

Essay 4

Using Marxist or Psychoanalytic Analysis to Understand Meaning

Marxism is the ideological and socioeconomic theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels including the belief that the struggle between social classes is a major force in history and that there should eventually be a society in which there are no classes. The fundamental ideology of communism, it holds that all people are entitled to enjoy the fruits of their labour but are prevented from doing so in a capitalist economic system, which divides society into two classes: non-owning workers and non-working owners. Marx called the resulting situation “alienation,” and he said that when the workers repossessed the fruits of their labour, alienation would be overcome and class divisions would cease. The Marxist theory of history posits class struggle as history's driving force, and sees capitalism as the most recent and most critical historical stage because at this stage the proletariat will at last arise united.

Consider a work made by a woman in the early modern period (1850 to 1940) to analyze using a Marxist approach. What socio-economic classes are represented in the work? What visual clues convey this class distinction? How are the subjects treated - are the Othered, made noble, assumed superior? Whom would the artist have assumed to be the viewer of this work? What message would this work have conveyed to the viewer concerning class? What social class was the artist? Did her class have anything to do with her profession, her success or dismissal in her profession? Does the artist's handling of class convey, reinforce understandings of womanhood or offer a feminist critique of their position?

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Consider a work made by a woman in the early modern period (1850 to 1940) to analyze using a Psychoanalytic approach. A psychoanalytic approach uses Freudian theory on the development of personality while considering how the artist's decisions may have been influenced by drives outside of their awareness. Freud theorized that an artist makes a work of art as an attempt to resolve developmental conflicts and as a means of obtaining pleasure. As well, the viewer may also consider their own experiences and how they color their understanding of the work of art.

When using psychoanalysis to understand the meaning of a work of art, the viewer examines an artist's psychological development as it relates to the work and the perceived or demonstrated pleasure associated with the making and viewing of the work. Freudian theory argues that human behavior, our urges, and feelings that inform the choices we make derive from struggles on an unconscious level that we do not perceive. The id, based in biological drives or “urges” is often in conflict with the ego, our conscience and moral regulator. The superego, society's rules and prohibitions, exerts further pressure on both the id and the ego. Freud believed that art offered a

space for unconscious/unacceptable desire to surface and saw representations as symbolic manifestations of that wish fulfillment. Consider the people and objects represented in the work on a symbolic level to detect sources of pleasure and unconscious urges rising to the surface. Think of the artist as a case study of the world around them. What anxieties, burdens, and struggles does the work convey? Psychoanalysis offers a modern perspective on human behavior. Given the tensions and conflicts of the early modern world, what does this work say about the state of women in this difficult terrain?

**Essays must cite two credible sources of information originating on paper in Chicago Manual of Style Footnotes (no Bibliography)

