

THE SOCIAL CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE NOVEL GREAT EXPECTATIONS USING MARXIST THEORY

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Abstract. This research analyzes the social class struggle in the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens through the perspective of Marxist theory. The novel *Great Expectations* describes the life journey of Pip, an orphan from a poor family who dreams to become a gentleman. Although many researches have discussed this novel, but there is a gap of literature which has not deeply examined the application of Marxist theory in the analysis of classic literature, especially the novel *Great Expectations*. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to fill the gap by analyzing the social class struggle in the novel *Great Expectations*. The research method used is descriptive qualitative, by collecting data from the novel and secondary sources such as books, journals, articles, and online sources. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis method to identify the main patterns relevant to Marxist theory. The results of the research show that social class struggle is apparent in the structures of occupation, authority, and property that illustrate social inequality. The impact of social class struggle is also apparent in the personal relationship and moral of each individual, which creates deep internal conflicts. *Great Expectations* criticizes social class inequalities which are still relevant today, and despite changes in social status, the inequality between the proletariat class and the bourgeois class still exists and continues.

Keywords: *Great Expectations*; literature; Marxist theory; social class struggle

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Great Expectations is a novel that depicts the struggle of social classes in English society in the 19th century. The novel contains the story of the life journey of Pip, an orphan from a poor family who aspires to be a gentleman, who then has a huge change in his social status after receiving an inheritance from a mysterious benefactor. Through Pip's life journey, Dickens not only illustrates the influence of social status on an individual's identity, but also criticizes the injustice of the social class system of his time. Marxist theory, which emphasizes the importance of class struggle and socio-economic structure, is very relevant to analyze the theme of social class struggle in the novel *Great Expectations*.

The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles (Marx & Engels, 1919, p. 10). This emphasizes that the fundamental view of Marxism theory is to consider class relations as one of the main factors that shape social and political developments. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens illustrates how the struggle between social classes plays a major role in determining the fate and happiness of individuals. Pip's character who is trying to rise up through the classes and improve his life reflects the expectations and harsh realities faced by those below the poverty line. Through the novel, Dickens not only wanted to show the difficulties of individuals, but also how the social class system that existed at that time was severely restricting the opportunities for an individual to reach genuine happiness.

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones (Marx & Engels, 1919, p. 11). Even though the social system in the novel *Great Expectations* has changed, for example from feudal to capitalist, class inequality still exists, as in the character of Pip who symbolizes the struggle to rise up the class but in the end Pip can't achieve the genuine happiness.

Marxism highlights the impact of economic systems on the psyche and behavior of individuals, showing how they are often trapped by the very systems that promise them success (Yin, 2024). In this case, Pip is an obvious example of alienation caused by class struggle. Although he eventually gains wealth and status, Pip feels alienated from himself and from people in his life who have been important to him in the past, such as Joe Gargery and Biddy. This indicates that the success achieved through an inequitable social class system doesn't bring happiness, but will instead bring a sense of loneliness and alienation.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how the concept of social class struggle is depicted in *Great Expectations* through the perspective of Marxist theory. This research aims to explore the dynamics of power, inequality, and alienation seen in the novel, particularly in relation to the protagonist, Pip, and other characters. Through this analysis, the research is hopefully to be able to highlight the social critique delivered by Dickens regarding the inequality of social classes in society.

The hypothesis of this research is the class struggle depicted in the novel *Great Expectations* reflects Marxist principles, where social and economic inequalities affect the individual's actions, decisions, and their lives. Through Marxist theory, this research aims to highlight the relevance of the novel in the contemporary context of the issues of social class inequality.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The study of the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens is often linked to the issue of social class, which can be analyzed using Marxist Theory. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (Marx & Engels, 1919, p. 10). This statement is the main foundation for Marxist theory, which views human history as a series of conflicts between the class who own the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and the working class (the proletariat). This theory is often used in literature to examine how social inequality and power are reflected in characters, narratives, or conflicts between classes. In the novel *Great Expectations*, the social class struggle is reflected through the character Pip who has transitioned from the working class to the upper class because he received a mysterious inheritance.

This is aligned with the results of the research by De Bellaigue (2019), which highlights how childhood, family, and education played an important role in the process of high-class social mobility in the 19th century. This approach uses a family-biographical to examine the experience and practice of social mobility among the nineteenth-century middle classes by focusing on the understudied relationship between childhood and social mobility (De Bellaigue, 2019, p. 3). De Bellaigue states that even though Dickens portrays the expectation of moving up in class through working hard and a good education, social structures still limit and direct the fate of individuals. The most obvious sign

that children were the objects of mobility processes was that family members strive to provide for future generations. In different ways, the men and women from the middle industrialized classes sought to transfer material, social, and cultural goods to their children (De Bellaigue, 2019, p. 7).

In addition, the research by Dupovac (2022) highlighted how Dickens depicted social space and class hierarchy in his novel. Dupovac explained that the difference between the modest house of Joe Gargery and the luxurious house of Miss Havisham represented the obvious social class difference between the working class and the high class. The author uses the houses to illustrate a direct contrast between the higher social class, who have wealth, and the lower social class, who lack wealth, education, and aspirations (Dupovac, 2022, p. 8). This analysis reinforces the Marxist perspective that society's space and wealth are not fairly distributed, but are instead controlled by people who have the power of economic and symbolic power.

Both of these researches have highlighted how *Great Expectations* reflected the class structure of English society in the 19th century. However, there are not many studies that explicitly analyze how the class struggle in the novel can be linked to the key of Marxist concepts such as alienation, class consciousness, and critique of the ideology of capitalism. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the representation of social class struggle in the novel through Marxist theory.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research used a descriptive qualitative design to explore the themes of class struggle and social mobility in the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. This approach allows the author to explore the understanding of the meaning of the text in depth. Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2017, p. 4). This approach is very relevant for analyzing literary texts that require contextual interpretation.

The data of this research consists of two main sources, namely primary data and secondary data. The primary data is the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens which is the main object to be analyzed. Secondary data includes books, journals, articles, and relevant online sources to strengthen the theoretical context and support primary data analysis. In qualitative research, the data is collected from various sources, by using various data collection techniques (triangulation), and carried out continuously until the data is saturated (Sugiyono, 2013, p. 243; translated from the original Indonesian work by author).

In the technique of data collection, the author uses five steps, as follow: 1) Reading and understanding the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, 2) Searching and reading related journals or articles and some information needed from the internet, 3) Taking notes on important things in the novel, 4) Identifying problems that occurred in the novel *Great Expectations*, 5) Arranging data or problems in *Great Expectations* to be analyzed.

The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis method to identify the main patterns or the main themes that are relevant to Marxist theory. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 6). The analysis process involves the repeated reading of the novel text to understand the context of the story, the marking of the passages relevant to the main themes such as social mobility, empowerment, and social alienation, and the interpretation of these themes based on Marxist theory.

Preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion (Creswell, 2017, p. 185). The results of this analysis can hopefully reveal the social criticism conveyed by Charles Dickens regarding the social class inequality of his time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Social Class Struggle in the Novel *Great Expectations*

The social class struggle in the novel *Great Expectations* is clearly visible through how Dickens described the inequality that exists in society through various aspects that affect the characters and the plot of the story. Social class inequality is reflected in the occupational structure, authority structure, and property, which are the signs of changing social classes in the story.

1. Occupational Structure as a Symbol of Social Class

Occupation is one of the representations of social class struggle in *Great Expectations*. Pip is a concrete example of the working class who are at the bottom of the social pyramid, because the father figure for him is Joe Gargery who is just a blacksmith. Joe's job represents a lower social class position and makes Pip feel the restrictions that exist in the working class. He describes Joe by saying, "Joe was a well-knit characteristic-looking blacksmith; in his holiday clothes, he was more like a scarecrow in good circumstances, than anything else" (Dickens, 1894, p. 21). This reflects how Joe was trying to seem formal, but he looked inappropriate, showing that appearance doesn't change the social perception of an individual's identity in the society. However, as the story progresses, Pip gets the opportunity to become a gentleman through the inheritance he gets from a mysterious benefactor. This process reflects the transition from lower class to high class. He then proudly says, "My dream was out; my wild fancy was surpassed by sober reality..." (Dickens, 1894, p. 137).

According to the perspective of Marxist theory, occupation reflects a person's social class position in the production system. Pip and Joe, as workers, belong to the proletariat class, which only has their labor as capital. Pip, who feels trapped in the limitations, motivates himself to make his dream of becoming a gentleman not just wishful thinking. The proletariat goes through various stages of development. With its birth begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie (Marx & Engels, 1919, p. 21). Pip's dissatisfaction with the reality of the working class reflects a broader class struggle in which the proletariat continues to struggle against the dominance of the bourgeoisie. Through Pip's ambition to change his fate, who finally gains the opportunity to become a gentleman, Dickens illustrates that despite Pip's ability to change his social status, the inequality between the proletariat and the bourgeois class still exists and continues.

2. Authority Structure as a Symbol of Social Class Domination

In *Great Expectations*, authority is also an important aspect of the social class struggle. In the novel, Miss Havisham is part of the bourgeois class who has authority and utilizes her wealth to control the lives of others, especially Pip and Estella. "I had heard of Miss Havisham up town,-everybody for miles round had heard of Miss Havisham up town,-as an immensely rich..." (Dickens, 1894, p. 49). The statement illustrates how Miss Havisham's wealth and authority allows her to maintain her high social status and can influence the lives of others. In the story, after Pip becomes a gentleman, he feels a shift in his authority. The authority over himself and his future found in the following

statement, "...I had always wanted to be a gentleman, and had often and often speculated on what I would do, if I were one" (Dickens, 1894, p. 146).

In the perspective of Marxist theory, the dominance of the bourgeoisie is the result of the capitalist system that structurally supports social inequality. The bourgeoisie...has played a most revolutionary part (Marx & Engels, 1919, p. 13). It has set up a system that leads, ...to the progressive historical development of the proletariat (Marx & Engels, 1919, p. 55). The authority owned by Miss Havisham not only strengthens her social position, but also maintains the existing social inequality. Pip, who is initially under Miss Havisham's authority, finally gets a chance to change his fate and achieve a higher status as a gentleman. Although he gains control over his life, this change remains within the larger framework of class inequality. Despite Pip feels he has more authority after becoming a gentleman, the existing social structure still shows that the bourgeois class, such as Miss Havisham, still maintains their dominance over the proletariat class, thus creating continued inequality.

3. Property as a Symbol of Social Class Status

Property in *Great Expectations* is also a powerful symbol that illustrates social class struggle. Miss Havisham's mansion, called Satis House, symbolizes the authority and wealth of the bourgeois class. Pip describes Satis House as "...a large and dismal house barricaded against robbers, and who led a life of seclusion" (Dickens, 1894, p. 49). This property represents not only wealth but also the isolation and exclusivity of the upper class, who maintain their status by controlling the access of outsiders. Meanwhile, Joe Gargery's blacksmith's forge represents the lower class and is full of restrictions. This property symbolizes hard work without any authority or luxury, which reflects the position of the proletariat class in the capitalist system. Pip, who feels embarrassed about his background, would often compare Joe's forge to Satis House, which reflects the social inequality that exists between them.

In the perspective of Marxist theory, property is a tool to maintain the dominance of the higher class, over the lower class. The modern bourgeois society... has established new classes, new conditions of oppression, and new forms of struggle (Marx & Engels, 1919, p. 11). Property like Satis House represents how the bourgeois class uses their wealth to dominate the lower classes, maintaining the existing social hierarchy.

The Influence of Social Class Struggle in the Novel *Great Expectations*

In the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, it depicts how social class struggles can affect the lives of the characters and have a significant impact on their relationships and moral perspectives. Through the journey of Pip's story, Dickens allows readers to reflect on the role of social classes in shaping individual identities, ambitions, and life decisions.

1. The Influence of Social Class Struggle on Personal Relationships

Social class struggle is a major theme that affects the characters' personal relationships, especially between Pip and Joe, Biddy, and Estella. Through a Marxist theory perspective, these relationships can be analyzed as a result of the alienation and inequality between individuals created by the capitalist class structure.

The relationship between Pip and Joe Gargery is a concrete example of how class struggle can destroy a relationship that was previously very close. Joe, the working-class blacksmith, is a father figure to Pip in his young age. Their relationship is full of warmth and strong harmony. However, after Pip

receives an inheritance from a mysterious benefactor to become a gentleman, he begins to feel ashamed of Joe. Pip avoids Joe because of his lower social status. According to the Marxist perspective, this is the result of the internalization of bourgeois ideology that dominates capitalist society. The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size (Marx, 1932, p. 28). Reflecting how Pip, who became “rich” in status, actually became poor in emotional, and became alienated from a genuine relationship with Joe.

In addition, Pip’s relationship with Biddy, which depicts an equal and honest relationship, is ignored because of Pip’s ambition to be a gentleman. Biddy, who also comes from the proletariat class, shows understanding and equality in her interactions with Pip. However, Pip prefers to pursue Estella who is from a high social class. This increasing consciousness of the historical character of development begins to influence judgments on economic conditions and class struggle (Lukács, 1963, p. 25). It explains that when an individual begins to realize how society develops over time, it will affect how an individual considers economic problems and class struggle. In this story, Pip begins to realize that his struggle to be part of the higher class is influenced by the different social classes that exist in society.

Furthermore, Pip’s relationship with Estella illustrates how class inequality is the barrier to his love. Estella is an adopted daughter raised by Miss Havisham to become a tool of revenge for men, as well as a representation of bourgeois class authority. Pip, who comes from the proletariat class, feels unworthy and tries to pursue social status by becoming a gentleman, just to get recognition from Estella. In the Marxist perspective, Pip and Estella’s relationship represents how the bourgeois class maintains their authority through creating psychological and emotional distance between the high class and the lower class. Estella even says, “You must know...that I have no heart...I have no softness there, no-sympathy-sentiment-nonsense” (Dickens, 1894, p. 233, p. 234).

Through Pip’s relationships with Joe, Biddy, and Estella, Dickens explains how social class struggle not only creates physical and emotional distance. However, it also shows how unequal class structures can create alienation and exploitation in personal relationships. Dickens used these characters to illustrate that in the capitalist society, relationships between individuals are often sacrificed just to satisfy social and economic ambitions.

2. The Influence of Social Class Struggle on Individual Morals

The social class struggle not only creates economic inequality, but also brings significant moral pressure on individuals. In the novel *Great Expectations*, the struggle of Pip to raise his social status brings a deep moral conflict. Pip who comes from the working class has great ambitions to become a gentleman, but these ambitions make him sacrifice genuine relationships with people who care about him, such as Joe and Biddy.

Pip who initially believes that his wealth is backed by an upper-class benefactor, possibly Miss Havisham, he believes that his destiny is being prepared to marry Estella. However, that reality comes to a crashing down when he realizes the truth that his entire wealth comes from Magwitch, a fugitive convict whom he had helped in his childhood. This moment is a crushing blow for Pip. He feels disgusted and disappointed. All his dreams and pride of being a gentleman suddenly lost meaning. However, as time goes on, he slowly begins seeing the other side of Magwitch, a man who is caring and has made sacrifices for his life. Pip says, “For now, my repugnance to him had all melted away; and in the hunted, wounded, shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me

with great constancy through a series of years” (Dickens, 1894, p. 443). This statement shows the moral development of Pip, where he was finally be able to accept and appreciate someone’s kindness regardless of who the person is and what their social status is.

The Relevance of Social Class Struggle in Today’s Modern Society

The social class struggle in the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens is still relevant when we relate it to the dynamics of modern society today. In this novel, social class struggle not only describes economic inequality, but also social status and influence in the relationships between each individual. Although times have changed, the problem of social class inequality remains a profound issue in our daily lives. The issue of economic inequality has also become more complex in the modern era, with challenges such as economic inequality, lack of access to education, technology, gaps in occupational opportunities, and lack of access to health facilities.

In the novel *Great Expectations*, social class differences are very visible through the economic conditions of the characters. Pip, the main character, feels a significant difference when he goes from a life of poverty to a more economically established life after receiving an inheritance from a mysterious benefactor. This struggle reflects the reality of economic inequality that exists in modern society, where the difference between the rich and the poor is increasingly apparent. In the current capitalist system, most of the rich are concentrated in a few hands, while many individuals are still living in poverty. This condition creates inequality similar to that described by Dickens, where the access to wealth and resources is very restricted for the lower class and it is difficult to achieve economic growth. This can often lead to dissatisfaction and social conflict in modern societies.

Education is an important key to achieving social mobility, both in *Great Expectations* and in today’s modern life. Through education, Pip tries to improve his social status by broadening his horizons. But, in the novel, his access to education is restricted by his social background, which restricts his ability to advance. As depicted in the novel *Great Expectations*, it emphasizes that the issue of inequality to access education is still relevant in the modern society. Although education has become more accessible today, the high costs of education are still a major obstacle for many people from low-class families.

Many of them can’t afford to pay for school, college or any other high-quality education. Income inequality and inequality in education often go hand in hand. Students who live in lower-income areas may have limited access to quality education (Sinkevich, 2024). This leads to inequality that continues from generation to generation, where people from rich families have easier access to advanced or higher-level education and better career opportunities. Therefore, education is the main key to improving social status, but not everyone can access a proper education because of economic restrictions or their background.

Occupational opportunities and social status are strongly influenced by an individual’s social class. Pip who felt that his lower social status could prevent him from getting a more prestigious job, such as being a gentleman. In modern society, occupational opportunities are also influenced by social background and education. For example, people from rich or high- class families have strong networks and greater access to more prestigious and high-income occupations. On the other hand, people from poor families are often stuck in low-income occupations with little opportunity for advancement. This represents a persistent gap in occupations in society that will exacerbate social inequality.

In the early 19th century, the industrial revolution created a distinct differences between the working class and the bourgeois class. In the digital era, technology plays an important role in providing new opportunities for those with access and skills. However, unequal access to technology exacerbates existing inequalities. People who don't have the facilities to access the internet or digital devices, and lack of technology training, are at risk of being disadvantaged in education, occupation and self-improvement. Digital inequality can be broadly defined as a unique status quo where groups differing in characteristics such as socioeconomic background, age and gender are disadvantaged in terms of access, knowledge, competency, and costs with respect to digital resources (Imran, 2023). This represents the social class struggle in *Great Expectations*, through which industrial and technological advancements can affect the lives of individuals.

The access to health facilities also reflects the social inequalities that exist, both in the novel *Great Expectations* and in today's modern society. In the novel, social class differences are reflected in the quality and access to healthcare. People from the lower class are less likely to receive attention in terms of health, while the higher class can access better and faster healthcare. Nowadays, despite health programs that aim to make access to health facilities more accessible, the inequality still exists. People who have more material resources, either financial or insurance, usually receive more advanced health care. On the other hand, people who are poor are often forced to wait in a long waiting line or are unable to access appropriate health care. Social class has a profound impact on health disparities. Access to healthcare, health behaviors, environmental factors, stress levels, and health literacy all contribute to the differences in health outcomes among different social classes (Sociology, 2024). It shows that the struggle for unequal access to health facilities is still relevant to the social inequalities depicted in the novel.

CONCLUSION

The novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, depicts social class struggles through various aspects that affect the characters and the plot. The social inequality that exists in this novel is apparent through the structures of occupations, authority, and property that Dickens uses to show the inequality in the novel. Pip, who initially comes from the working class, feels very trapped in the restrictions that exist in his class. However, through an inheritance from a mysterious benefactor, Pip gets the chance to become a gentleman. This shows the efforts of the proletariat class to fight against the domination of the bourgeoisie. Authority also plays an important role in the novel, such as the character of Miss Havisham who uses her wealth to control other people's lives. This shows the dominance of the bourgeois class over the working class. Properties such as the Satis House owned by Miss Havisham symbolize wealth and authority, while the forge owned by Joe symbolizes the simplicity of the working class.

The impact of social class struggle in the novel is apparent in the personal relationships and morals of the individual. The relationships between Pip and Joe, Biddy and Estella show how class inequality creates physical and emotional distance and a sense of alienation in personal relationships. Pip's ambition to rise into a higher social class brings about deep moral conflicts, and he finally realizes that true happiness is not found in social status or wealth, but in genuine relationships and the ability to accept ourselves.

The relevance of the social class struggle in *Great Expectations* to today's modern society is apparent. The economic inequality portrayed in the novel reflects the modern reality where wealth is only concentrated in a few, while there are still many people who live in poverty. The access of education

that is obstructed by cost and social background in the novel reflects the problem of educational inequality that still exists today. Job opportunities that are affected by social and educational backgrounds, as well as inequality in access to technology in the digital era also represent the social class struggle in the novel. The inequality in access to health facilities between the high class and the low class in the novel is also still relevant to the conditions of modern society today.

Through the novel *Great Expectations*, Dickens highlights the inequality of social class and the impact that it has on individuals. Although the character Pip succeeded in achieving a higher social status, but he didn't gain true happiness. Pip feels alienated, dissatisfied, and feels that there still has to be a struggle in his life. This shows that social inequality is a deep structural problem that remains relevant today. The novel reminds us that social class struggles are not only about economic inequality, but also about the way inequality can affect personal relationships, individual morals, and the access to different aspects in our lives. It also reminds us that true happiness is not found through social status.

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