

Degree - III

English (Hons.)

Paper - (V)

Topic - Criticism

Marxist Criticism

(Lecture - 3) (final)

The main tenet of Marxist Criticism - that the nature of literature is influenced by the social and political circumstances in which it is produced - might well be immediately accepted as self-evidently true.

The difficulty and controversy lie entirely in deciding how close the influence is. Are you going to adopt a 'determinist' position and argue that literature is the passive product of socio-economic forces, or do you take a more 'liberal' line and see the socio-economic influence as much more distant and subtle?

Your main difficulty will be to show the operation of these economic forces (no matter whether you take the 'strong' or the 'weak' model) in a given literary work. What exactly do directly operating or indirectly operating socio-economic forces look like in a literary work?

These are difficult questions to cope with in the abstract, and you will find helpful to think about them in the context of a specific example. In the example below, therefore, a 'determinist' and 'liberal' line being taken and how is this indicated? Is the socio-economic influence seen by the critic in the plot content of the play, in the characterisation, or in

the literary form itself, and if so how?

What Marxist critics do

- (a) They make a division between the 'overt' (manifest or surface) and 'covert' (latent and hidden) content of a literary work (much as psychoanalytic critics do) and then relate the covert subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes, such as class struggle and the progression of society through various historical stages, such as the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. Thus, the conflicts in *King Lear* might be read as being 'really' about the conflict of class interest between the rising class and (the bourgeoisie) and the falling class (the feudal overlords).
- (b) Another method used by Marxist critics is to relate the context of a work to the social class status of the author. In such cases an assumption is made (which again is similar to those made by psychoanalytic critics) that the author is unaware of precisely what he or she is saying or meaning in the text.
- (c) A third Marxist method is to explain the nature of a whole literary genre in terms of the social period which 'produced' it. For instance, *The Rise of the Novel*, by Ian Watt, relates the growth of the novel in the 18th century to the expansion of ^{the} middle classes during that period. The novel speaks for

this social class, just as, for instance, tragedy speaks for the monarchy and the nobility, and the ballad speaks for rural and semi-urban 'working class'.

(d) A fourth Marxist practice is to relate the literary work to the social assumption of the time in which it is consumed, a strategy which is used particularly in the later variant of Marxist criticism known as cultural materialism.

(e) A fifth Marxist practice is the ~~political~~ politicisation of literary form, that is, the claim that literary forms are themselves determined by political circumstances. For instance, in the view of some critics, literary realism carries with it an implicit validation of conservative social structures; for others, the formal and metrical intricacies of the sonnet and the iambic pentameter are a counterpart of social stability, decorum and order.