

Materialistic Interest in *The Bedbug* by Vladimir Mayakovsky

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Abstract: The play entitled *The Bedbug* is one of the most imaginative political satires on the Soviet Union in the twentieth century which was written by one of the greatest Russian poets, Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1929. The primary purpose of this study is to analyze the play in terms of Marxism's Materialistic Aspects. This article intends to show the economic positions and influence of materialistic interests of the characters in general, and the protagonist of the play, Prisytkin, in particular. It shows how Prisytkin behaves like the upper classes, and it also explains the reasons behind the character's change. Moreover, the paper demonstrates the reasons why Mayakovsky portrayed him like that. In conclusion, Mayakovsky criticizes all the self-interest proletariat class through Prisytkin, he also indirectly criticizes the Soviet Union leaders.

Keywords: Marxism, Social Classes, Economic Position, Proletariat, Bourgeoisie, Opportunist

1. Introduction

Marxism theory is based on the ideas and thoughts of Karl Marx who was under the influence of philosopher Friedrich Engel. It was later improved by the Marxist writers like Antonio Labriola in Italy (1843–1904), Franz Mehring in Germany (1846–1919), Karl Kautsky in Germany (1854–1938), Rosa Luxemburg in Poland (1870–1919), George Plekhanov in Russia who is known as the father of Russian Marxism (1856–1918), Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in Russia (1870–1924), Leon Trotsky in Russia (1879–1940), and the György Lukács in Hungary (1885–1971). According to Marxists, literature mainly reflects class differences and economic state of the individuals in a society. Marxists claim that ideologies and thoughts don't determine the material truth of lifetime, but they are rather a mirror image and response to the material being of people. In other words, the material reality of life affects people's ideology and behavior but not vice versa. In Marxists' viewpoint literature is viewed "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams 1999). Marxists also take historical conditions in consideration in analyzing any piece of writing. In *The Communist Manifesto*, it is stated that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx & Engels 1967).

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Marx declaims that every society has been divided into two classes; the first class is the bourgeoisie who are the owners of the means of production. The second one is Proletariats, who are the workers' group. Likewise, Lynn talks about these classes as he says a "worker is just a tool for the owner. How can this economic base of society, given its fundamental unfairness" (Lynn, 1998, p. 156)? Marx claims that there is always a conflict between the classes, and he works to eliminate these classes in society. He aims to create a classless society through revolution. One of his influential speeches about class conflict is "Let the ruling classes tremble before a communist revolution: the workers have nothing to lose by it but their chains . . . They have the world to win . . . Workers of every land, unite!" (Marx & Engels 1967).

Many branches of literary criticism got benefit from Marxism theory such as feminism, deconstruction, and historicism, postcolonial and cultural criticism. Habib states that "what distinguishes Marxism is that it is not only a political, economic, and social theory but also a form of practice in all of these domains" (Habib, 2011, p. 528). When analyzing any piece of writing in terms of materialistic aspects, we have to ask some crucial questions like: How is the economic situation of each character? To what extent does this economic situation affect the characters' life and behaviour? Which class does the writer belong to "upper or lower"? This paper aims to explain *The Bedbug* in terms of Marxism's materialistic aspects. It endeavors to answer the above questions and explains the statements by giving pieces of evidence and quotations from the play.

Marx's brief thoughts about the economy and material reality of life; he believed that the primary influence on life is the economy. He claims that there is a constant conflict between the classes in society, especially between the rich and poor classes. According to him the system of capitalism in society makes the rich richer and the poor poorer, and he defined capitalism as an economic system that which a small group of people in the society who are called the "bourgeoisie" owns and takes control of the means of production and they employ people to work for them to produce the products that they sell (Elster & Jon 1986).

2. *The Bedbug*

The Bedbug is a play written by the well-known Russian poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1929. The play is divided into two parts, the first four scenes take place in 1929 and the last five scenes take place fifty years later in 1979. In the first part, the former working-class and the protagonist of the play, Ivan Prisytkin is shopping extravagantly. He forgets his proletarian origin and looks for a better life. He also abandons his ex-lover Zoya and prepares to get married to Elzevir Renaissance. His coworkers criticize him for his behaviour. Later, the building gets on fire on the wedding day. In the second part, it is realized that no one is survived the fire except Prisytkin. He is alone and frozen in the second part. As a result, the professor and the doctors try to resurrect him.

The play is not divided into acts; it has nine scenes instead, which is a film technique. It is written in a modern style. The characters represent groups and types rather than individuals, for example, Prisytkin represents the entire opportunist proletarian who lost their proletarian origin during the New Economic Policy. Satire is used throughout the play. For instance, Oleg Bard's encouragement of Prisytkin for buying everything is a satire on the proletarian class; Mayakovsky intends to show the proletariat's deficiency.

3. Materialistic Aspects in *The Bedbug*

According to Marxist literary criticism, literature reflects class struggle and materialism. Marxists claim that the material reality of life affects people's ideology and behaviour, and characters can be defined by their wealth and economic position. Therefore, the characters in *The Bedbug* are affected by the materialistic reality to a great degree since the play deals with social classes and philistinism in Russia during the late 1920s. The author, Mayakovsky, was an active party member in the Russian revolution. He was against the New Economic Policy which was established by Vladimir Lenin in 1921. The new policy allowed individuals to have small enterprises as Lawton says in the New Economic Policy (NEP), "private and cooperative publishing enterprises were permitted" (Lawton, 1988, p. 42). It was seriously protested by the pure communists. Russel states that the play is a pure satire against the new economic policy (Russell, 1988). The writer portrays the protagonist of the play, Prisytkin, to show all the Russian opportunist citizens during NEP.

At the very beginning of the play, the protagonist of the play and the party worker, Prisytkin, behave like a bourgeois. His change of behaviour is due to his materialistic interests. He wants to improve his economic situation. Firstly, he abandons his ex-lover. He has found a more beautiful girl with a higher economical rank as it is noticed in this conversation between Prisytkin and his former lover, Zoya: "I love another, Zoya, she is smarter and cuter. With a bosom held tighter. By a beautiful sweater. Zoya Beryozkina: But what about me, Vanya? Who do you think you are? A sailor with a girl in every port?" (Mayakovsky, 1975, p. 250). Zoya does not believe that he abandons her for another girl. The reason for her abandonment is not due to her fault in the relationship, but it is rather due to his materialist interest. As a result, Zoya tries to commit suicide. In the second part of the play when the doctors unfreeze Prisytkin, she disgusts him. She doesn't believe that she almost died for the sake of such a stupid man "And to think that fifty years ago I might have died on account of this shunk . . ." (Mayakovsky, 1975, p. 293). Furthermore, he changes his name from Ivan Prisytkin to Pierre Skripkin, derived from skripka which means violin. His new name is considered to be more elegant than Prisytkin. Pierre is a French name which was used by the Russian upper classes. Mayakovsky shows the character's philistinism by changing his name; the writer ridicules him because Prisytkin thinks he would sound like the upper class with his brand new name.

Mayakovsky keeps showing Prisytkin as an opportunist character throughout the play. He loses his proletarian origin and looks for a luxurious life. Accordingly, Sundaram comments that "The first four scenes target Prisytkin in the spirit of Mayakovsky's NEP satire directed at hypocrites who used the rhetoric of Communism to justify pursuing a self-serving, comfortable middle-class lifestyle and social status" (Sundaram, 2001, p. 53). Most of his co-workers look down on him for his change of behaviour. He doesn't care about what his friends think about him and he believes that it is his right to reap what they sow in the revolution. The following quotation proves the above statements:

Mind your own goddamn business! Respected comrade. What did I fight for? I fought for the good life, and how I've got it right there in my hands a wife, a home, and real etiquette. I'll do my duty, if need be, but it's only we who held the bridgehead who have a right to rest by the river! So there! Mebbe I can raise the standards of the whole proletariat by looking after my own comforts. So there! (Mayakovsky, 1975, p. 259)

It can be seen that his change of behaviour is because of his materialistic attachment. The writer uncovers all the self-interests of proletarians through the depiction of Prisyppkin. He complains that the revolution took place for their sake, yet they are looking for a comfortable lifestyle. Mayakovsky considers them betrayals of revolution.

Another extract from the book which confirms that Prisyppkin loses his proletarian origin is when the workers talk about missing the pair of shoes. "Prisyppkin took them to go to see his ladylove, his she-camel. He cursed while he put them on. "this is the last time." He said. "in the evening," He said. "I shall present myself in a get-up more appropriate at my new social status,"(Mayakovsky, 1975, p. 252). When the barefoot worker asks for his shoes, the cleaner tells him that Prisyppkin has taken them. He also retells that Prisyppkin stated he would have a new social status by the evening. The phrase "new social state" indicates that he uses marriage as a means to shift from lower to upper class, i.e. from poor to rich.

Rosalie Pavlovna is another self-interest character in the play, her main purpose in Prisyppkin's marriage to her daughter is to get a party member into her family so that she will have a union card in her family. Rosalie accepts to buy whatsoever Prisyppkin asks when they are shopping to obtain what she aims to get.

"Buy 'em, buy 'em, Rosalie Pavlovna! He doesn't mean to be vulgar-that's how the up-and-coming working class sees things. Here he is, bringing an immaculate proletarian origin and a union card into your family and you count your kopecks! His house must be like a horn of plenty . . . Rosalie Pavlovna buys with a sigh" (Mayakovsky, 1975, p. 247).

The sentence "Rosalie Pavlovna buys with a sigh" indicates that she doesn't like Prisyppkin's extravagancy. The only reason that she accepts to buy everything which Prisyppkin wishes to have is that she does not want to ruin the marriage. Prisyppkin and Rosalie Pavlovna are both derived as opportunist characters; the only difference between them is that the first one is looking for a better life by marrying a rich girl, whereas the latter one is trying to get a party member into her family so that she can have all the proletariat privileges. Therefore, it can be said that marriage is based on materialistic interests.

Prisyppkin's materialistic interest and extravagant expenses are condemned more than Rosalie who is a bourgeois woman in the play. He wishes to have everything for the wedding. Rosalie criticizes him for his extravagance.

Rosalie Pavlovna: Comrade Prisyppkin . . .

Prisyppkin: Don't call me comrade! You are not a proletarian yet – not still after the marriage!

Rosalie Pavlovna: Well, Minister Prisyppkin, for this money fifteen men could have a shave – beards, whiskers, and all. What about an extra dozen beers for the wedding instead? (Mayakovsky, 1975, p. 246)

We realize that the writer is more concerned about the proletariat's problems rather than the bourgeoisie. Rosalie keeps complaining about the prices and the new state policy. She believes that the new regime is no better than the previous one. She also likes the new regime of Mr Ryabushinsky's family who was a

rich family before the revolution as is explained in the following quotation: "What did we fight for, Comrade Skripkin, eh? Why, oh, why did we kill the Tsar? Why did we throw away Mr Ryabushinsky? This Soviet regime of yours will drive me to my grave . . . A whole tail's length longer!" (Mayakovsky, 1975, p. 250).

The second part of the play which takes place fifty years later, in 1979, is disputable. Many critics claim that it is a satire on the future society rather than Prisytkin who represents philistinism (Russell, 1988, p. 119). While some other critics claim that Mayakovsky tries to show that Prisytkin's attitudes and behaviours seem trivial to the pure communist society, they also claim that Mayakovsky continues talking about the same theme which is satirizing Proletariat shortcomings through Prisytkin. The first opinion is stronger because Mayakovsky tries to show the betrayal of the working class, and the following extract from the play proves the above statement: "citizens! Brothers! My own people! Darlings! How did you get here! Why am I alone in the cage? Darlings, friends, come and join me! Why am I suffering? Citizens!" (Mayakovsky, 1975, p. 302). Prisytkin's crying is sympathetic. Despite all his faults, the readers may commiserate with him. Mayakovsky indirectly tells us what would happen to opportunist people at the end through the depiction of Prisytkin.

4. Conclusion

According to Marxism Literary Criticism literature reflects class difference and the economic position of the individuals in a society, and the material reality of life plays a great role in creating characters. Therefore, the effect of the economy and materialistic interest are the main themes in the play. Prisytkin is a self-interest character and abandons his class including his lover for searching a better life. The play shows the proletariat and philistinism faults by depicting Prisytkin. Particularly, Mayakovsky demonstrates the proletariat's problems after the establishment of NEP which was established by Vladimir Lenin. He criticizes all the proletarian citizens who acted selfishly during NEP through Prisytkin's undesirable acts like his extravagant shopping, changing his name, abandoning her lover and engaging with Elzevir.

Furthermore, Mayakovsky also tries to criticize the entire leadership through Prisytkin. He intentionally portrays him as a proletariat working class while he acts more like a bourgeois. He intends to convey the message that the leaders in the Soviet Union show themselves as supporters of the proletarians but they are opportunists indeed. Mayakovsky was against the NEP in 1921, he was also against the First Five-year Plan which was established in 1928 by Stalin. Many scholars suspect his suicide which took place in 1930, only one year after publishing *The Bedbug*. Many critics claim that foul play is involved in his death because of his later works.

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