions (from nuclear submarines to television shows) can be understood without understanding the specific material/historical circumstances in which those events and productions occur. That is, all human events and productions have specific material/historical causes. An accurate picture of human affairs cannot be obtained by the search for abstract, timeless essences or principles but only by understanding concrete conditions in the world. Therefore, Marxist analysis of human events and productions focuses on relationships among socioeconomic classes, both within a society and among societies, and it explains all human activities in terms of the distribution and dynamics of economic power. And Marxist *praxis*, or methodology, dictates that theoretical ideas can be judged to have value only in terms of their concrete applications, that is, only in terms of their applicability to the real world.

From a Marxist perspective, differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. For the real battle lines are drawn, to put the matter simply, between the "haves" and the "have-nots," between the *bourgeoisie*—those who control the world's natural, economic, and human resources—and the *proletariat*, the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor—the mining, the factory work, the ditch digging, the railroad building—that fills the coffers of the rich. Unfortunately, those in the proletariat are often the last to recognize this fact; they usually permit differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender to separate them into warring factions that accomplish little or no social change. Few Marxists today believe, as Marx did, that the proletariat will one day spontaneously develop the class consciousness needed to rise up in violent revolution against their oppressors and create a classless society. However, were the proletariat of any given country to act as a group, regardless of their differences (for example, were they all to vote for the same political candidates, boycott the same companies, and go on strike until their needs were met), the current power structure would be radically altered.

The class system in America

It has become increasingly difficult in the United States to clearly place people either in the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. How do we classify, for example, the person who employs several workers in a small, family-owned business but whose yearly profits are less than the annual wages of a salesperson working for a big corporation? In other words, in this country at least, some workers earn more than some owners. To complicate matters further, the words *bourgeoisie* (noun) and *bourgeois* (adjective) have come to refer in everyday speech to the middle class in general, with no distinction between owners and wage earners. At this point in history, therefore, it might be more useful to classify Americans according to socioeconomic lifestyle, without reference to the manner in which their income is acquired. For the sake of clarity, let's take a moment to do so now by drawing a simplified sketch of the major socioeconomic divisions in contemporary America.

Whether or not we would agree on which individuals belong to the bourgeoisie and which to the proletariat, most of us can observe the striking difference in socioeconomic lifestyle among the following groups: the homeless, who have few, if any, material possessions and little hope of improvement; the poor, whose limited educational and career opportunities keep them struggling to support their families and living in fear of becoming homeless; the financially established, who own nice homes and cars and can usually afford to send their children to college; the well-to-do, who can afford two or more expensive homes, several cars, and luxury items; and the extremely wealthy, such as the owners of large, well-established corporations, for whom money (mansions, limousines, personal airplanes, yachts) is no problem whatsoever. We might loosely refer to these five groups as America's underclass, lower class, middle class, upper class, and "aristocracy."

Clearly, members of the underclass and the lower class are economically oppressed: they suffer the ills of economic privation, are hardest hit by economic recessions, and have limited means of improving their lot. In sharp contrast, members of the upper class and "aristocracy" are economically privileged: they enjoy luxurious lifestyles, are least affected by economic recessions, and have a great deal of financial security. But what about members of the middle class? Are they economically oppressed or economically privileged? Of course, the answer is probably both. Their socioeconomic lifestyle is certainly better than that of the classes below them, but they'll probably never own a mansion; they have more financial stability than the lower classes, yet they are often hard hit by economic recessions and usually have good reason to worry about their financial future; they benefit from institutionalized forms of economic security, such as

good medical insurance and pension plans, but they shoulder an enormous (and, many would argue, unfair) tax burden relative to their income.

Why don't the economically oppressed fight back? What keeps the lower classes "in their place" and at the mercy of the wealthy? At least for the poor and homeless in America today, the struggle to survive is certainly a factor in keeping them down. Who has the time to become politically active, or even politically aware, when one is struggling just to stay alive and feed one's children? Other elements oppressing them are the police and other government strong-arm agencies, who, under government orders, have mistreated lower-class and underclass poor perceived as a threat to the power structure, such as the striking workers who were arrested, beaten, or killed in the early days of American labor unions or the homeless who were routed from their cardboard boxes in New York's Central Park a few years ago because their shanties, in effect, "ruined the view" from the windows of the wealthy living in posh apartments nearby. The poor are oppressed even more effectively, however, by ideology.

The role of ideology

For Marxism, an *ideology* is a belief system, and all belief systems are products of cultural conditioning. For example, capitalism, communism, Marxism, patriotism, religion, ethical systems, humanism, environmentalism, astrology, and karate are all ideologies. The critical theories we will study in this book are all ideologies. Even our assumption that nature behaves according to the laws of science is an ideology. However, although almost any experience or field of study we can think of has an ideological component, not all ideologies are equally productive or desirable. Undesirable ideologies promote repressive political agendas and, in order to ensure their acceptance among the citizenry, pass themselves off as natural ways of seeing the world instead of acknowledging themselves as ideologies. "It's natural for men to hold leadership positions because their biological superiority renders them more physically, intellectually, and emotionally capable than women" is a sexist ideology that sells itself as a function of nature, rather than as a product of cultural belief. "Every family wants to own its own home on its own land" is a capitalist ideology that sells itself as natural by pointing, for example, to the fact that almost all Americans want to own their own property, without acknowledging that this desire is created in us by the capitalist culture in which we live. Many Native American nations, in contrast, don't believe that land is something that can be owned. For them, it's like trying to own the air we breathe.

By posing as natural ways of seeing the world, repressive ideologies prevent us from understanding the material/historical conditions in which we live because

they refuse to acknowledge that those conditions have any bearing on the way we see the world. Marxism, a nonrepressive ideology, acknowledges that it is an ideology. Marxism works to make us constantly aware of all the ways in which we are products of material/historical circumstances and of the repressive ideologies that serve to blind us to this fact in order to keep us subservient to the ruling power system. Although Marxist theorists differ in their estimation of the degree to which we are "programmed" by ideology, all agree that the most successful ideologies are *not* recognized as ideologies but are thought to be natural ways of seeing the world by the people who subscribe to them. Thus, although we could argue that the economic interests of middle-class America would best be served by a political alliance with the poor in order to attain a more equitable distribution of America's enormous wealth among the middle and lower classes, in political matters the middle class generally sides with the wealthy against the poor.

To cite one simple example, the middle class tends to resent the poor because so much middle-class tax money goes to government programs to help the poor. However, the middle class fails to realize two important socioeconomic realities: (1) that it is the wealthy in positions of power who decide who pays the most taxes and how the money will be spent (in other words, it is the wealthy who make the middle class support the poor), and (2) that the poor receive but a small portion of the funds earmarked for them because so much of it goes, through kickbacks and "creative" bookkeeping, into the pockets of the wealthy who control our social services and the middle-class employees who administer them. What is the ideology that blinds the middle class to the socioeconomic inequities in contemporary America? In large part, the middle class is blinded by their belief in the *American dream*, which tells them that financial success is simply the product of initiative and hard work. Therefore, if some people are poor, it is because they are shiftless and lazy.

In this country, we believe that it is natural to want to "get ahead," to want to own a better house and wear better clothes. The key word here is *better*, which refers not only to "better than I had before" but also to "better than other people have." That is, embedded within the belief in "getting ahead" is the belief in *competition* as a natural or necessary mode of being. After all, haven't we learned from science that nature demands the "survival of the fittest"? And doesn't this view of human behavior fit perfectly with the belief in rugged individualism upon which America was founded and without which it would not have become the great nation it is today? For that matter, isn't all of the above—getting ahead, competition, and rugged individualism—part and parcel of the American dream, according to which we are all born equal and are free to advance as far as our own "get-up-and-go" will take us?

While this view of human endeavor may seem, to most Americans at least, quite natural and proper—and we can certainly point to the success of self-made men like Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln to underscore its apparent rightness—Marxist analysis reveals that the American dream is an ideology, a belief system, not an innate or natural way of seeing the world. And like all ideologies that support the socioeconomic inequities of capitalist countries like ours—that is, countries in which the means of production (natural, financial, and human resources) are privately owned and in which those who own them inevitably become the dominant class—the American dream blinds us to the enormities of its own failure, past and present: the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, the virtual enslavement of indentured servants, the abuses suffered by immigrant populations, the widening economic gulf between America's rich and poor, the growing ranks of the homeless and hungry, the enduring socioeconomic barriers against women and people of color, and the like. In other words, the success of the American dream—the acquisition of a wealthy lifestyle for a few—rests on the misery of the many. And it is the power of ideology, of our belief in the naturalness and fairness of this dream, that has blinded us to the harsh realities it masks.

Some of us might want to pause at this point to ask, "But isn't the American dream an ideal? Although our ideals may fail in practice, shouldn't we continue to aspire to them? Should we abandon, for example, the ideal that human life is sacred just because we sometimes fail to live up to it?" For Marxism, when an ideal functions to mask its own failure, it is a false ideal, or *false consciousness*, whose real purpose is to promote the interests of those in power. In the case of the American dream, then, the question for Marxist analysis is, "How does the American dream enlist the support of all Americans, even of those who fail to achieve it, in promoting the interests of those in power?"

The answer, at least in part, is that the American dream, much like the state lotteries or the big-bucks sweepstakes that are its latest incarnation, opens the possibility that anyone can win, and, like gambling addicts, we cling to that possibility. In fact, the less financial security we have, the more we need something to hope for. The American dream also tells us what we want to hear: that we are all "as good as" the wealthiest among us. It's not supposed to matter that the wealthy don't think I'm as good as they are as long as I believe it's true. And it's not supposed to matter that "as good as" doesn't mean entitled to the same health care, material comforts, or social privileges, including the privilege of hiring the best lawyers should the need arise. In my need to "feel good about myself," especially if my life is burdened with financial worries, I will cling to the ego gratification offered by the American dream. Analogously, if I want to avoid the guilt that accompanies my acquisition of a large fortune while so many of my fellow citizens can barely eke out a living, I will be comforted by the assurance I receive from the American dream that I deserve whatever wealth I have the initiative to amass. Indeed, the power of the American dream to mask material/historical reality is such that it can invoke an America for whom class doesn't matter and plunk that ideology down right in the middle of an America whose class system is too complex for me to map, beyond the rough outline provided earlier.

From a Marxist perspective, the role of ideology in maintaining those in power is so important that we should briefly examine a few more examples so that we can see how it works. *Classism*, for example, is an ideology that equates one's value as a human being with the social class to which one belongs: the higher one's social class, the better one is assumed to be because quality is "in the blood," that is, inborn. From a classist perspective, people at the top of the social scale are naturally superior to those below them: those at the top are more intelligent, more responsible, more trustworthy, more ethical, and so on. People at the bottom of the social scale, it follows, are naturally shiftless, lazy, and irresponsible. Therefore, it is only right and natural that those from the highest social class should hold all the positions of power and leadership because they are naturally suited to such roles and are the only ones who can be trusted to perform them properly.

Patriotism is an ideology that keeps poor people fighting wars against poor people from other countries (one way or another, sufficient money can generally keep one out of the armed forces during war time or, at least, out of the combat units) while the rich on both sides rake in the profits of war-time economy. Because patriotism leads the poor to see themselves as members of a nation, separate from other nations, rather than as members of a worldwide oppressed class opposed to all privileged classes including those from their own country, it prevents the poor from banding together to improve their condition globally.

Religion, which Karl Marx called "the opiate of the masses," is an ideology that helps to keep the faithful poor satisfied with their lot in life, or at least tolerant of it, much as a tranquilizer might do. The question of God's existence is not the fundamental issue for Marxist analysis; rather, what human beings do in God's name—organized religion—is the focus. For example, while many Christian religious groups work to feed, clothe, house, and even educate the world's poor, the religious tenets that are disseminated along with the food and clothing include the conviction that the poor, if they remain nonviolent, will find their reward in heaven. Obviously, the 10 percent (or less) of the world's population who own 90 percent (or more) of the world's wealth have a vested interest in promoting this aspect of Christian belief among the poor and historically have exploited Christianity for just this purpose. Indeed, the Bible has been used successfully to justify and promote the enslavement of Africans in America and the subordination of women and nonstraight people.

Rugged individualism, which, as we have seen, is a cornerstone of the American dream, is an ideology that romanticizes the individual who strikes out alone in pursuit of a goal not easily achieved, a goal that often involves risk and one that most people would not readily undertake. In the past, such a goal would have been, for example, the rush for gold and silver on the American frontier, an attempt in which many individuals risked losing their lives. Today, such a goal might be the undertaking of a high-risk business, in which one risks losing all one's money. Although it may sound like an admirable character trait, Marxist thinkers consider rugged individualism an oppressive ideology because it puts self-interest above the needs—and even above the survival—of other people. By keeping the focus on "me" instead of on "us," rugged individualism works against the well-being of society as a whole and of underprivileged people in particular. Rugged individualism also gives us the illusion that we make our own decisions without being significantly influenced by ideology of any sort when, in fact, we're all influenced by various ideologies all the time, whether we realize it or not.

Consumerism, or shop-'till-you-drop-ism, is another cornerstone of the American dream. Consumerism is an ideology that says "I'm only as good as what I buy." Thus, it simultaneously fulfills two ideological purposes: it gives me the illusion that I can be "as good as" the wealthy if I can purchase what they purchase or a reasonable facsimile thereof (albeit on credit) and it fills the coffers of the wealthy who manufacture and sell the consumer products I buy and who reap the 15–20 percent interest on my credit-card bills.

Of course, there are many more capitalist ideologies we could analyze. These few are intended just to illustrate in general terms the Marxist view of repressive ideologies. Our goal as Marxist critics is to identify the ideology at work in cultural productions—literature, films, paintings, music, television programs, commercial advertisements, education, popular philosophy, religion, forms of entertainment, and so on—and to analyze how that ideology supports or undermines the socioeconomic system (the power structure) in which that cultural production plays a significant role. While Marxists believe that all social phenomena, from child-rearing practices to environmental concerns, are cultural productions—and that culture cannot be separated from the socioeconomic system that produced it—many Marxists are interested in cultural productions in the narrower sense of the word: for example, art, music, film, theater, literature, and television. For these critics, culture, in this narrower sense, is the primary bearer of ideology because it reaches so many people in what seems to be an innocent form: entertainment. When we are being entertained, our guard is down, so to speak, and we are especially vulnerable to ideological programming.

Consider, for example, a representation of a homeless man I saw recently on a situation comedy on television. The man sleeps every night in a bus station, where the sitcom is set. We see him in a public phone booth, talking on the phone, when he is interrupted by one of the workers, who gives him his mail. (Big laugh: the guy hangs around the station so much that the post office thinks it's his home!) He inspects his mail and makes a casual comment like, "I wish the post office would do something about all this junk mail!" (Another big laugh: instead of complaining about—or even noticing— the situation he's in, he's complaining about junk mail!) The scene may seem innocent enough, but a Marxist critic would see in it an implied message that serves the capitalist power structure in America: "Don't worry about the homeless; they're doing all right for themselves" or, worse, "The homeless like to live this way; it's as natural to them as our lifestyle is to us."

How does the American dream contribute to just such a view of the homeless? It does so by promoting the myth, which we discussed earlier, that financial success can be achieved in this country merely through initiative and hard work. Therefore, the poor must be shiftless and lazy. We are thus encouraged to forget, for example, that a homeless person can't get a job without an address and can't get an address without a job, that most homeless people become so due to economic circumstances wholly beyond their control, and that many people are homeless today because they were evicted from the mental health institutions closed during the Reagan administration and are, therefore, in need of increasingly expensive medication and/or therapy as well as homes.

Human behavior, the commodity, and the family

Although the later works of Karl Marx focus on economics, on the workings of society as a whole, rather than on the individual, it is important to remember that he began as a student of human behavior—we might even say a social psychologist—in his own right. For example, his concern over the rise of industrialism in the mid-nineteenth century was a concern for the effects of factory work on people who were forced to sell their labor to the industries that were replacing independent artisans and farmers. Because factory workers produced such large quantities of products, none of which bore their names or any other mark of their individual contributions, Marx observed that they became disassociated not only from the products they produced but from their own labor as well, and he noted the debilitating effects of what he called *alienated labor* on the laborer and on the society as a whole.

Similarly, Marx's concern over the rise of a capitalist economy was a concern for the effects of capitalism on human values. In a capitalist economic system,

an object's value becomes impersonal. Its value is translated into a monetary "equivalent"—the word *capital* means money—and determined solely in terms of its relationship to a monetary market. The question becomes, How many people will buy the object, and how much money will they be willing to pay for it? Whether or not people really need the object in question and whether or not it is really worth its assigned price are irrelevant issues. In Anglo-European culture, capitalism replaced a barter economy in which labor or goods were exchanged for other labor or goods, depending on the abilities and needs of the individuals involved in the exchange. The focus of many later Marxists on the ways in which ideology is transmitted through popular culture and operates in our emotional lives is thus a natural extension of Marx's own interest in human behavior and experience.

Of course, many Marxist insights into human behavior involve the damaging effects of capitalism on human psychology, and those damaging effects often appear in our relationship to the *commodity*. For Marxism, a commodity's value lies not in what it can do (*use value*) but in the money or other commodities for which it can be traded (*exchange value*) or in the social status it confers on its owner (*sign-exchange value*). An object becomes a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign-exchange value, and both forms of value are determined by the society in which the object is exchanged. For example, if I read a book for pleasure or for information, or even if I use it to prop up a table leg, the book has use value. If I sell that same book, it has exchange value. If I leave that book out on my coffee table to impress my date, it has sign-exchange value. *Commodification* is the act of relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value. I commodify a work of art when I buy it as a financial investment, that is, with the intention of selling it for more money, or when I buy it to impress other people with my refined tastes. If I purchase and display costly goods or services excessively [illegible]

our primary mode of relating to the world around us. What could be better for a capitalist economy than for its members to be unable to "feel good about themselves" unless they acquire a fashionable "look" that can be maintained only by the continual purchase of new clothing, new cosmetic products, and new cosmetic services? In other words, in economic terms, it's in capitalism's best interests to promote whatever personal insecurities will motivate us to buy consumer goods. (Are my teeth not white enough? Should my hair be blonder? Should my muscles bulge more? Is my breath fresh enough?) And because the kinds of personal insecurities that make us buy consumer products are produced by comparing ourselves with other people (Are my teeth as white as his? Is my hair as blond as hers?), competition is promoted not just among companies who want to sell products but among people who feel they must "sell" themselves in order to be popular or successful.

Capitalism's constant need for new markets in which to sell goods and for new sources of raw materials from which to make goods is also responsible for the spread of *imperialism*: the military, economic, and/or cultural domination of one nation by another for the financial benefit of the dominating nation with little or no concern for the welfare of the dominated. Spain's rule of Mexico, England's domination of India, Belgium's exploitation of the Congo region of Africa, and U.S. efforts to subordinate native populations in North, Central, and South America are but a few examples of imperialist activities. When the imperialist nation establishes communities in an "underdeveloped" country, those communities are called *colonies*, as were the American Colonies before the American Revolution, and it uses those colonies to extend its economic interests. For the motive of all imperialist endeavor, no matter what positive influence the conquering nation claims to have on the local population, is economic gain for the "mother country."

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American history books, and the promotion of an Anglo-Saxon ideal of beauty. Thus, the attempt to colonize consciousness can be practiced against us by our own culture. Indeed, the promotion of consumerism discussed earlier is just such another example.

Clearly, Marxism's concern with human psychology overlaps with that of psychoanalysis: both disciplines study human behavior and motivation in psychological terms. However, while psychoanalysis focuses on the individual psyche and its formation within the family, Marxism focuses on the material/historical forces—the politics and ideologies of socioeconomic systems—that shape the psychological experience and behavior of individuals and groups. For Marxism, the family is not the source of the individual's psychological identity, for both the individual and the family are products of material/historical circumstances. The family unconsciously carries out the cultural "program" in raising its children, but that program is produced by the socioeconomic culture within which the family operates. While it is our parents who read us bedtime stories, take us to movies, and, in these and other ways, form our morals, it is our social system that provides the stories, movies, and morals, all of which ultimately serve the economic interests of those in control of that social system. Thus, while

A Marxist reading, in contrast, would focus on the ways in which the psychological problems listed above are produced by the material/historical realities within which the family operates: the ideology of the American dream that tells Willy his self-worth is earned only by economic success and that keeps him looking up to his predatory brother Ben; the rampant consumerism that keeps the Lomans buying on credit what they can't afford; the competitiveness of the business world that puts Willy back on straight commission work after thirty years of employment with the same firm; the exploitative potential of a socioeconomic system that doesn't require all companies to provide adequate pension coverage for their employees; and the ideology of "survival-of-the-fittest" capitalism that allows Howard to fire Willy with no concern for the latter's deteriorating mental condition. The central scene for such an interpretation would be that in which Howard (after displaying signs of his own economic success) fires Willy, telling him to turn to his sons for financial help.

Clearly, if a Marxist critic uses a psychoanalytic concept, it is used in service of a Marxist interpretation. For example, Willy's denial of reality, and the regressive hallucinations that accompany it, would be viewed as evidence of the Am[illegible] dream's debilitating ideological agenda: the American dream is certainly good

Before we extend these concepts to the realm of literary interpretation, let's take a look at Marxism's view of literature in general.

For Marxism, literature does not exist in some timeless, aesthetic realm as an object to be passively contemplated. Rather, like all cultural manifestations, it is a product of the socioeconomic and hence ideological conditions of the time and place in which it was written, whether or not the author intended it so. Because human beings are themselves products of their socioeconomic and ideological environment, it is assumed that authors cannot help but create works that embody ideology in some form.

The fact that literature grows out of and reflects real material/historical conditions creates at least two possibilities of interest to Marxist critics: (1) the literary work might tend to reinforce in the reader the ideologies it embodies, or (2) it might invite the reader to criticize the ideologies it represents. Many texts do both. And it is not merely the *content* of a literary work—the "action" or the theme—that carries ideology, but the *form* as well or, as most Marxists would argue, the form primarily. Realism, naturalism, surrealism, symbolism, romanticism, modernism, postmodernism, tragedy, comedy, satire, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and other genres and literary devices are the means by which form is constituted. If content is the "what" of literature, then form is the "how."

Realism, for example, gives us characters and plot as if we were looking through a window onto an actual scene taking place before our eyes. Our attention is drawn not to the nature of the words on the page but to the action those words convey. Indeed, we frequently forget about the words we're reading and the way the narrative is structured as we "get lost" in the story. Part of the reason we don't notice the language and structure, the form, is because the action represented is ordered in a coherent sequence that invites us to relate to it much as we relate to the events in our own lives, and the characters it portrays are believable, much like people we might meet. So we get "pulled into" the story. In contrast, a good deal of postmodern literature (and nonrealistic, experimental literature of any kind) is written in a fragmented, surreal style that seems to defy our understanding and serves to distance or estrange us from the narrative and the characters it portrays.

For some Marxists, realism is the best form for Marxist purposes because it clearly and accurately represents the real world, with all its socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions, and encourages readers to see the unhappy truths about material/historical reality, for whether or not authors intend it they are bound to represent socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions if they accurately represent the real world. Marxist fans of realist fiction often have been inclined to reject nonrealistic, experimental fiction for being inaccessible to the majority of readers and for being too exclusively concerned with the

inner workings of an individual mind rather than with the individual's relationship to society. However, many Marxists value nonrealistic, experimental fiction because the fragmentation of experience it represents and the estrangement the reader often experiences constitute a critique of the fragmented world and the alienated human beings produced by capitalism in today's world.

To see how form affects our understanding of content (or how form *is* a kind of content), let's take another brief look at *Death of a Salesman*. As we have seen, the play has a strong Marxist component in that it invites us to condemn the capitalist exploitation Willy suffers at the hands of his employer, and it shows us the contradictions inherent in capitalist ideology, which promotes the interests of big business at the expense of the "little man" who has "bought into" capitalist values. However, for many Marxists, this anticapitalist theme is severely undermined by the fact that the play is written in the form of a tragedy. You will recall that tragedy portrays the ruin of an individual human being due to some character flaw—usually hubris, or excessive pride—in that individual's personal makeup. The tragic form of *Death of a Salesman* thus encourages us to focus primarily on the character flaws in Willy as an individual rather than on the society that helped produce those flaws, and we are thus led to overlook the negative influence of the capitalist ideology that is, at bottom, responsible for all the action in the play.

Although Marxists have long disagreed about what kinds of works are most useful in promoting social awareness and positive political change, many today believe that even those literary works that reinforce capitalist, imperialist, or other classist values are useful in that they can show us how these ideologies work to seduce or coerce us into collusion with their repressive ideological agendas. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), for example, may be said to reinforce classist values to the extent that it portrays those born into the upper class—for example, Alphonse Frankenstein, Elizabeth Lavenza, and the De Laceys—as morally and intellectually superior to those below them on the social scale. Characters at the bottom of the social ladder, on the other hand, are often depicted as rude, insensitive, and easily incensed to mob behavior. In contrast, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) undermines classist values by illustrating the injustices suffered under the class system imposed by American capitalism in the early 1940s. In addition, by revealing the ways in which religion and escapist movies harm the poor by encouraging them to ignore the harsh realities of their lives, rather than organize politically and fight collectively for their fair share of the pie, this novel can be said to have a Marxist agenda.

Some questions Marxist critics ask about literary texts

The following questions are offered to summarize Marxist approaches to literature.

1. Does the work reinforce (intentionally or not) capitalist, imperialist, or classist values? If so, then the work may be said to have a capitalist, imperialist, or classist agenda, and it is the critic's job to expose and condemn this aspect of the work.
2. How might the work be seen as a critique of capitalism, imperialism, or classism? That is, in what ways does the text reveal, and invite us to condemn, oppressive socioeconomic forces (including repressive ideologies)? If a work criticizes or invites us to criticize oppressive socioeconomic forces, then it may be said to have a Marxist agenda.
3. Does the work in some ways support a Marxist agenda but in other ways (perhaps unintentionally) support a capitalist, imperialist, or classist agenda? In other words, is the work ideologically conflicted?
4. How does the literary work reflect (intentionally or not) the socioeconomic conditions of the time in which it was written and/or the time in which it is set, and what do those conditions reveal about the history of class struggle?
5. How might the work be seen as a critique of organized religion? That is, how does religion function in the text to keep a character or characters from realizing and resisting socioeconomic oppression?

Depending on the literary work in question, we might ask one or any combination of these questions. Or we might come up with a useful question of our own not listed here. These are just some starting points to get us thinking about literary works in productive Marxist ways. Remember, not all Marxist critics will interpret the same work in the same way, even if they focus on the same Marxist concepts. As always, even expert practitioners disagree. Our goal is to use Marxist theory to help enrich our reading of literary works, to help us see some important ideas they illustrate that we might not have seen so clearly or so deeply without Marxist theory, and, if we use Marxist theory the way it is intended to be used: to help us see the ways in which ideology blinds us to our own participation in oppressive sociopolitical agendas.

The following Marxist reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is offered as an example of what a Marxist interpretation of that novel might yield. It focuses on what I will argue is the novel's critique of American capitalist ideology. In addition, I will try to show the ways in which the novel fails to push its critique far enough, becoming the unwitting prey of the capitalist ideology it attacks.