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Economic Determinist/Marxist

The concept of cultural and economic determinism—and its corollary, the **economic determinist/Marxist critical approach**—is one of the major political ideas of the nineteenth century. Karl Marx (1818–1883) emphasized that the primary influence on life was economic, and he saw society enmeshed in a continuous conflict between capitalist oppressors and oppressed working people. The literature that emerged from this kind of analysis often features individuals who are coping with the ill effects of economic disadvantage. Sometimes called “proletarian” literature, it focuses on persons of the lower class—the poor and oppressed who spend their lives in endless drudgery and misery, and whose attempts to rise to the top usually result in renewed oppression.

Marx's political ideas were never widely accepted in the United States and have faded still more after the political breakup of the Soviet Union, but the idea of economic determinism (and the related term *Social Darwinism*) is still credible. As a result, much literature can be judged from an economic perspective even though the economic critics may not be Marxian: What is the economic status of the characters? What happens to them as a result of this status? How do they fare against economic and political odds? What other conditions stemming from their class does the writer emphasize (e.g., poor education, poor nutrition, poor health care, inadequate opportunity)? To what extent does the work fail by overlooking the economic, social, and political implications of its material? In what other ways does economic determinism affect the work? How should readers consider the story in today's developed or underdeveloped world? Seemingly, Hawthorne's story “Young Goodman Brown,” which we have used for analysis in these discussions, has no major economic implications, but an economic determinist/Marxist critical approach might take the following turns. (See also p. 1547, for a Marxist reading of Ibsen's *A Dollhouse*.)

Example: Hawthorne's “Young Goodman Brown”

“Young Goodman Brown” is a fine story just as it is. It deals with the false values instilled by the skewed acceptance of sin-dominated religion, but it overlooks the economic implications of this situation. One might suspect that the real story in the little world of Goodman Brown's Salem should be about the disruption that an alienated member of society can produce. After Brown's condemnation and distrust of others forces him into his own shell of sick imagination, Hawthorne does not consider how such a disaffected character would injure

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the economic and public life of the town. Consider this, just for a moment: Why would the people from whom Brown recoils in disgust want to deal with him in business or personal matters? In town meetings, would they want to follow his opinions on crucial issues of public concern and investment? Would his preoccupation with sin and damnation make him anything more than a horror in his domestic life? Would his wife, Faith, be able to discuss household management with him or to ask him about methods of caring for the children? All these questions of course are pointed toward another story—a story that Hawthorne did not write. They also indicate the shortcomings of Hawthorne's approach, because it is clear that the major result of Young Goodman Brown's selfish preoccupation with evil would be a serious disruption of the economic and political affairs of his small community.

Second Example: Bambara's "The Lesson," page 387

Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" explores the economic disparities among people who exist in close proximity in a modern American city. Set in New York, the narrator, Sylvia, a young African American girl, describes a day when she and her friends visit F.A.O. Schwarz, a toy store in Manhattan. They are escorted there by Miss Moore, a recently arrived college-educated woman to the neighborhood who takes it upon herself to help the neighborhood children see a small slice of the real world. At first, Sylvia disparages Miss Moore, saying how "she was always planning these boring ass things for us to do" and describes her physical features in great detail, such as her lack of makeup and "fish-white" feet. The day of the visit to the toy store is an eye-opening experience for the narrator and other children. At the store they see extravagantly expensive items such as a microscope that costs \$300 and a "handcrafted sailboat of fiberglass at one thousand one hundred ninety-five dollars." The contrast between their economic situation and the opulence they are exposed to gradually helps the children see an aspect of the real world that they had not been aware of. One of the girls remarks that "this is not much of a democracy if you ask me. Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough, don't it?" This comment is in such stark contrast to the earlier wisecracks of the children that it signals a sudden awareness of the realities of economic differences among people who live so close together. Economic differences are further highlighted by Sylvia's decision to keep what remains of the \$5 Miss Moore gave her to pay taxi fare to the toy store. What remains is enough to "get half a chocolate layer and then go to the Sunset and still have plenty of money for potato chips and ice cream sodas." The story ends on Sylvia's defiant tone. "But ain't nobody going to beat me at nuthin." This refers to her friend Sugar running ahead of her, but metaphorically points to the challenge that economic realities will play in her future life.

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