Introduction to Literature
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**Marxism**

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was primarily a theorist and historian (less the evil pinko commie demon that McCarthyism fretted about). After examining social organization in a scientific way (thereby creating a methodology for social science: political science), he perceived human history to have consisted of a series of struggles between classes--between the oppressed and the oppressing. Whereas Freud saw "sexual energy" to be the motivating factor behind human endeavor and Nabokov seemed to feel artistic impulse was the real factor, Marx thought that "historical materialism" was the ultimate driving force, a notion involving the distribution of resources, gain, production, and such matters.

The supposedly "natural" political evolution involved (and would in the future involve) "feudalism" leading to "bourgeois capitalism" leading to "socialism" and finally to "utopian communism." In bourgeois capitalism, the privileged bourgeoisie rely on the proletariat--the labor force responsible for survival. Marx theorized that when profits are not reinvested in the workers but in creating more factories, the workers will grow poorer and poorer until no short-term patching is possible or successful. At a crisis point, revolt will lead to a restructuring of the system.

For a political system to be considered communist, the underclasses must own the means of production--not the government nor the police force. Therefore, aside from certain first-century Christian communities and other temporary communes, communism has not yet really existed. (The Soviet Union was actually state-run capitalism.)

Marx is known also for saying that "Religion is the opiate of the people," so he was somewhat aware of the problem that Lenin later dwelt on. Lenin was convinced that workers remain largely unaware of their own oppression since they are convinced by the state to be selfless. One might point to many "opiates of the people" under most political systems--diversions that prevent real consideration of trying to change unjust economic conditions.

**Marxist Criticism**

According to Marxists, and to other scholars in fact, literature reflects those social institutions out of which it emerges and is itself a social institution with a particular ideological function. Literature reflects class struggle and materialism: think how often the quest for wealth traditionally defines characters. So Marxists generally view literature "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams 149). Literature reflects an author's own class or analysis of class relations, however piercing or shallow that analysis may be.

The Marxist critic simply is a careful reader or viewer who keeps in mind issues of power and money, and any of the following kinds of questions:

* What role does class play in the work; what is the author's analysis of class relations?
* How do characters overcome oppression?
* 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?
* Does the work propose some form of utopian vision as a solution to the problems encountered in the work?

Works Consulted

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