

Marxist Theory

Marxist theory—which is drawn from the economic, social, and political theories of the late 19th century economist Karl Marx—is among the most popular, influential, and controversial theories of literature currently practiced throughout the Western academic world. In general terms, Marxist theory can be described as an “economic” approach to interpreting literary texts. Marxist theorists often examine literary texts with a critical eye toward their various economic, ideological and social contexts, suggestions, and assertions. Marxist theorists tend to focus their interpretations on considering how literary texts depict class oppression and strife and social inequality and, in turn, serve to critique elements of capitalistic Western life. Marxist theorists also consider how literary texts subvert and even overturn ordinary forms of social and political order and thus present or enable new forms of social and political perception and interaction. Marxist theorists tend to give critical thought to how literary texts participate in or resist mass media and other forms of popular, capitalistic culture. They consider how such literary resistances might suggest possibilities for social revolution and, mutually, how the ruling classes might manipulate such for the purpose of social control over the other classes. Marxist theorists often take an interest in how an author’s own class, political positions, and other ideological positions serve to influence his or her writings, considering the ideologies presented within the text as well as the economic and social conditions under which particular texts are composed, published, publicized, sold, and consumed by the public.

Today, what is known as “New Marxist Criticism” is quite popular among a number of critical theorists. Contemporary Marxist theoretical approaches, to some measure, part ways with formal and traditional modes of strict Marxist theory and consider how Marxism (and Marxist theory itself) functions in terms of other modes of literary theory. A number of literary theorists, despite aligning themselves with forms of literary theory other than Marxism, often make active use of the principles of Marxism in their theoretical work, particularly practitioners of such decidedly socially and politically minded forms of theory as new historicism, queer theory, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic theory.

Application in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

While *Hamlet* might not seem to be a likely text for a strong Marxist reading given that its protagonist is a man of privilege and that the play takes place in a fictional version of 16th century Denmark, *Hamlet* can be interpreted through a number of different Marxist theoretical approaches. A Marxist critic might take a particular interest in the manner in which Hamlet subverts Claudius’s rule by engaging in acts of subterfuge, manipulation,



and revolution in order to overcome his oppressive rule over him. A critic may also argue that Hamlet's actions serve to demonstrate a way by which an oppressive ideological regime can be countered and overcome. A Marxist theorist might argue that Claudius killed his brother King Hamlet in order to gain political, social, and economic power, and hence might be viewed as a figure who is corrupted by his desire for social and political power. Hamlet himself steps outside of the standards, rules, and norms established and encouraged by the ruling class that he was once a part of in order to resist its oppressive ideology. Such a critical viewpoint might serve to argue that *Hamlet* is at least partly about Hamlet's own sudden separation from and realization of the ideological faults of the political structure he is or was a part of. Also, a Marxist theorist might take interest in the plays focus on characters who belong to the ruling class and the lack of "voice" given to common people in the play. One may argue that Shakespeare—who, himself, was born to a commoner and was himself very much a member of what we would today call the "working class" or "middle class"—is issuing an attack or critique of the oppressive and morally corrupt ideology of the ruling classes throughout *Hamlet*. Furthermore, a Marxist critique of *Hamlet* might take special interest in the famous grave digging scene of the play, and point out how Shakespeare positions the gravedigger—who is the only common or non-privileged character given a prominent voice within the narrative—as a source of wisdom capable of recognizing intrinsic truths about existence and the nature of the events that have come to pass within the story that the high-ranking and privileged characters in the play, including Hamlet himself, are unable to realize partly because of their own class positions. While a Marxist theorist would probably not argue that Shakespeare was himself quite a proto-Marxist, he or she might argue that in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was anticipating and recognizing ideas concerning class distinctions and attitudes that were further developed by Karl Marx over 300 years later.

Study questions:

1. How does Marxist theory suggest that literature critiques capitalistic culture?
2. What is the difference between "New Marxist Criticism" and traditional Marxist theory?

