Chapter 5

Using concepts from Marxist theory to understand literature

Why should we learn about Marxist theory?

Most of us realize that a country's socioeconomic system determines who has the most power in that country. For example, in medieval Europe's feudal system, the most power belonged to those who controlled the most land, and a powerful class system developed that kept the descendants of those land-owning families in power. In the capitalist systems operating in most Western nations today, the most power belongs to those who control the most money—the word capital means money—and that control may or may not change hands at any given time.

For Marxist theory, however, the socioeconomic system in which we live does much more than determine who has the most power. It also determines, among other things, how we are educated, and it influences our religious beliefs, which together control to a great degree how we perceive ourselves and our world. For if a socioeconomic system is to survive, the people who live within it must be convinced that it is the right system. For a rigid class system to survive, then, its people must be convinced of the natural superiority of those born into the upper class. Analogously, for American capitalism's American Dream to survive, Americans must be convinced of the natural superiority of those who manage to rise from the bottom to the top of the financial heap. And it is our education and our religious beliefs that do much of the convincing by determining how we perceive ourselves and our world.

Let me develop this point further. To understand the kind of influence a socioeconomic system exerts over its members, let's take a minute to look at a bit more closely at the ways in which those of us born and bred in the United States have been influenced by ours. To succeed in the US, we must compete against other Americans for financial prosperity. So we must believe in the virtues of both competition and financial prosperity. Now consider that the American educational system teaches us, from the earliest grades, to compete, each of us alone against the rest of the class, for prizes in spelling bees, essay contests, talent contests, and the like. Consider, too, that Puritan culture in colonial North America, from which much of our national culture developed, included the belief that certain individuals are "elected" before birth to be among God's chosen and that the signs of one's "election" included financial prosperity. Thus, in the United States, financial success became associated with moral virtue. This belief persists today in the American Dream, which celebrates as a virtue the individual's rise to the highest plateau of financial achievement of which he or she is capable. In other words, both America's educational philosophy and religious history foster the spirit of individual competition and the desire for financial prosperity that are the basis of its capitalist socioeconomic system. This is just one example of the ways in which a nation's socioeconomic system influences how its members perceive themselves and their world. Marxism, therefore, is concerned with how the socioeconomic system in which we live shapes our personal identity.

The goal of Marxism is to achieve a worldwide classless society by exposing the oppressive ideologies (belief systems) that keep the nations of this planet bound within socioeconomic systems in which a relatively small number of people are extremely wealthy while most people are struggling, or even failing to get by. For example, while the top executive officers of international corporations often have personal financial holdings in the hundred millions, the vast majority of people on this planet are lucky if they can feed, clothe, and shelter themselves and their children, let alone afford such "luxuries" as adequate healthcare and educational opportunities. And too many families—even in such a prosperous country as the United States—are unable to do that. So we can start to use Marxist theory to understand literature by asking the following two questions about any literary work we want to interpret. (1) What oppressive socioeconomic ideologies influence the characters' behavior? (2) Does the literary work combat those ideologies by clearly illustrating the damage they do? If the literary text does not combat those ideologies, then, for Marxist theory, that text is considered part of the problem—because it blinds us to the problem—rather than part of the solution. The most common oppressive socioeconomic ideologies are defined in the "Basic concepts" section that follows. Although it's important that you read through this list of concepts, don't be too concerned if you don't feel you thoroughly understand every one. You'll begin to understand these concepts much better when we use them, later on in this chapter, to help us interpret the literary texts that appear at the end of this book. And you'll see that these fundamental Marxist concepts can help us understand other works of literature, as well.

Remember, too, that I'm offering you my own literary analyses in the interpretation exercises provided later in this chapter. You might use the same Marxist concepts I use but come up with different interpretations of your own. If you disagree with any of the analyses I offer in these exercises, don't be afraid to look in the literary work in question for evidence that will support your viewpoint. A literary work can often support a number of different interpretations, even when readers are using concepts from the same theory.
Basic concepts

Note that the basic concepts listed below are all examples of socioeconomic ideologies that have existed for centuries and in which many people believe today. Marxism didn’t invent these ideologies. Rather, Marxism opposes them. For according to Marxist theory, each of these ideologies fosters a socioeconomic hierarchy that grants enor mus wealth and power to a relatively small number of people at the top of the socioeconomic ladder, prevents a large number of people from escaping the poverty in which they are trapped at the bottom of the ladder, and keeps those on the middle rungs—if there are any middle rungs—at the financial mercy of such unpredictable occurrences as increased taxes and the rising costs of healthcare, education, and housing. Therefore, the definition of each socioeconomic ideology listed below is followed by a Marxist description of that ideology’s flaws.

You’ll notice many references to the United States in the following paragraphs because American culture, I think, illustrates with particular clarity the ability of socioeconomic ideologies in general, and of capitalist ideologies in particular, to customize themselves to fit the self-image of any society in which they have taken hold. Indeed, two of the capitalist ideologies defined below—the American Dream and rugged individualism—have American origins, though they now exert their influence globally.

Classism

Classism is the belief that our value as human beings is directly related to the social class to which we belong: the higher our social class, the higher our natural, or inborn superiority. It is only right and proper, classists believe, that those in the highest class should assume leadership roles, for they are, by birth, more intelligent, honorable, energetic, and dependable than those beneath them on the social scale. Analogously, classist ideology tells us that people born into the lowest class have, by birth, a greater tendency to be slow-witted, dishonorable, lazy, and undependable. In traditional classist societies, social class is determined by birth and cannot be changed by the accumulation or loss of wealth because class superiority or inferiority is believed to be “in the blood”—that is, determined by the class to which our parents belong.

Marxist theory, in contrast, rejects the idea that the social class into which we are born determines our superiority or inferiority as human beings. All our class standing determines is whether we’ll be socially advantaged or disadvantaged. In other words, Marxist theory considers classism unfair and unwise because it grants privileges to a small segment of the population and withholds privileges from a large segment of the population without regard for individual merit. And unfortunately, classist ideology is hard to defeat.

The United States, for example, tried to eliminate classism by creating a society in which one’s social class can change with the accumulation or loss of wealth. This method, it was thought, would allow individuals of merit to rise to the top. However, Marxist theory points out that the accumulation of wealth, especially of enormous wealth, isn’t necessarily a sign of merit. All too often it’s a sign of questionable ethics. Indeed, as history has shown us, the accumulation of great wealth, or even the maintenance of great inherited wealth, depends upon such unethical practices as the exploitation of cheap labor, the production and sale of such dubious commodities as alcohol and drugs, the exorbitant pricing of such necessities as healthcare and prescription drugs, and the destruction of the environment. In addition, classism exists in the United States, despite the fact that Americans can change the social class into which they were born, because those who occupy the upper class at any given point in time usually expect to be treated, and usually are treated, as if they were superior to those below them on the socioeconomic ladder. And members of the American upper class usually have the same kind of political clout as upper-class people in traditional classist societies. Analogously, those who get trapped in the lower class in the US, due to limited educational and occupational opportunities, are treated as if they were inferior, as if it were their fault that there aren’t enough high-paying jobs to go around.

Capitalism

As we saw earlier, the word capital means money. So capitalism is a system in which everything—every object, every activity, every person—can be defined in terms of its worth in money, its “going rate” on a specific market. Because the market (the availability of and demand for a given product) is considered the best regulator of a product’s monetary worth, capitalist governments tend to avoid regulating business profits. Industries are therefore left in private hands.

Marxist theory suggests, however, that unregulated business profits tend to promote what might be called an ethics of greed, according to which the only virtue, or the only virtue anyone really wants to cultivate, is the virtue of making the most money. For only an ethics of greed could permit the kinds of huge profits enjoyed, for example, by the large American pharmaceutical companies, which have resulted in the inability of most Americans who become ill, especially who become chronically ill, to pay for their medication without prescription insurance, which most Americans don’t yet have. Marxist theory can point to many examples of the destructive nature of capitalism’s promotion of greed, including the squeezing out, by large chain-stores, of the small, independent businesses that used to be so numerous in the United States and the rapidly rising cost of many necessities, in addition to prescription drugs, beyond the easy reach of many people in the United States and throughout the world: hospitalization and other healthcare services and products; decent housing; education; safe, accessible transportation; and even adequate food.

Despite its flaws, however, it seems to many of us who live in capitalist societies that capitalism is, if not perfect, unavoidable. After all, isn’t it human
nature to want more money? That's the kind of ideology capitalism promotes in order to keep us from questioning it. And that's why, to give you just one striking example, Americans have long believed the myth that the island of Manhattan, on which New York City is now located, was sold to white settlers for beads and trinkets valued at about twenty-four dollars. The fact is that the island of Manhattan was not for sale. The Native Americans who allegedly “sold” it didn’t believe that land could be bought and sold (just as air can’t be bought and sold). The island was so rich in wildlife that all Native Americans, even tribes engaged in hostilities, were allowed to hunt there in peace. When the white settlers offered beads and trinkets to the locals, the native hunters simply believed it was an offering of friendship made in gratitude for being allowed to hunt on the island! Clearly, it is not human nature to want more money because not all human cultures share this desire. Nevertheless, the settlers moved in and defended their new “purchase” with guns, believing, or choosing to believe, that the island now belonged to them.

Capitalist ideologies

**Competition**—Capitalism believes that competition among individuals—competition for jobs, for pay raises, for customers, for loans, for awards, and so forth—is the best way to promote a strong society because competition ensures that the most capable, most intelligent people will rise to the top. In contrast, Marxist theory suggests that unrestrained competition is oppressive because it tends to ensure that the most selfish, unethical people will rise to the top, as they’re the ones willing to do whatever it takes to win. The result is that the needs of the community as a whole are usually overlooked, and the needs of those least willing or able to compete are usually sacrificed entirely. That is, competition emphasizes the importance of the individual—“me, me, me”—instead of the group. In addition, it’s difficult to confine the spirit of competition to the school or the workplace. We tend to bring it home with us and become competitive in our personal lives, as well, getting unduly upset if we don’t win the Scrabble game or if our child doesn’t win the spelling contest or if our furniture isn’t as new as our neighbor’s.

**Commodification**—A commodity is anything that has a price tag. Because capitalism defines everything in terms of its monetary worth, it encourages commodification. That is, it encourages us to relate to things and people as commodities. We commodify something when we relate to it in terms of how much money it’s worth, or put another way, how much money it can be exchanged for (its *exchange value*). When we buy something with a high price tag, we acquire social status, so we also commodify something when we relate to it in terms of the social status its ownership gives us (its *sign-exchange value*). For example, I commodify the man I’m dating if I go out with him because he spends a great deal of money on me, in which case

I’m dating him for his exchange value. Also, I commodify him if I go out with him to impress my friends, in which case I’m dating him for his sign-exchange value.

You probably don’t need Marxist theory to show you the dangers involved in this capitalist ideology. We all know that it’s not good to date someone for shallow, selfish reasons. However, we see this kind of behavior so often that it seems almost “natural,” and it seems to many of us, even if we don’t admire it, relatively harmless. So let me offer you a more striking, though less visible example. The commodification of human beings is such an accepted part of big business in the United States that the price-tag placed on human life is frequently the chief motive determining whether or not a given airline company will upgrade its airplanes for safety. The cost of the upgrade is weighed against the cost—for example, the cost in terms of lawsuits and bad publicity—of however many lives are liable to be lost, according to statistical analysis, if the upgrade is not done. If the cost of the upgrade is sufficiently higher than the cost of the loss of human life, the upgrade is not done.

**The American Dream**—The American Dream is a capitalist ideology associated specifically with American history and culture. According to the ideology of the American Dream, anyone who has the determination to work hard enough and the persistence to work long enough can rise from “rags to riches” because America is the land of equal opportunity for all.

Marxist theory points out, however, that our belief in the American Dream blinds us to the reality that a vast number of people have not had and do not have equal opportunity in education, employment, or housing due to such factors as, for example, their gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class. And worse, the American Dream leads us to believe that poor people who are unable to significantly improve their financial status must be shiftless and lazy or in some other way undeserving of decent living conditions. After all, the American Dream tells us that all it takes to make it in America is hard work and determination, and that those who don’t make it have only themselves to blame.

**Rugged individualism**—The American Dream has fostered the ideology of rugged individualism, which holds up for our admiration the example of the individual who strikes out alone in pursuit of a goal not easily achieved, for example, the goal of undertaking an untried, high-risk line of business, in which attempt one could lose all one’s money, or rushing for gold on the American frontier, in which attempt one could lose one’s life.

Marxist theory suggests, however, that the rugged individualist has been greatly romanticized by American folklore while, in reality, rugged individualism generally requires putting self-interest above the needs of the community and a commitment to the belief that “nice guys finish last.” The rugged individualist—who generally believes that his first duty is to himself and his first goal is to win whatever competition he’s entered—isn’t the
person most likely to stop and share his canteen of water with a thirsty straggler who has lost his way to the gold-fields.

The role of religion

For many people, religion is a source of spiritual strength and moral guidance. And Martin Luther King has shown us that the church can function as a powerful force against political oppression when parishioners organize for that purpose. Marxist theory observes, however, that religion too often plays a role in oppressing the poor. One of the best-known Marxist sayings is that “religion is the opiate of the masses.” This means that religion acts as a kind of drug that keeps poor people quiet. Belief in God is not the issue here. Rather, the issue is what is done in the name of organized religion to keep the poor oppressed. For example, white plantation owners in the pre-Civil-War American south used the Bible to justify slavery. And religious belief has long been used to keep poor people satisfied in the knowledge that they’ll get their reward in heaven, thus keeping the poor from rebelling against those who oppress them.

There are, of course, additional oppressive ideologies that Marxism opposes, but these are enough to get us started using Marxist theory to interpret literature. Let’s begin our interpretation exercises by analyzing a story that illustrates very well several of the concepts just outlined: Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use.”

Interpretation exercises

Understanding the operations of capitalism: Interpreting “Everyday Use”

Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” (1973; see Appendix D) is set in the rural south of the late 1960s and early 1970s and tells the story of the Johnsons, an African American family consisting of a mother and her two grown daughters. Although the college-educated Dee Johnson has escaped the poverty into which she was born, Mama and Maggie Johnson have not. And it is the story’s portrayal of the economically successful Dee, especially when contrasted with its portrayal of Mama and Maggie, that makes “Everyday Use” a promising candidate for a Marxist interpretation. Indeed, the depiction of Dee illustrates the operations of all the capitalist ideologies listed in the “Basic concepts” section of this chapter: (1) competition; (2) commodification; (3) the American Dream; and (4) rugged individualism. So let’s take a look at each of these capitalist values in turn and try to see the role it plays in Walker’s tale.

To the extent that these ideologies play a positive role in the characters’ lives, the story is pro-capitalist—it shows capitalism in a good light—which means, in Marxist terms, that the story promotes capitalist oppression. To the extent that these ideologies play a negative role in the characters’ lives, the story is anti-capitalist—it reveals the evils of capitalism—which means, in Marxist terms, that
Using concepts from Marxist theory

Focusing your essay

As we’ve just seen, all of the capitalist ideologies represented in the story damage the character who embraces them: Dee. And the story portrays Dee in a way that makes it difficult for most readers to like her. In contrast, the characters who seem to reject capitalist ideology—Mama and Maggie—are sympathetically portrayed. So it seems reasonable to focus your essay on the ways in which “Everyday Use” is anticapitalist, the ways in which the story invites us to reject the capitalist ideologies it illustrates, which, from a Marxist perspective, is a very good thing for a story to do.

As always, remember that you don’t have to limit yourself to the analysis of the story I’ve offered you. For example, while you might agree that the story’s portrayal of Dee shows the damaging effects of capitalism on personal values and family solidarity, you might argue that Mama and Maggie’s situation doesn’t offer us an inviting alternative to capitalism. If the choice of lifestyle offered in “Everyday Use” is between that afforded by Dee’s financial stability and the undereducated poverty of Mama and Maggie, many readers, at least unconsciously, will probably be drawn to Dee’s capitalist lifestyle despite whatever personal dislike they might feel for her. From a Marxist perspective, this would be a flaw in the story.

You might also argue that the story’s Marxist critique of capitalism isn’t as thorough as it might be. For Marxist theory doesn’t want the poor to be content with their poverty, as Mama and Maggie seem to be. Rather, Marxism wants the poor to work against their own victimization, for example, by joining together in community, state, national, and international groups to organize efforts to change laws and policies that discriminate against the poor. Whatever your interpretation, be sure you understand the Marxist concepts you choose to employ, compose a clear statement of your thesis, and support your interpretation with adequate textual evidence.

Recognizing the operations of the American Dream: Interpreting “The Battle Royal”

Sometimes a literary work illustrates the operations of one capitalist ideology in particular, as we see in Ralph Ellison’s “The Battle Royal” (1952; see Appendix C). In this story, the nameless narrator takes us back to his youth. As a young man who has just graduated from high school, the narrator seems fixed on one idea: he wants to “get ahead.” Through hard work and determination, he wants to become a financial success and raise himself out of the poverty in which most of the members of his African American community are stuck. In other words, he wants to achieve the American Dream. And because he knows that the local white civic leaders hold the key to his success, the narrator knows he must please them if he is to have any chance at all of achieving that Dream. In fact, he is so focused on his own desire for success
that he is unable to understand the meaning of the bizarre events that occur in the hotel ballroom on the evening he is to give a speech before the town's leading white men. For his attention to the scene around him is repeatedly interrupted by his concern over what the white civic leaders might be thinking about him.

So there's our start: the story portrays a young man's belief in the American Dream. Now in order to determine whether the story is defending or attacking this capitalist ideology, we must examine whether the American Dream is portrayed positively or negatively. In other words, are the effects of the narrator's devotion to the American Dream positive or negative? To answer that question, note what is going on in the story each time the young man's thoughts dart to his concern about the civic leaders' opinion of him, a concern that often takes the form of worrying about his speech. I think you'll observe that each time this happens, the narrator's desire to know what the white men are thinking—which is a desire for his own success, for his own chance at the American Dream—blinds him to the reality of what is going on in that hotel ballroom and in his life. Specifically, I think you'll find that the narrator's belief in the American Dream blinds him to five important things: (1) the real intentions of the white civic leaders he tries so hard to please; (2) the significance of his alienation from the other young men from his community; (3) the significance of the white exotic dancer the civic leaders parade before the young black men; (4) the meaning of the battle royal in which the narrator participates; and (5) the meaning of the narrator's dream about his grandfather. Let's take a look at each one in turn.

The real intentions of the white civic leaders

The white civic leaders have invited the narrator to their smoker to give a speech, a speech the young man believes will open for him the path to the American Dream. And the narrator does, in fact, give a speech, after which he is presented with a briefcase and a scholarship to a state college for black youth. Nevertheless, it seems rather clear that these leaders—who represent such public institutions as the government, the church, and the schools—do not intend that the narrator will do anything more in the future than serve the white power structure by helping to keep his people "in their place." These men have no intention of helping him achieve the American Dream, unless it is in the form of an unofficial pay-off for services rendered: the narrator may be permitted to achieve a slightly higher degree of financial success than the rest of the black community, but that success will come at the cost of helping the white power structure keep his people down. Yet this black youth is unable to see how these powerful white men feel about him.

1 Find all the evidence in the story you can to show the real intentions of the white civic leaders toward the narrator.

2 Find the textual evidence that shows how these young men feel about the narrator.

The narrator's alienation from his community

The narrator's negative reaction to the young men with whom he is to participate in the battle royal might be considered an example of classism: he feels he doesn't belong with them because he believes himself socially superior to them. However, notice that he is mainly concerned that the white civic leaders will associate him with these less successful and presumably less deserving young men and that this will lessen his chance of being aided by the white community in his quest to achieve the American Dream.

1 Find the textual evidence that shows us how the narrator's devotion to the American Dream alienates him from the young men in his own community.

a Find the lines that show how the narrator feels about the other black youths.

b Find the lines that show how these black youths feel about the narrator.

2 Find the textual evidence showing that the narrator isn't even able to fully realize how the other young men feel about him. (His encounter, in the ring, with Tatlock is especially revealing.)

The significance of the exotic dancer

From the perspective of Marxist theory, the exotic dancer is a commodity for the white men who have hired her, a token of their social status, and their social status is the source and mirror of their social power. In fact, as a sign of white men's prestige and power, the exotic dancer represents white women in general. Such tokens have little meaning if they are not displayed for others to see. This is why the civic leaders insist on displaying her before the young black men. They want these young men to desire her. The white men are telling the black youths, in effect, "You want white women, but you can't have them because they are our property, a sign of our social status, a sign that we are superior to you."
122 Using critical theory

1. Find all the evidence in the story you can to support this claim.
2. Find the textual evidence that shows the narrator's inability to see this aspect of the white men's relationship to the exotic dancer.
   a. Does it ever occur to the narrator that the white men are displaying their power in this scene?
   b. Instead of getting angry at the white men, where does the narrator direct his anger?

The meaning of the battle royal

Of course, the battle royal is a chilling example of racist brutality, and it is the degradation of young black males in their prime that the white men apparently find so “entertaining.” However, from the perspective of Marxist theory, the battle royal also mirrors one of the ways in which the socioeconomically oppressed are kept down by those in power. They are kept fighting among themselves, forced to compete with one another for the limited amount of money thrown their way. In the real world, the socioeconomically oppressed are kept down by those in power. They are kept fighting among themselves, forced to compete with one another for the limited amount of money thrown their way. In the story, the young men must compete for the limited amount of money thrown on the electrified rug. In the real world, the socioeconomically oppressed must compete for the limited number of jobs available to them. Do you see the parallel? And as long as the oppressed are kept battling one another, they won’t join forces and turn against their oppressors. In fact, this is why the white men want the narrator to participate in the battle: he, too, must be kept down where he “belongs.”

1. Find the evidence the story provides to support the claim that the battle royal represents this kind of keep-them-fighting-among-themselves strategy.
   a. What do the white men say to the fighters before the battle?
   b. What do the white men yell at the fighters during the battle?
   c. What do the white men do when they think that a fighter is trying to escape from the ring?

2. Find the textual evidence that shows us how the narrator’s focus on the American Dream blinds him to this meaning of the battle royal.
   a. Note how often the narrator’s thoughts drift to his speech, on which he has pinned his hopes of future success.
   b. Note exactly what is happening each time the narrator’s thoughts drift to his speech.

3. In this context, explain the significance of the fact that the fighters in the battle royal are blindfolded.

The meaning of the narrator’s dream about his grandfather

Toward the end of the story, the narrator is finally allowed to give his speech, and he receives a scholarship to the state college for black youth. That night he dreams about his grandfather, who horrified the family years ago by telling them, on his death bed, that his life of meekness and humility had been just a disguise to fool white folks, whom he considered the enemy of his people. Look closely at this dream. As we learned in the previous chapter on psychoanalytic theory, dreams sometimes reveal a truth that we have buried in our unconscious—that is, a truth we are afraid to face because we fear we can’t handle it.

1. What truth is revealed in the narrator’s dream about his grandfather? In other words, what does the narrator unconsciously know about his position as a black person in a racist society dominated by whites?
2. How does the American Dream help him close his eyes to this truth?

Focusing your essay

It should be a fairly simple task to focus your essay based on the evidence you’ve collected above because all of that data point to one idea: the story suggests that the American Dream is not only a false ideology—it doesn’t keep its promise—but a dangerous ideology. The narrator is so blinded by his belief in the American Dream that he can’t see the obvious reality of his own situation. And if he can’t see the problem, then he can’t even begin to try to solve it. In the same way that religion is referred to by Marxist theory as “the opiate of the masses,” Ellison’s tale shows us how the American Dream can operate as a drug in its own right. For the narrator, the American Dream is a religion, and his unquestioning belief in it blinds him to the reality that surrounds him, keeping all his hopes and all his attention focused on some indefinite future when he believes he will be rewarded for proper conduct by being allowed to achieve his piece of the American pie. However, the narrator’s hard work and determination, not to mention the chilling sacrifices of personal safety and dignity he makes to please the white civic leaders portrayed in the story, do not ensure that he will be offered his rightful opportunity to attain the American Dream. Rather, it is quite clear that he will be kept running in pursuit of an American Dream he will never be allowed to earn. And he will be kept running because his belief in the Dream doesn’t permit him to realize how completely the deck is stacked against him.

It’s probably easier to see why people who have succeeded in climbing the socioeconomic ladder believe in the American Dream than to understand why those whom it excludes remain committed to it. But an essay based on the evidence you’ve collected above will show the power of the American Dream to blind even the poorest Americans to the fact that the Dream is not equally accessible to all. You may be thinking, “Well, it’s still good for the poor to have something to hope for even if they can’t get it.” But a hope that blinds you to the reality of your circumstances is dangerous because, without a clear understanding of the situation you’re in, you can’t help but be victimized by
it. In such a case, your hope is like the hope of a person addicted to gambling: because addicted gamblers believe they can win—that is, they have hope—they can’t quit gambling. As long as the narrator in “The Battle Royal” clings to the American Dream, which is a dream of coming out on top, of beating the competition, he will not be able to realize what Marxist theory would have him realize: that his only real hope lies in uniting with other oppressed people and working to change the laws and attitudes that created and sustain socioeconomic oppression.

Of course, you don’t have to limit yourself to the analysis of the story I’ve offered you. For example, you might focus, instead, on the ways in which the white civic leaders commodify everyone in the story: the narrator, the group of young black men they bring in for the battle royal, and the exotic dancer. For these white men relate to those beneath them on the socioeconomic ladder as tokens of their own sign-exchange value, of their own social status. Such an analysis would include a discussion of the negative effects of commodification on the white men’s moral character. In other words, you’d be showing how “The Battle Royal” reveals the harmful effects of capitalist ideology even on those it privileges.

If you would prefer, instead, to focus your essay on the ways in which the story illustrates the damaging effects of classism, keep one thing in mind. The classist behavior you see in the story—the white men’s belief in their class superiority and the narrator’s belief that he “outclasses” the young men from his community—is based on skin color. The underlying assumption is that white people are superior to black people and that light-skinned blacks are superior to those with darker skin. So in “The Battle Royal,” classism is based on racism, a subject explored in depth in Chapter 8, “Using concepts from African American theory to understand literature.” Whatever your interpretation of this story, be sure you understand the Marxist concepts you choose to employ, compose a clear statement of your thesis, and support your interpretation with adequate textual evidence.

**Analyzing the operations of classism: Interpreting “A Rose for Emily”**

America was founded on the belief that human beings should not be bound by a class system that keeps sons and daughters chained to the same profession, and therefore the same socioeconomic class, as their parents. Nevertheless, at different times and places in American history, the traditional class system—according to which one’s family name, one’s ancestry, is one’s defining characteristic—has been the factor that determines one’s social class and therefore one’s social standing in the community. We see the remnants of this kind of traditional class system operating in William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” (1931; see Appendix B). The death of Mr. Grierson reveals that he has lost his fortune and that his daughter Emily, the story’s main character, will not inherit the money the family once had. Nevertheless, the town of Jefferson