**Central Marxist concepts**  
Central Marxist concepts: the dialectical model of history; the notion that social being determines consciousness; and the base/superstructure model.   
**Marxism and literature**  
Marxist literary critics tend to look for tensions and contradictions within literary works. This is appropriate because Marxism was originally formulated to analyse just such tensions and contradictions within society. Marxist literary critics also see literature as intimately linked to social power, and thus their analysis of literature is linked to larger social questions. Since Marxism is a belief system which can be used to analyse society at the grandest or most detailed level, Marxist literary criticism is ultimately part of a much larger effort to uncover the inner workings of society.  
[**http://www.lawrence.edu/dept/ENGLIS**](http://www.lawrence.edu/dept/ENGLIS)**H/COURSES/60A/marxist.html#marxcent**  
  
**Karl Marx and Marxist Theory: The Proletariat Rises**  
“Marxism assumes the independent reality of matter and its priority over mind (dialectical materialism).  
**It teaches**

1. a theory of value based upon labour,
2. the economic determination of all social actions and institutions,
3. the class struggle as the basic pattern in history,
4. the inevitable seizure of power through the revolution of the proletariat (working class, ‘the masses’),
5. the dictatorship of that proletariat,
6. the ultimate establishment of a classless society.

**Marx proposes a model of history in which economic and political conditions determine social conditions.**  
-It’s a response to social hardships stemming from the rise of capitalism. *Appropriately, his theories analyze how society functions during upheaval and constant change.*  
  
**The base and superstructure model**  
An individual's social being, “the social consciousness” (Marx) is determined by larger political and economic forces. Simply stated, the social class into which a person is born determines her outlook and viewpoints.  
A central concept of Marxism—base and superstructure. *The base=economic system; the Superstructure=cultural activities—such as philosophy or literature*. Society's economic base determines the interests and styles of its literature; this relationship between the determin*ing* base and determin*ed* superstructure is Marxism’s point of interest  
  
Because the superstructure is determined by the base, it supports the ideologies, changing ideas, values, and feelings of individuals in a society. They [changing ideology] present the dominant ideas and values as the beliefs of society as a whole, thus preventing individuals from seeing how society actually functions. *Literature, as a cultural production, is a form of ideology, one that legitimizes the power of the ruling class*.  
**Recurrent terms in Marxist literary criticism:**

* **Base vs. Superstructure:** Base in Marxism refers to economic base. Superstructure, according to Marx and Engels, emerges from this base and consists of law, politics, philosophy, religion, art.
* **Ideology:** the shared beliefs and values held in an unquestioning manner by a culture. It governs what that culture deems to be normative and valuable. For Marxists, **ideology** is determined by economics. A rough approximation: "tell me how much money you have and I'll tell you how you think."
* **Hegemony:** coined by the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, this "refers to the pervasive system of assumptions, meanings, and values -- the web of ideologies, in other words, that shapes the way things look, what they mean, and therefore what reality *is* for the majority of people within a given culture"
* **Reification:** often used to describe the way in which people are turned into commodities useful in market exchange. For example, some would argue that the media's obsession with tragedy (e.g.the the murders at Columbine High School in Colorado) make commodities out of grieving people. The media expresses sympathy but economically thrives on these events through ratings boost.

**What do Marxist literary critics do with texts?**

* They explore ways in which the text reveals ideological oppression of a dominant economic class over subordinate classes. In order to do this a Marxist might ask the following questions:
  + Does the text reflect or resist a economic dominant ideology? Does it do both?
  + Whose story gets told in the text? Are lower economic groups ignored or devalued?
  + Are values that support the dominant economic group given privilege? This can happen tacitly, in the way in which values are taken to be self-evident.

***The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848), and *Das Kapital* by Marx (1867)” (A Handbook to Literature Harmon and Holman 307).**