UNIT 2

Lesson 1: The Rise of Industrialism and Capitalism in America

Europe's shift from the Middle Ages to modernity witnessed several revolutionary changes. With the rise of the Enlightenment and its liberal ideas, monarchies fell and church authority diminished, giving in to new ways of social, political, and economic organisation. The rise of the modern state happened in tandem with the twin processes of industrialisation and urbanisation. In the domain of political economy, liberals, such as Adam Smith, called for the implementation of laissez-fair policies: a free market economy, characterised by scarce intervention from the state. Liberal economists believe that the less the state interferes with the market (regulating the market) the more prosperity will be achieved and the more progress will be made. This economic system associated with liberal societies is called capitalism.

The rise of modern industry was a catalytic event in the 17th and 18th centuries. The appearance of factories forced many people to move from their rural settings and settle in urban areas. This mass exodus saw many craftsmen abandon their crafts and farmers abandon their farms. Economic production shifted from the private sphere to the public sphere. Having sold their labour to factories, these craftsmen and farmers had to learn to survive in a rather unfriendly urban environment. In the burgeoning modern city, class differences became more marked, with the factory owners (the then capitalists) getting richer and the labourers getting poorer. Urban areas became not only a hub of economic production but also a morass of vice, the pit of poverty, and most importantly a ground for imminent class conflict.

Amid the ills bred by mass industrialisation, rose calls for reform. Carl Marx spearheaded an early critique of capitalism, offering by so doing new insights into how socio-economic conditions shape our perception of reality. His analysis did away with the idealist view prevalent in his time and offered instead a materialist interpretation of history. He believes that capitalism is an oppressive ideology, which, like all oppressive ideologies, seeks to instil a false consciousness in its adherents.

This lesson will shed light on the rise of the class system in America (case study) by drawing on the works of Thom Hartmann and Michael Parenti. While Thom Hartmann argues that the Founding Fathers were well aware of the importance of the middle class to protect the nation against the tyranny of a corporate class, Michael Parenti argues that the Founding Fathers were themselves complicit in protecting the interests of the upper class, to which they belonged themselves. Both authors agree that the American Dream proved to be but an illusion, a myth, for the majority of its seekers.

The Rise of a Corporate Class in America: Thom Hartmann's *Unequal Protection*

Like their Portuguese and Spanish counterparts, early English colonists were motivated by an entrepreneurial spirit, fuelled by accounts of the bounties of the New World. What the colonists regarded as possible acquisitions, the Native Americans regarded as gifts of nature to be shared altruistically with fellow tribespeople. This idea of collective welfare led Native Americans to develop a political system well ahead of its time. Thom Hartmann calls them ancient "cauldrons of democracy." The advanced system of governance evidenced by the Iroquois Confederacy did indeed win the admiration of Benjamin Franklin:

> "It would be a very strange thing if Six Nations of Ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an Union and be able to execute it in such a manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble, and yet a like union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies."

The concept of chief, monarch or ruler in the then European mind, was alien to these Native Americans. They would never give absolute power to anyone ruler. The Iroquois Confedeacy functioned like any modern democracy with elected representatives, an upper house, a lower house, and a supreme court. The framers of the constitution had this model of government in mind when they penned the first draft of one of the most important documents in American history.

The Founding Fathers rejected the view held by Thomas Hobbes, who argues in *Leviathan* (his magnum opus) that society can only function properly with the rule of the few over the many. Without a strong central government, he holds, there will be no culture, no arts, no industry, and so on. He believes that the general population is ready to give up personal, political, and economic freedom for security. In the Hobbesian view, the existence of a middle class is useless.

Thomas Jefferson was well aware that a well-functioning democracy would never flourish without the creation of a somewhat well-off middle class. In Jefferson's time, this middle class consisted of yeoman farmers (there was hardly any industry at the time). The difference between the farmers of the Old World (the serfs) and the farmers in Jefferson's time is that the latter owned their lands, and thus enjoyed a great degree of economic freedom. This spirit was evidenced in Jefferson's declaration that everyone has the right to "life, liberty, and happiness."

Thom Hartmann believes that America's plight today should be traced to the rise of big business and corporations. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln issued the Declaration of Emancipation, a document that officially abolished slavery. During the Reconstruction, the 14th amendment was passed, granting African Americans all the constitutional rights enjoyed by the Whites. The 14th amendment was about flesh and blood individuals and was by no means passed to protect artificial persons.

British Common Law, upon which the American constitution is based, distinguishes between natural persons and artificial persons, under which category corporations are classified. The distinction was originally made so that the government could levy taxes. In other words, corporations were granted this status—which in effect does not state they are real persons—so that the government could tax them legally.

The constitution, according to Hartmann, does not state clearly the distinction between natural persons and artificial persons, a loophole that corporations continue to capitalise on. He insists:

> The modern corporation is neither male nor female, doesn't breathe or eat, can't be enslaved, can't give birth, can live forever, doesn't fear prison, and can't be executed if found guilty of misdoings. It can cut off parts of itself and turn them into new "persons," can change its identity in a day, and can have simultaneous residences in many different nations. It is not a human but a creation of humans. Nonetheless, today a corporation gets many of the constitutional protections America's Founders gave humans in the Bill of Rights to protect them against governments or other potential oppressors.

The first successful exploitation of the loophole ever recorded in American history goes back to the Santa Clara County versus the Southern Pacific Railroad case in 1886. The railroad refused to pay taxes to the county for the way and rights-of-way owned by the railroad. The case was eventually taken to the Supreme Court.

The attorneys defending the railroad boldly argued that the taxes were unconstitutional and violated the rights of the railroad, which, they believed ought to have been granted legal protection under the 14th amendment very much like any natural person. It was the first time anyone called for

the appropriation of the 14th amendment in a context for which it had not originally been conceived. In other words, the attorneys were calling for the protection of an entity that could not talk, breathe, or do anything human-beings would naturally do.

The attorney defending the corporations, a certain Sanderson, claimed that by imposing taxes on the corporation the county was in fact discriminating against the railroad company. He said: "I believe that the clause [of the fourteenth amendment] in relation to equal protection means the same thing as the plain and simple yet sublime words found in the declaration of independence, 'all men are created equal.' Not equal in physical and mental power, not equal in fortune and special position, but equal before the law" (quoted in Hartmann, 18).

The arguments put forward by the railroad and its attorneys infuriated Delphine M. Delmas, the attorney defending the Santa Clara County, who launched into a diatribe:

> To my mind, the fallacy, if I may be permitted so to term it, of the argument lies in the assumption that corporations are entitled to be governed by the laws that are applicable to natural persons. That, it is said, results from the fact that corporations are [artificial] persons, and that the last clause of the fourteenth amendment refers to all persons without distinction.

There is no mention of the word corporation in the US constitution because the founding fathers were aware that corporations would have been a danger to the burgeoning democracy had they acquired limitless rights. After all, corporations by nature thrive on profit: more is better. Moral considerations, if any, come second to relentless profit. The founding fathers wanted the states to regulate the activities of corporations so that nothing like the East India Company would ever happen again.

Putting corporations on an equal footing with people not only gave them the right to protection under the 14th amendment, but it also, at some later stage, gave them access to overall legal protection under the US constitution. They began to capitalise on a host of amendments to defend themselves against the regulatory policies of the government. For instance, they capitalised on the provision in the first amendment that gives citizens the right to free speech. This came with enormous implications in the political sphere in that now they, having acquired the right of personhood, engaged in all sorts of lobbying and financing their political candidates. They had equally took the 4th amendment to their advantage in order protect themselves against scrutiny of their records, which was required by the federal laws. They called on the government to respect their right to privacy as much as like human beings (49).

If we really come to think about it, the Pilgrims sailed to the New World aboard the Mayflower, a ship owned by a giant corporation at the time, the East India Company. The East India Company faced a lot of competition from small business owners who themselves imported tea to the colonies. They sometimes traded with the Dutch instead of the East India company, something that harmed the company (69). In a bid to quell this competition, the company pressured and lobbied for laws that would to "put its small business competitors out of business" (70). The fact is many members of the British government and royalty were stockholders in the company, so they pushed for laws that identified those who imported tea without a government-granted license as privateers and pirates, who risked to face the death penalty as a punishment (70). Among the important laws passed, the Townshend Act (1767) and the Tea Act (1773) stood out.

Many people still wrongly believe that the Tea Act, which led to the Tea Party was simply the product of the colonists' indignation over the tax per se. Rather, the colonists wised up to the fact that the act was meant to give the East India Company full monopoly to export tea to the colonies, a

monopoly that exempted it from paying taxes to the government. "It even gave the company a tax refund on millions of pounds of tea that it was unable to sell and holding in inventory" (71). In fact, small merchants in the colonies had to pay higher taxes than the company, so they eventually cried out against what they perceived as blatant injustice and raised the famous slogan "no taxation without representation."

Interestingly, Hewes notes that it wasn't just American small businesses and citizens who objected to the new monopoly powers given to the East India Company by the English Parliament. The company was also putting out of business many smaller tea exporters in England, who had been doing business with American family-owned retail stores for decades, and those companies began a protest in England that was simultaneous with the American protests against transnational corporate bullying and the East India Company's buying of influence with the British Parliament (75-76).

Among the reasons cited in the 1776 Declaration of Independence for separating America from Britain are, "For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world: For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent." The British had used tax and anti-smuggling laws to make it nearly impossible for American small businesses to compete against the huge multinational East India Company, and the Tea Act of 1773 was the final straw (81).

The Implementation of a Class System: Michael Parenti's *Democracy for the Few*

If Thom Hartmann honours the noble intentions of the Founding Fathers to establish democracy, Michael Parenti argues that the Founding Fathers themselves worked to establish a system that served the class interests to which they belonged (the upper class). He argues that they gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 out of the need to establish a strong central government in order to protect the interests of the rich against the greed of the poor. After all, the framers of the constitution agreed with the most prominent economic theories of the time such as those advanced by Adam Smith, who believed that government was "instituted for the defense of the rich against the poor" and "grows up with the acquisition of valuable property." He goes on to dismantle the myth that early American society was egalitarian, free of and immune to the ills, such as extreme want and wealth, which characterised the Old World. Extreme want and wealth always meant that society was virtually split into two classes: the extremely wealthy (the landed gentry) and the extremely poor (the landless serfs).

Early American colonial society did not differ much from its English counterpart. Men of influence and power received generous land grants from the crown. By 1700, three-fourths of the acreage in New York belonged to fewer than a dozen persons. In the interior of Virginia, seven individuals owned over 1,7 million acres. By 1760, fewer than 500 men in 5 colonial cities controlled most of the commerce, shipping, banking, mining, and manufacturing on the Eastern seaboard.

During the period extending from the American Revolution and the framing of the constitution (1776-1787), the big land owners, merchants, and bankers had a huge amount of influence over politico-economic life, dominating local newspapers and the flow of information. This period proved once again the perennial link between moneyed interests and the media in that controlling the information is vital to protecting the status-quo. The relationship between politics and economy manifested itself in the early legislations regarding suffrage. In 12 of the 13 colonies (except Pennsylvania), only property-owning white males could vote, not more than 10 per cent of the population. Such legislations excluded Native Americans, slaves, free blacks, women, indentured servants, and even white males lacking sufficient property. A member of the New Jersy legislature had to be worth at least 1000 pounds. South Carolina state senators had to possess estates worth at least 7000 pounds clear of debt (equivalent to over a million dollars today). So, it was not about race or gender or anything; it was about property, money, and economic standing. Remember that Adam

Smith argued that governments are first and foremost established to protect the property of the rich. Giving suffrage to, say, propertyless white males would have meant a stumbling-block in the way of the rich.

Because of the increasing debts (debtors lent money to people at high interest rates and people mortgaged their property. In most cases, the poor lost their property), there was growing sentiment among the people that the war against the British Empire was fought for naught. In 1787, impoverished farmers in western Massachusetts led by Daniel Shays took up arms. Their rebellion was put down by the state militia leaving 11 men dead and scores wounded. Shays' Rebellion was a serious threat to the politico-economic order.

In the Federalist, James Madison wrote about his attitude towards Shays' Rebellion (1787). He was almost convinced that persons of birth and fortune should take the reins of the burgeoning nation. The role of the ruling class consisted of checking the "leveling impulses" of the propertyless majority "to secure the public good and private against the danger of such a faction."

UNIT 2

Lesson 2: Introducing Marxist Literary Theory

What is Marxist Literary Criticism?

Students new to the study of critical theory often ask why we study Marxist criticism now that the Communist Bloc in Europe has failed, thereby proving that Marxism is not a viable theory. In addition to ignoring the existence of China, among other communist countries, such a question overlooks two important facts. First, beyond some relatively small and relatively short-lived communes, there has never been, as far as we know, a true Marxist society on the face of the earth. Communist societies, though they claim to be based on the principles developed by Karl Marx (1818–1883), have been, in reality, oligarchies in which a small group of leaders controls the money and the guns and forces its policies on a population kept in line through physical intimidation. Second, even if communist countries were true Marxist societies and even if all of them had failed, Marxist theory would still give us a meaningful way to understand history and current events. Indeed, one could use Marxism to interpret the failure of Marxist regimes. However, before we can attempt a Marxist interpretation of such political events, or of events of any kind, we must first, of course, understand Marxist theory.

For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on. Thus, economics is the *base* on which the *superstructure* of social/political/ideological realities is built. Economic power therefore always includes social and political power as well, which is why many Marxists today refer to *socioeconomic class*, rather than economic class, when talking about the class structure.

In Marxist terminology, economic conditions are referred to as *material* circumstances, and the social/political/ideological atmosphere generated by material conditions is called the *historical* situation. For the Marxist critic, neither human events (in the political or personal domain) nor human productions (from nuclear submarines to television shows) can be understood without understanding the specific material/historical circumstances in which those events and productions occur. That is, all human events and productions have specific material/historical causes. An accurate picture of human affairs cannot be obtained by the search for abstract, timeless essences or principles but only by understanding concrete conditions in the world. Therefore, Marxist analysis of human events and productions focuses on relationships among socioeconomic classes, both within a society and among societies, and it explains all human activities in terms of the distribution and dynamics of economic power. And Marxist *praxis,* or methodology, dictates that theoretical ideas can be judged to have value only in terms of their concrete applications, that is, only in terms of their applicability to the real world.

From a Marxist perspective, differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. For the real battle lines are drawn, to put the matter simply, between the "haves" and the "have-nots," between the *bourgeoisie*—those who control the world's natural, economic, and human resources—and the *proletariat,* the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor—the mining, the factory work, the ditch digging, the railroad building—that fills the coffers of the rich. Unfortunately, those in the proletariat are often the last to recognize this fact; they usually permit differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender to separate them into warring factions that accomplish little or no social change. Few Marxists today believe, as

Marx did, that the proletariat will one day spontaneously develop the class consciousness needed to rise up in violent revolution against their oppressors and create a classless society. However, were the proletariat of any given country to act as a group, regardless of their differences (for example, were they all to vote for the same political candidates, boycott the same companies, and go on strike until their needs were met), the current power structure would be radically altered.

Clearly, members of the underclass and the lower class are economically oppressed: they suffer the ills of economic privation, are hardest hit by economic recessions, and have limited means of improving their lot. In sharp contrast, members of the upper class and "aristocracy" are economically privileged: they enjoy luxurious lifestyles, are least affected by economic recessions, and have a great deal of financial security. But what about members of the middle class? Are they economically oppressed or economically privileged? Of course, the answer is probably both. Their socioeconomic lifestyle is certainly better than that of the classes below them, but they'll probably never own a mansion; they have more financial stability than the lower classes, yet they are often hard hit by economic recessions and usually have good reason to worry about their financial future; they benefit from institutionalized forms of economic security, such as good medical insurance and pension plans, but they shoulder an enormous (and, many would argue, unfair) tax burden relative to their income.

Why don't the economically oppressed fight back? What keeps the lower classes "in their place" and at the mercy of the wealthy? At least for the poor and homeless in America today, the struggle to survive is certainly a factor in keeping them down. Who has the time to become politically active, or even politically aware, when one is struggling just to stay alive and feed one's children? Other elements oppressing them are the police and other government strong-arm agencies, who, under government orders, have mistreated lower-class and underclass poor perceived as a threat to the power structure, such as the striking workers who were arrested, beaten, or killed in the early days of American labor unions or the homeless who were routed from their cardboard boxes in New York's Central Park a few years ago because their shanties, in effect, "ruined the view" from the windows of the wealthy living in posh apartments nearby. The poor are oppressed even more effectively, however, by ideology.

Ideology

For Marxism, an *ideology* is a belief system, and all belief systems are products of cultural conditioning. For example, capitalism, communism, Marxism, patriotism, religion, ethical systems, humanism, environmentalism, astrology, and karate are all ideologies. The critical theories we will study in this book are all ideologies. Even our assumption that nature behaves according to the laws of science is an ideology. However, although almost any experience or field of study we can think of has an ideological component, not all ideologies are equally productive or desirable. Undesirable ideologies promote repressive political agendas and, in order to ensure their acceptance among the citizenry, pass themselves off as natural ways of seeing the world instead of acknowledging themselves as ideologies. "It's natural for men to hold leadership positions because their biological superiority renders them more physically, intellectually, and emotionally capable than women" is a sexist ideology that sells itself as a function of nature, rather than as a product of cultural belief. "Every family wants to own its own home on its own land" is a capitalist ideology that sells itself as natural by pointing, for example, to the fact that almost all Americans want to own their own property, without acknowledging that this desire is created in us by the capitalist culture in which we live. Many Native American nations, in contrast, don't believe that land is something that can be owned. For them, it's like trying to own the air we breathe.

By posing as natural ways of seeing the world, repressive ideologies prevent us from understanding the material/historical conditions in which we live because they refuse to acknowledge that those conditions have any bearing on the way we see the world. Marxism, a nonrepressive ideology, acknowledges that it is an ideology. Marxism works to make us constantly aware of all the ways in which we are products of material/historical circumstances and of the repressive ideologies that serve to blind us to this fact in order to keep us subservient to the ruling power system. Although Marxist theorists differ in their estimation of the degree to which we are "programmed" by ideology, all agree that the most successful ideologies are *not* recognized as ideologies but are thought to be natural ways of seeing the world by the people who subscribe to them. Thus, although we could argue that the economic interests of middle-class America would best be served by a political alliance with the poor in order to attain a more equitable distribution of America's enormous wealth among the middle and lower classes, in political matters the middle class generally sides with the wealthy against the poor.

From a Marxist perspective, the role of ideology in maintaining those in power is so important that we should briefly examine a few more examples so that we can see how it works. *Classism*, for example, is an ideology that equates one's value as a human being with the social class to which one belongs: the higher one's social class, the better one is assumed to be because quality is "in the blood," that is, inborn. From a classist perspective, people at the top of the social scale are naturally superior to those below them: those at the top are more intelligent, more responsible, more trustworthy, more ethical, and so on. People at the bottom of the social scale, it follows, are naturally shiftless, lazy, and irresponsible. Therefore, it is only right and natural that those from the highest social class should hold all the positions of power and leadership because they are naturally suited to such roles and are the only ones who can be trusted to perform them properly.

Patriotism is an ideology that keeps poor people fighting wars against poor people from other countries (one way or another, sufficient money can generally keep one out of the armed forces during war time or, at least, out of the combat units) while the rich on both sides rake in the profits of war-time economy. Because patriotism leads the poor to see themselves as members of a nation, separate from other nations, rather than as members of a worldwide oppressed class opposed to all privileged classes including those from their own country, it prevents the poor from banding together to improve their condition globally.

Rugged individualism, which, as we have seen, is a cornerstone of the American dream, is an ideology that romanticizes the individual who strikes out alone in pursuit of a goal not easily achieved, a goal that often involves risk and one that most people would not readily undertake. In the past, such a goal would have been, for example, the rush for gold and silver on the American frontier, an attempt in which many individuals risked losing their lives. Today, such a goal might be the undertaking of a high-risk business, in which one risks losing all one's money. Although it may sound like an admirable character trait, Marxist thinkers consider rugged individualism an oppressive ideology because it puts self-interest above the needs—and even above the survival—of other people. By keeping the focus on "me" instead of on "us," rugged individualism works against the well-being of society as a whole and of underprivileged people in particular. Rugged individualism also gives us the illusion that we make our own decisions without being significantly influenced by ideology of any sort when, in fact, we're all influenced by various ideologies all the time, whether we realize it or not.

Consumerism, or shop-'till-you-drop-ism, is another cornerstone of the American dream. Consumerism is an ideology that says "I'm only as good as what I buy." Thus, it simultaneously fulfills two ideological purposes: it gives me the illusion that I can be "as good as" the wealthy if I can purchase what they purchase or a reasonable facsimile thereof (albeit on credit) and it fills the coffers of the wealthy who manufacture and sell the consumer products I buy and who reap the 15–20 percent interest on my credit-card bills.

Of course, there are many more capitalist ideologies we could analyze. These few are intended just to illustrate in general terms the Marxist view of repressive ideologies. Our goal as Marxist critics is to identify the ideology at work in cultural productions—literature, films, paintings, music, television programs, commercial advertisements, education, popular philosophy, religion, forms of entertainment, and so on—and to analyze how that ideology supports or undermines the socioeconomic system (the power structure) in which that cultural production plays a significant role. While Marxists believe that all social phenomena, from child-rearing practices to environmental concerns, are cultural productions—and that culture cannot be separated from the socioeconomic system that produced it—many Marxists are interested in cultural productions in the narrower sense of the word: for example, art, music, film, theater, literature, and television. For these critics, culture, in this narrower sense, is the primary bearer of ideology because it reaches so many people in what seems to be an innocent form: entertainment. When we are being entertained, our guard is down, so to speak, and we are especially vulnerable to ideological programming.

Human Behavior, Commodity, and the family

Although the later works of Karl Marx focus on economics, on the workings of society as a whole, rather than on the individual, it is important to remember that he began as a student of human behavior—we might even say a social psychologist—in his own right. For example, his concern over the rise of industrialism in the mid-nineteenth century was a concern for the effects of factory work on people who were forced to sell their labor to the industries that were replacing independent artisans and farmers. Because factory workers produced such large quantities of products, none of which bore their names or any other mark of their individual contributions, Marx observed that they became disassociated not only from the products they produced but from their own labor as well, and he noted the debilitating effects of what he called *alienated labor* on the labourer and on the society as a whole.

Similarly, Marx's concern over the rise of a capitalist economy was a concern for the effects of capitalism on human values. In a capitalist economic system, an object's value becomes impersonal. Its value is translated into a monetary "equivalent"—the word *capital* means money—and determined solely in terms of its relationship to a monetary market. The question becomes, How many people will buy the object, and how much money will they be willing to pay for it? Whether or not people really need the object in question and whether or not it is really worth its assigned price are irrelevant issues. In Anglo-European culture, capitalism replaced a barter economy in which labor or goods were exchanged for other labor or goods, depending on the abilities and needs of the individuals involved in the exchange. The focus of many later Marxists on the ways in which ideology is transmitted through popular culture and operates in our emotional lives is thus a natural extension of Marx's own interest in human behavior and experience.

Of course, many Marxist insights into human behavior involve the damaging effects of capitalism on human psychology, and those damaging effects often appear in our relationship to the *commodity*. For Marxism, a commodity's value lies not in what it can do (*use value*) but in the money

or other commodities for which it can be traded (*exchange value*) or in the social status it confers on its owner (*sign-exchange value*). An object becomes a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign-exchange value, and both forms of value are determined by the society in which the object is exchanged. For example, if I read a book for pleasure or for information, or even if I use it to prop up a table leg, the book has use value. If I sell that same book, it has exchange value. If I leave that book out on my coffee table to impress my date, it has sign-exchange value. *Commodification* is the act of relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value. I commodify a work of art when I buy it as a financial investment, that is, with the intention of selling it for more money, or when I buy it to impress other people with my refined tastes. If I purchase and display costly goods or services excessively in order to impress people with my wealth, I am guilty of *conspicuous consumption*, as when I buy a full-length, white mink coat (or even a pair of $100 designer sunglasses), not just for the object's usefulness or beauty but in order to show the world how much money I have.

Finally, I commodify human beings when I structure my relations with them to promote my own advancement financially or socially. Most of us know what it means to treat a person like an object (for example, a sex object). An object becomes a commodity, however, only when it has exchange value or sign exchange value. Do I choose my dates based on how much money I think they will spend on me (their exchange value) or on how much I think they will impress my friends (their sign-exchange value)? If so, then I'm commodifying them.

Lesson 3: Analysing Simile and Metaphor

Introduction

In everyday English, we use expressions like 'silent as the grave,' 'time is money,' 'sharp as a tack,' 'you're a gem,' and many others. These expressions have gained too wide a currency over time that perhaps we no longer think of them as **tropes** or **figures of speech**. They might have lost some of their appeal in that the images they conjure up have become **trite**. Linguists often refer to these overused tropes as **clichés**, but the point is we use figures of speech regularly, especially simile and metaphor. In this lesson, we will look into how simile and metaphor work and how to analyse them.

Metaphor as Concept

We often talk about life in terms of journeys, about arguments in terms of war, about theories in terms of buildings, about anger in terms of heat, and so on. Consider these examples:

He was boiling with rage.
She has a hot temper.

One would easily understand that here we are talking about anger in terms of heat. One way to couch the **conceptual metaphor**, or master metaphor, so to speak, is as follows: Anger is heat. In a conceptual metaphor, we try to understand one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. The first conceptual domain here is *anger*, often referred to as **the target domain**, and the second conceptual domain is *heat*, often referred to as **the source domain**.

As human-beings, we tend to draw on our daily experiences to understand certain concepts. In our example above, we are trying to understand anger, a more abstract concept, in terms of our day-to-day more practical experience with heat. To understand further how conceptual metaphors work, let us turn our attention to some common examples.

An argument is war

Your claims are *indefensible*.
He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
His criticisms were *right on target*.
I *demolished* his argument.
I've never *won* an argument with him.
You disagree? Okay, *shoot*!
If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.
He *shot down* all of my arguments.

In the examples above, we have drawn on the domain of war to understand the way we argue with each other. Much like in a war, we come up with strategies, we defend our line, we attack, we destroy and demolish our opponent's arguments, and so on. In other words, we have drawn on our understanding of an actual battlefield to understand a verbal battlefield, as it were.

Theories are buildings

Is that the *foundation* for your theory?
The theory needs more *support*.
We need *to construct a strong* argument for that.
We need *to buttress* the theory with *solid* arguments.
The theory will *stand or fall* on the *strength* of that argument.
So far we have *put together* only the *framework* of the theory.

Ideas are food

All this paper has in it are *raw* facts, *half-baked* ideas, and *warmed-over* theories.

There are too many facts here for me *to digest* them all.
I just can't *swallow* that claim.
Let me *stew* over that for a while.
That's *food* for thought.
She *devoured* the book.
Let's let that idea *simmer on the back burner* for a while.

Literal Versus Figurative Language

In all the examples above, language can be said to have been used figuratively. One cannot literally '*devour a book*,' *swallow a claim*,' or '*shoot down an argument*.' A **literal meaning** of word is usually the primary meaning listed in a dictionary. A **figurative meaning** of a word, by contrast, takes the word out of its usual context. The primary meaning of the word *head* is part of the body containing the eyes, the nose, and the ears. By virtue of its importance to the human body, we usually take the word out of its usual context to talk about the most important person in an organisation, a school, a department, and so on.

Similes and metaphors are **tropes**. A trope is a word or a phrase used out of its usual context to conjure up mental images or create certain effects. Tropes usually fall within the domain of rhetoric, which refers to speech or writing that is intended to influence an audience. Writers and poets also use tropes such as simile and metaphor to create fresh images and make us perceive the common in uncommon terms.

Simile

Simile is a way of comparing one thing to another using words like *like* or *as*. In other words, if you use a simile, you invite your reader to see the similarities between A and B. Similes can be identified easily:

O, my love's like a red, red rose,

That's newly sprung in June:

O, my love's like the melody

That's sweetly played in tune.

The similes above are trite, but let us analyse them, anyway. First, the poet wants his readers to see his beloved in terms of a red rose. As readers, we instantly think about the properties associated with a rose, namely *scent*, *beauty*, *freshness*, and so on. These properties are then transported from the usual context in which they occur to another context, creating by so doing an unusual comparison. It is as if the poet said my "love's like a red rose in its *scent*, *beauty*, and *freshness*." Similarly, instead of saying "my love speaks charmingly," the poet uses a simile. *Sweetness*, *pleasantness*, *harmony* might be some of the properties we usually associate with a melody.

Metaphor

Metaphor is a way of saying one thing is another. Your friend has done you a huge favour to which you reply by praising him/her: "*You're a gem; you're a godsend.*" You have just used two metaphors here. The idea of transport applies to metaphors as well. The most important quality of a gem is its *preciousness*, which is here invoked to talk about how precious your friend's help has been. Godsend, originally applied in a religious context, is associated with divine intervention. Here, it is used to talk about the *timeliness* of your friend's favour.

Vehicle, Tenor, and Ground

Armstrong Richards, a literary critic, proposed a model by which we can analyse metaphors and similes. He calls the target domain of the metaphor **tenor**, he calls the source domain **vehicle**, and he calls the common properties between the two domains **ground**. In her description of the ferocity of nature, Emily Dickinson wrote:

The Clouds their Backs together laid
The North began to push
The Forests galloped till they fell
The Lightning played like mice

The forests are the *tenor*, galloped (horses gallop) is the *vehicle*, and the properties associated with the way horses gallop are the *ground*. These properties might include *ferocity*, *pace*, *strength*, and *wildness*. The metaphor conjures up an image of trees tossing wildly, probably no more rooted to the ground than horses are. The simile is no less interesting. Dickinson likens the way lightening plays to mice probably because mice play and move about quietly. This quality about mice finds justification in the popular cliché '*quiet as a mouse*.' Lightening is soundless, quiet as a mouse, so to speak. Through original images, Dickinson thus allows us to think about storms differently.

Metaphors are more difficult to identify than similes. Easily identifiable metaphors are referred to as **explicit metaphors**, while metaphors that are somehow difficult to identify are referred to as **embedded metaphors**.

Explicit Metaphor Versus Embedded Metaphor

An explicit metaphor is couched in the following formula: A is B. In other words, both the tenor and the vehicle are ***clearly stated***. Embedded metaphors are far less predictable in that the tenor or the vehicle are ***not clearly stated***. Consider the following examples:

You're a pain in the neck.

He's the apple of her eye.

You're a brick.

The children made pigs of themselves.

My angel of a father said he'd help.

These are all examples of explicit metaphor. Let us analyse one example here: ***you're a brick***. The metaphor takes the basic formula A is B, so *you* is the tenor, *brick* is the vehicle, and *reliability* is the ground. A brick is probably the most important building unit. You cannot have a reliable structure without using bricks. The quality of reliability associated with bricks is transported to and applied (figuratively) in a context other than the one in which it is originally applied.

An embedded metaphor violates the basic formula:

The actor was pixieing around on stage.

Here, the tenor of the metaphor is *actor* (a noun), but the vehicle is not clearly stated. The basic formula, as stated above, functions as follows: A (noun) is B (noun). Here, we have a verb that substitutes the **unstated vehicle**. This example reminds us of Dickinson's example: *the forests galloped till they fell*. She could have said: *the forests (noun) are horses (noun)*, which would then have been an explicit metaphor. In an embedded metaphor a verb (gallop) associated with the vehicle (horses) is often used. To return to our example, we could have said: the actor was a pixie on stage. What qualities associated with pixies and pixieing (the writer coined the verb) can we think of? *Graceful movement* and *magic* spring to mind first. The writer could have said the actor moved gracefully and magically on stage instead of conjuring up those images (qualities and attributes) by means of the word pixie.

2 Types of Metaphor

The Extended Metaphor

An extended metaphor is a metaphor in which comparison works at more than one level. It is especially used in poetry:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

Here, T.S. Eliot wants his readers to see that fog and cats move and act in the same way, creating by so doing an original and fresh comparison. *Fog* is the tenor and *rub*, *lick*, *linger*, *slip*, *leap*, *curl*, and so on, are verbs associated with the behaviour of the vehicle: cat.

Anthropomorphic Metaphors and Personification

Anthropomorphism and personification are similar. Personification refers to attributing human traits and characteristics to inanimate objects or abstract ideas, while Anthropomorphism refers to attributing human traits and characteristics to animals. We use personification everyday: in speech, in writing, in poetry, and so on. The following examples illustrate how an economist may talk about inflation:

Inflation ***has pinned us to the wall***.
Our biggest ***enemy*** right now *is* inflation.
The dollar ***has been destroyed*** by inflation.
Inflation *has* ***robbed*** me of my savings.
Inflation *has* ***outwitted*** the best economic minds in the country.
Inflation ***has given birth*** to a money-minded generation.

The writer has attributed human traits and characteristics to the abstract concept of inflation. Inflation can now be viewed as a villainous character that attacks, threatens, destroys, robs, and employs cunning and wit. Viewed as a ruthless adversary, inflation can become our number one enemy, leading the government to declare war on it.

Lewis Carroll uses personification in *The Walrus and the Carpenter*:

The moon was shining sulkily,

Because she thought the sun

Had got no business to be there

After the day was done –

"It's very rude of him," she said,

"To come and spoil the fun."

Carroll creates beautiful imagery to describe the *competitiveness* between the moon and the sun, both believed to be objects of admiration and contemplation. The competition for admirers is at its utmost at sunset, a time that announces the appearance of the moon, but also a time that sees the sun flaunt its regal splendour. By sulking, a human expression, the moon is loath to express itself fully (*shining sulkily*) in the face of the sun, which refuses yet to leave room for it (the moon). The sun perceives of the unwelcome intrusion a rude behaviour that "*spoils the fun*." There is no better way to capture the rivalry between the moon and the sun than expressing their behaviour using human traits and attributes.

Lesson 4: Marxist Reading of Barn Burning by William Faulkner

Model Essay

William Faulkner and economic power disparities between the bourgeoisie, represented by 's short story "Barn Burning" demonstrates the political the justice system and aristocratic landowners, and the proletariat, represented by the Snopes family. Taking place within living memory of the Civil War, the story is a critique of the southern sharecropping system and captures the immorality, greed, and lack of caring by the South's affluent classes. Yet the story also suggests that "barn-burning" nihilism is not the answer to class conflict. As young Sarty's flight suggests at story's end, for a true Marxist revolution, false consciousness, violence, and self-interest must be erased from people's actions.

The story opens as Abner Snopes is on trial for burning a barn. When his young son and main character, Colonel Sartoris Snopes, is called as a witness, Sarty's struggle begins. Although he identifies with his father and has inherited his father's ideas of the relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, the story focuses on Sarty's burgeoning awareness that his father's barn burning is not a legitimate or helpful response to class inequality. Although Sarty ultimately warns Major de Spain of his father's attempted barn burning at story's end, signifying a break with his father's values, he supports and identifies with his father in the story's opening courtroom scene.

Abner Snopes typifies the powerlessness of the proletariat. In the opening trial scene, he does not speak until after the judgment is pronounced, underscoring his lack of voice in the political system as a whole. (He is equally silent after a lone statement in a second trial for barn burning.) He is ordered to leave the county. After their travel and relocation to Major de Spain's plantation, Abner states that he wishes to have a word with the man who will own him "body and soul for the next eight months." After leaving Major de Spain's house, Abner remarks that it was built with "nigger sweat" and that Major de Spain intends to add some "white sweat" as well. This comment demonstrates that race does not matter in Marxist class division. Those who own land and control the means of production hire workers to toil for small wages or life's necessities while the landowners themselves reap great benefit.

Although Abner's silence and control seem respectable, they demonstrate that he has been fully interpellated to accept the class system that offers him no opportunity. Instead of speaking representatively of himself in court, he chooses silence. He burns barns instead of calling for a redistribution of the means of production, landownership, and other material inequalities. Although Abner recognizes the injustices of sharecropping, he cannot imagine an alternative system. This acceptance of the way things are represents Abner's false consciousness. He can imagine only violence as a solution to class conflict. His violence becomes nihilism, destruction without reconstruction. However, as the family's nomadic life proves, nihilism provides only revenge, not economic opportunity.

Faulkner's language choice during the pivotal scene where Abner steps in horse droppings and walks across Major de Spain's rug demonstrates the inevitable social construction of individuals' beliefs. As Abner walks toward the house, Sarty notes that his father could have avoided the droppings with a "simple change in stride." Once inside, Abner's foot comes down on the floor "with clocklike finality." When Mrs. de Spain addresses him, Abner once again does not speak but simply turns and exits. Abner's unchanging stride suggests that he knows no other way to deal with class conflict. His reactions are socially constructed with a clocklike finality of their own. His silence when addressed by Mrs. de Spain parallels the silence of the courtroom scenes and underscores Abner's false consciousness: He believes he cannot gain power through speaking, only through destroying.

Marxist oppression continues across generations. The women in the family amply demonstrate the political and economic oppression and false consciousness of Marxist class division. Sarty's sisters are often described as cattle instead of humans. Attention is drawn to the cheapness of their clothes. The women are not allowed to exist as graceful upper-class women. Yet Faulkner suggests that the "inertia" surrounding them is their own. Like Abner, the sisters' problems are socially constructed and to some degree of their own making.

Sarty's mother and aunt also sustain the system of oppression. They save the little money that they have to buy Sarty a half-size ax, a gift that symbolizes the movement of the next generation into the working class and its false consciousness. Later, when Abner believes Sarty will flee to warn Major de Spain of the barn burning, Abner instructs his wife to hold her son, denying both his wife's and Sarty's ambitions to see Sarty escape the family's entrapment in the vicious cycle of southern agrarian sharecropping.

Throughout the story, Sarty himself wrestles with his father's ideas about class conflict and violence. In the opening scene, Sarty is hungry, underscoring the family's destitute status. Early on, we see him making mental efforts to make "his father's enemy" into his enemy as well. Upon exiting the trial, he scraps with the boy who yells "barn burner." However, as the family pulls away from the trial in their wagon, Sarty hopes that his father is satisfied and will not continue the cycle of destruction based on violence and nihilism without the production of economic opportunity.

Sarty's development is next seen when he and his father walk toward the de Spain house for the first time. Sarty intuits that his father can't harm such an aristocratic family. He realizes that his father's violence would be a "buzzing wasp" capable of only an annoying sting but no more. Sarty hopes that his father realizes this as well and will change from what "he couldn't help but be." This line suggests that Sarty understands how his father has been socially constructed to understand class relationships and social mobility only through the current system based upon inequality and irresolvable conflict.

Sarty's disavowal of his father's nihilistic barn burning is the story's climax. As Abner rushes to burn the de Spain barn to the ground, Sarty protests by saying that before other burnings, a messenger was sent to warn the landowners. Abner only continues to prepare for the conflagration. Sarty understands that he could flee from the system of conflict, poverty, and interpellation in which his family is trapped. He says, "I could run on and on and never look back, never need to see his face again. Only I can't." Ultimately, Sarty does break with his father. He warns the de Spain household of his father's actions, and he runs from his family, spending the night in the woods. The story ends with the sun about to rise, symbolically letting Sarty begin a new life. He understands that his father's nihilistic, ideological stranglehold kept the family from realizing a better life of economic and political opportunity.

"Barn Burning" presents an economic and political system that perpetuates class conflict, robs the working class of power and equality, and creates a false consciousness that destroys the proletariat's ability to imagine a different system based upon economic and political equality. Faulkner illustrates the interpellation throughout the entire Snopes family. While Abner Snopes is caught in material and social circumstances that allow him only nihilistic protest through barn burning, Sarty represents the true Marxist mind that realizes that an alternative system is needed, one where the bourgeoisie do not control the means of production and the proletariat are not in eternal insurgency. Although Sarty himself may be too young to think in such precise Marxist terms, the story "Barn Burning" itself suggests that successful economic and political systems must redistribute the means of production and allow society to recognize the equality and humanity of all people.