

MARXIST LITERARY CRITICISM

Workers of the
World, Unite!

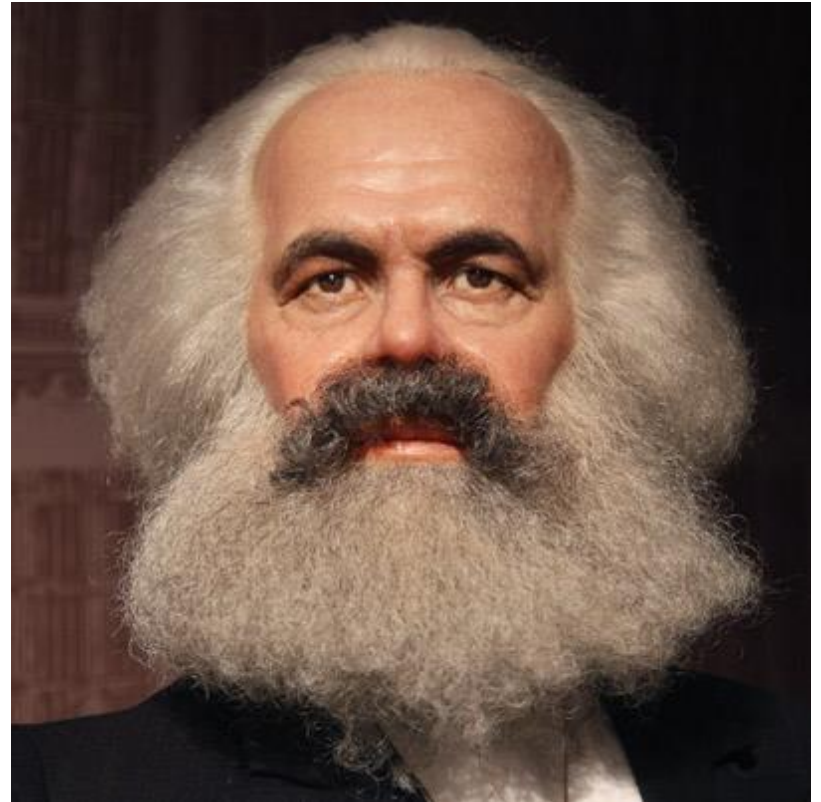
MARXIST CRITICISM

Karl Marx (1818-1883) emphasized that the primary influence on life was economic and saw society as an opposition between the **capitalists** and the **working class**.

Literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be influenced by literature.

Marxist literary criticism does not espouse communism.

Marxists believe literature can instigate revolution.



KEY TERMS

Capitalism: the economic base which values private ownership and profit for individuals

Class: a social group based on ownership, middle/working

Labor: employees, workers

Capital: employers, owners, major investors

Base: a society's values embedded in economy, property, material, and means of production

Superstructure: a society's ideology, laws, politics, education, which reflect the base

Reification: the way in which people are turned into commodities useful in market exchange

KEY TERMS

Exploitation: the difference between the value of production and what a worker is paid by the owner

Alienation: the results of capitalism on the worker; the separation between the worker and others due to exploitation on the job.

Marginalization: placing lower classes and people of color in the margins socially, economically, and politically

Hegemony: cultural, economic, social, and political dominance, or what reality *is* for the majority of people within a given culture

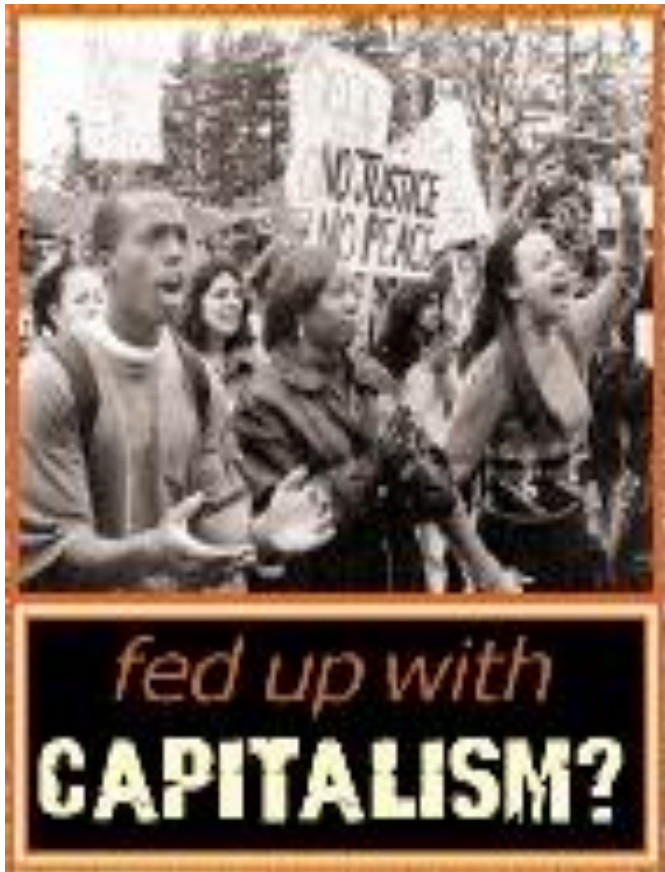
MARXIST CRITICISM

Whoever controls the means of **production** in a society controls the overall society.

Marx noted a **disparity** in the economic and political power enjoyed by the factory owners yet not afforded the factory laborers.



MARXIST CRITICISM



The literature that emerged from this kind of analysis focuses on individuals in the grips of a **class struggle**.

It emphasizes persons of the lower class and their constant **oppression** by the upper class.

The poor may try to escape their situation but ultimately fall back under the ruthless dominion of the **capitalist oppressor**.

Effects of capitalist oppression include:

- Reification
- Alienation
- Exploitation

THE HIDDEN TEXT IN MARXISM



Along with psychoanalytical, feminist, and cultural criticism, Marxist literary criticism concerns itself not with what the text **says** but what it **hides**.

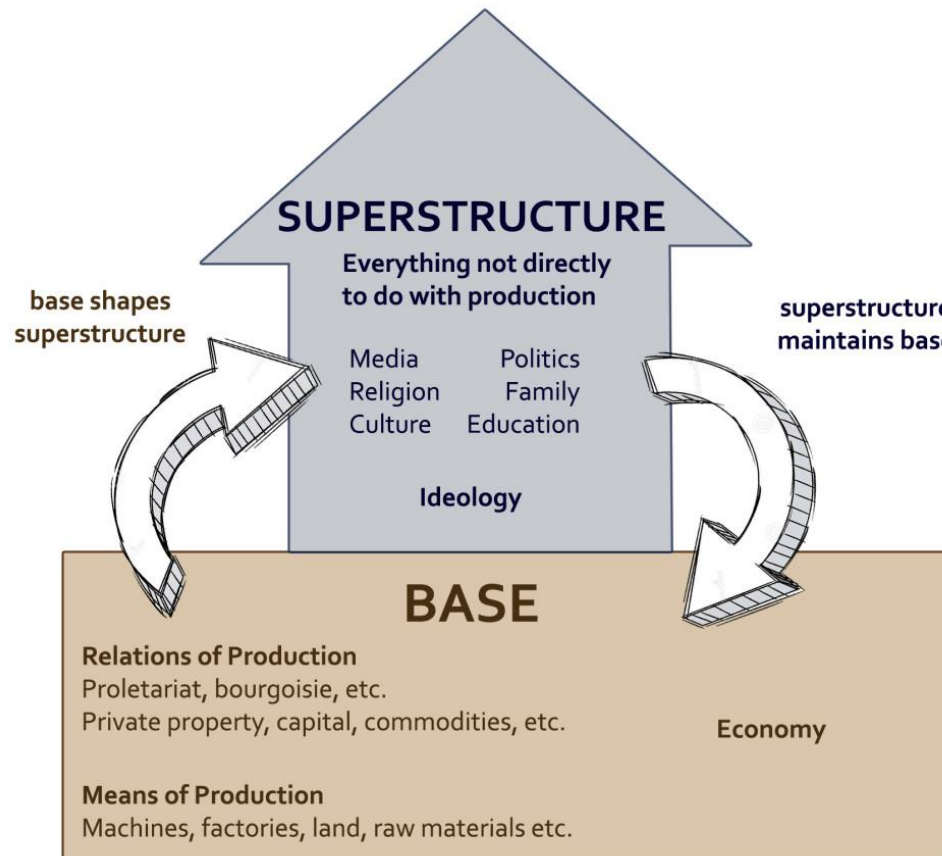
As Terry Eagleton, a leading Marxist critic, writes, the task of Marxist literary criticism “is to show the text as it cannot know itself, to manifest those conditions of its making (inscribed in its very letter) about which it is necessarily **silent**.”

BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

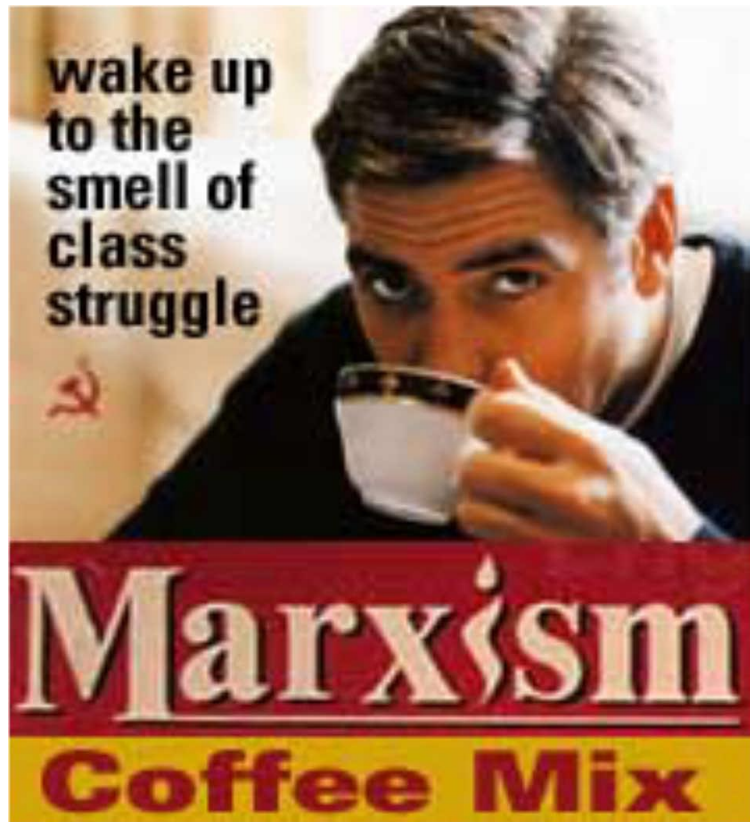


The beliefs, attitudes, and values of a society form an **ideolog** which influences the **superstructure** of a society: its laws, politics, religion, education, art, literature, film, urban development, etc.

BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE



THREE MAIN AREAS OF STUDY



- ❖ Economic Power
- ❖ Class Conflict
- ❖ Art, Literature, and Ideology

ECONOMIC POWER

A society is shaped by its forces of production. Those who own the means of production dictate what type of society it is.

There are two main classes of society:

- ❖ the **bourgeoisie** (who control the means of production and wealth) they can manipulate politics, government, education, art, and media
- ❖ the **proletariat** (who operate the means of production and are controlled by the bourgeoisie)

Commodification is one way the bourgeoisie keep the proletariat oppressed. Whenever the proletariat manages to acquire some sort of status symbol, the bourgeoisie concocts a new one; thus, the proletariat continues to struggle, never able to “catch up.”

CLASS CONFLICT

The bourgeoisie present their political, economic, and social structures as the only reasonable ones. The proletariat, **indoctrinated** from birth to have pride in their station, are prevented from wanting to overthrow their oppressors (ironically, the smaller and actually less-powerful group).

A capitalist society will inevitably experience conflict between its social classes.

The owners and the workers will have different ideas about the **division of the wealth** generated, and the owners will ultimately make the decision.

This constant **conflict** instigates **change**.

The Itsy Bitsy Spider: An Analysis.



THE SPIDER:
The spider symbolizes the proletariat, and his ongoing struggle against the bourgeoisie.



THE WATERSPOUT:
The waterspout is the myth of equality and the American Dream. The spider continues to doggedly scale it's heights, only to be denied the fruits of his hard work.

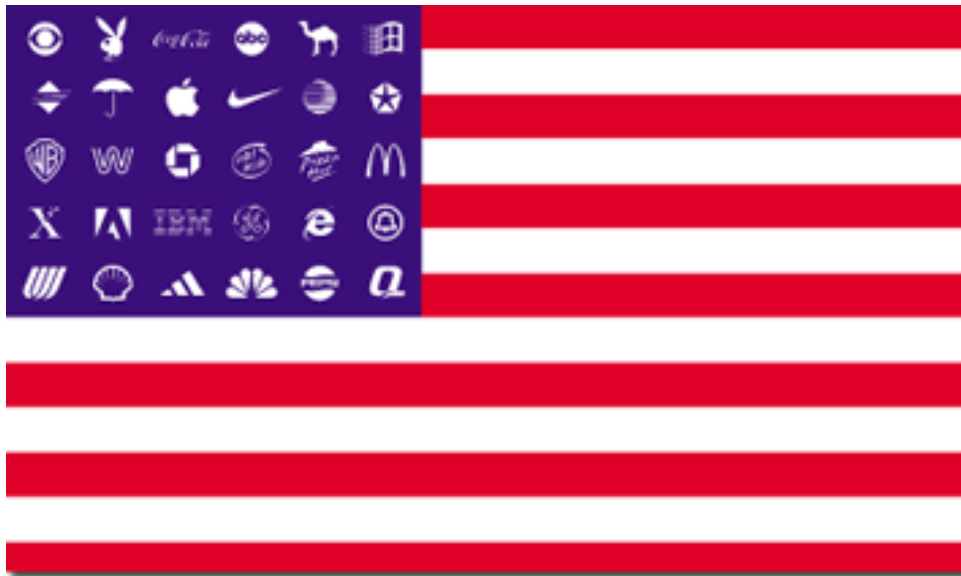


THE RAIN:
The rain is the bourgeoisie, impeding the progress of the spider, and standing between him and his ultimate goal of true freedom and equality. The rain also embodies man's inhumanity to man.



THE SUN:
The sun is the easing of difficult living and working conditions. It provides false hope for the spider, prolonging his struggle.

ART, LITERATURE, & IDEOLOGIES



- The bourgeoisie control most artistic output through patronage or sponsorship
- Any artist who wishes to criticize the bourgeoisie must do so in a subtle way (**satire**, irony, etc.).

QUESTIONS OF CRITICISM

What classes, or socioeconomic statuses, are represented in the text?

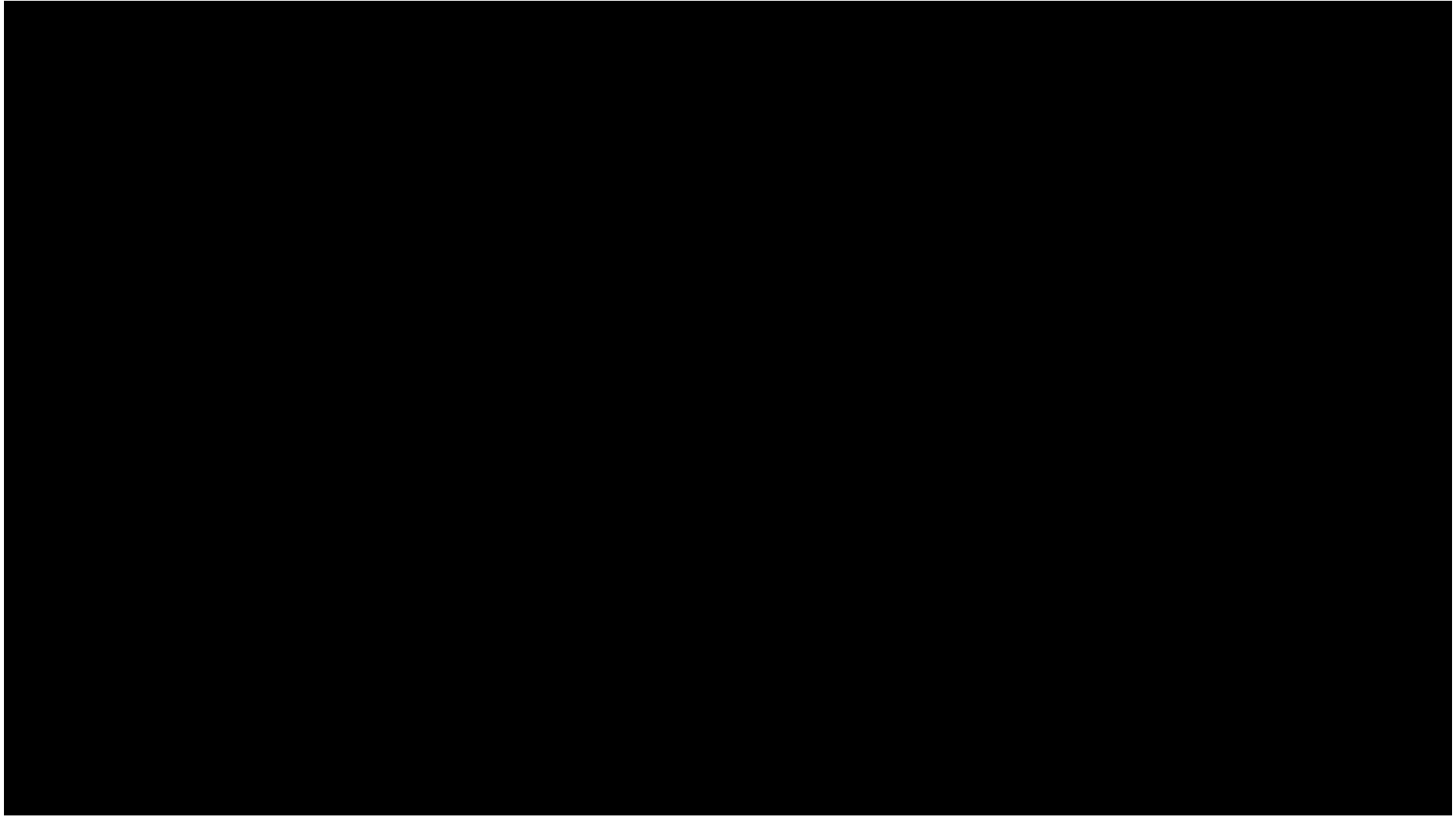
Are all the segments of society accounted for, or does the text exclude a particular class?

Does class restrict or empower the characters in the text?

How does the text depict a struggle between classes, or how does class contribute to the conflict of the text?

How does the text depict the relationship between the individual and the state? Does the state view individuals as a means of production, or as ends in themselves?

FRITZ LANG'S *METROPOLIS* (1927)



PHEME (FAME) VS. PRINTING HOUSE SQUARE

