

THE IMPACT OF DIFFERENT SOCIAL CLASSES IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S NOVEL *LITTLE WOMEN*

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Abstract

This study examines how social class differences are portrayed and how they affect the protagonists in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Using Marxist literary theory, the analysis focuses on class distinctions between the upper and lower classes and explores their implications for social behavior and personal identity. The qualitative descriptive method is applied to textual data gathered from close reading of the novel and relevant critical sources. The findings indicate that social class has significant impacts on the characters' lives, manifested through experiences of bullying, jealousy, and internalized social inequality. The protagonists, particularly Meg and Amy March, face emotional conflict and social exclusion as consequences of their lower-class status. These experiences not only reveal structural injustices but also reflect broader capitalist social dynamics that define access to power, privilege, and self-worth. The study concludes that *Little Women* remains a valuable text for understanding how literature mirrors the enduring social hierarchies that shape human experience.

Keywords: *bullying; jealousy; lower class; struggle; upper class*

1. Introduction

There is a close connection between literature and social life because the social function of literature is how it involves itself in the midst of social life (Semi, 1989, p.56). Literature, then, is commonly divided into many kinds. One of them is a novel. Novels and social life are related to one another so that we cannot separate the novel from the cultural background of the society where the book was written. A novel is a story with a prose form in a long shape; this long shape means the story includes a complex plot, many characters and various settings (Doody, 1996, p.29).

In this study, the writer will analyze the novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott using Marxist theory. The theory is given in chapter II of this thesis. According to Woolf (1882-1941), women's writing should experience and not just draw comparisons with the situation in society. *Little Women* was released in two volumes, in 1868 and 1869. It is one of the best-selling novels in America. The story in this novel reflects life, so readers immerse themselves when reading it. Therefore, people grab it. The novel has sold many copies, that is, around more than 2 million copies, and one of the famous film producers also exited with her novel and hopes that the *Story of Little Woman* by Louisa May Alcott will become the best movie in America. This novel also

has a positive value for literature because it is such a classic novel which can be read by older generations and younger generations.

Little Women tells a story about the lives of the four girls of March, which are, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. They have different characters. Meg, the oldest, is beautiful and has a dream to become a queen who always wears a beautiful dress. Jo, the second, is tomboyish and tempered. Beth, the third, is shy and has a talent for playing piano. The novel describes a class struggle. This happens because of injustice like class distinction that exists in a society and it has a negative impact on the survival of the community, especially the lower or subordinate classes, and it provides opportunities for the dominant class to do whatever they want to oppress or exploit the subordinate class.

Based on the explanation above, the researchers assume that there are class distinctions and human exploitation in capitalist society. It describes the social condition in a capitalist society. Human exploitation is related to the action of the upper class to lower class in a cruel manner. It can make people feel bad. Therefore, the researchers will analyze the impact of the social class in the novel.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Class

Karl Marx (1973), in his theory of class, states that class is a set of people who play the same functions in the organization of a production. Classes in society are differentiated based on the position of economic structure, which is in mastery of production. This reveals that Karl Marx's conception of class is based on the economic side as the fundamental factor in human life problems. The other theoretical creator of class divisions is Max Weber (Dwipayana, Eko, & Wicaksono, 2003, p.28-30). He also has the same idea as Karl Marx. He defines the term class as a group of people in the same social class and the economic factor is one of the dimensions that determine the social class of people in society.

Generally, social class is divided into three classes. They are upper class, middle class, and lower class. It also happens in Britain. British society is also often considered to be divided into three main groups of classes. They are upper class, middle class, and lower class or working class. According to Kerbo (1996, p.13-14), there are some characteristics of class divisions that need to be known. They are the upper class, the middle class, and the lower class. Each of them can be described as clearly as possible through each of their explanations as given below.

a. The Upper Class

The upper class people constitute an elite group that occupies the top hierarchy of the social class of society. They have the greatest influence and dominance in society. Usually they are known as people who wallow in wealth, have high power, and dignity.

b. The Middle Class

This class is used to signify people less comfortably off than the upper class, and definitely less powerful, but respected nonetheless. They include shop owners, housekeepers, and industrialists.

c. The Lower Class

This class is used to signify those people that rarely have the requirements of life and are never considered by other classes, no matter how long or hard they work on

improving their circumstances. It also consists of people who have no property, who are often unemployed, and have no authority.

Class is based on heredity as the only factor to divide people into social groups. Therefore, there are the nobility, clergy and commoners (Day, 2001, p.2). Social class is sometimes presented as a description of how members of society have sorted themselves into varying positions of importance, influence, prestige, and compensation. In these models, certain occupations are considered to be desirable and influential, while others are considered to be menial, respectful, and unpleasant. In some cases, nonoccupational roles such as being a parent or volunteer mentor are also considered.

Generally, the higher ranking on such scales indicates higher skills and educational level. There are many modes of class struggle practiced by people of the lower class to reach higher social class. The most common ways are class struggle through violence, proletarian revolution, and dictatorship of the proletariat (Wilczynski, 1984). Horton also stated that social class can be defined as a stratum of people of similar position in the social status continuum. Aristotle observed that populations tended to be divided into three groups. They are very rich, very poor and those in between. The description of social class implies that money separates people into different groups. The members of particular social class often have about the same amount of money, but the most important thing is that they have the same attitudes, values, and way of life (Horton, 1980, p.313).

2.2 Marxist Theory

Marxist is a theory to depict social problems in literary work, especially dealing with the social changes occurring in industrial society in which the struggle of an oppressed working class to be free from capitalist oppression becomes the main point of literary analysis. Abcarian et al. (1998) writes that The Marxist critic analyzes literary works to show how, wittingly or unwittingly, they support the dominant social class, or how they, in some way, contribute to the struggle against oppression and exploitation. And since a critic views literature as just one of the variety of human activities that reflect power relations and class divisions, he or she is likely to be more interested in what a work says than in its formal structure.

Based on Karl Marx's writings above, it is claimed that literary works are essentially political because they either challenge or support economic oppression of the dominant social class. On the other hand, literary work is also the practice of human exploitation in the mode of production, distribution and exchange, which in turn gives great inspiration to the working class to struggle against the exploitation. Marxist theory focuses on the content and themes of literature rather than on its form. Besides, Marxist critics often look at literature and look for the "hidden" messages, especially as they reflect class struggle, reinforce ideas of a dominant class and illusions about reality.

Class struggle is one of the many theories postulated by Karl Marx. It arises originally from Marx's concept of a classless society. That concept is based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Since Marx sees progress in society as coming about through the struggle for power between different social classes. Class struggle then becomes a class conflict which is caused by the exploitation of one class by another, especially in capitalist society (Barry, 1995, p.156-157).

There are a number of reasons why elaborating the concept of class in terms of exploitation has theoretical payoffs beyond the specific normative agenda of Marxist class analysis itself. These can be described below.

1. Linking Exchange and Production

The Marxist logic of class analysis affirms the intimate link between the way in which social relations are organized within exchange and within production. This is a substantive, not definitional, point: the social relations that organize the rights and powers of individuals with respect to productive resources systematically shape their location both within exchange relations and within the process of production itself.

2. Conflict

One of the standard claims about Marxist class analysis is that it foregrounds conflict within class relations. Indeed, a conventional way of describing Marxism in sociological textbooks is to see it as a variety of "conflict theory." This characterization, however, is not quite precise enough, for conflict is certainly a prominent feature of Weberian views of class as well. The distinctive feature of the Marxist account of class relations in these terms is not simply that it gives prominence to class conflict, but that it understands conflict as generated by inherent properties of those relations rather than simply contingent factors.

3. Power

At the very core of the Marxist construction of class analysis is not simply the claim that class relations generate deeply antagonistic interests, but that they also give people in subordinate class locations forms of power with which to struggle for their interests. Since exploitation rests on the extraction of labor effort, and since people always retain some measure of control over their own effort, they always confront their exploiters with capacities to resist exploitation. This is a crucial form of power reflected in the complex counter-strategies exploiting classes are forced to adopt through the elaboration of instruments of supervision, surveillance, monitoring, and sanctioning.

4. Coercion and Consent

Marxist class analysis contains the rudiments of what might be termed an endogenous theory of the formation of consent. The argument is basically that the extraction of labor effort in systems of exploitation is costly for exploiting classes because of the inherent capacity of people to resist their own exploitation. Purely coercively backed systems of exploitation will often tend to be suboptimal under many conditions. It is too easy for workers to withhold diligent performance of labor effort. Exploiting classes will, therefore, have a tendency to seek ways of reducing those costs. One of the ways of reducing the overhead costs of extracting labor effort is to do things which elicit the active consent of the exploited. These range from the development of internal labor markets, which strengthen the identification and loyalty of workers to the firms in which they work, to the support for ideological positions which proclaim the practical and moral desirability of capitalist institutions. Such consent-producing practices, however, also have costs attached to them, and thus systems of exploitation can be seen as always involving trade-offs between coercion and consent as Mechanisms for extracting labor effort.

5. Historical/Comparative Analysis

As originally conceived, Marxist class analysis was an integral part of a sweeping theory of the epochal structure and historical trajectory of social change. But even if one rejects historical materialism, the Marxist exploitation-centered strategy of class analysis still provides a rich menu of concepts for historical and comparative analysis. Different kinds of class relations are defined by the specific mechanisms through which exploitation is accomplished, and these differences in turn imply different problems faced by exploiting classes for the reproduction of their class advantage and different opportunities for exploited classes to resist. Variations in these mechanisms and in the specific ways in which they are combined in concrete societies provide an analytically powerful road map for comparative research. Weber's class concept also figures in an account of historical variation, and one of its strengths is the way in which his conceptual menu draws attention to the interplay of class and status and to historical variations in the forms of rationality governing life-chances. These are not issues brought into focus by the Marxist concept of class. On the other hand, the Weberian concept, by marginalizing the problem of exploitation, fails to bring to center stage the historical variability in forms of conflict linked to the central mechanisms of extraction and control over the social surplus.

2.3 Impact

According to the Oxford Dictionary (2000, p.678), impact is the powerful effect that something has on somebody or something. Based on this definition, it can be meant that everything absolutely has an impact on life. According to Lawang in Saptono, Sulasmono, and Suteng (2007) in their book, the negative impacts of social stratification can be described clearly as follows:

a. Conflict

Conflict is a struggle to acquire rare things such as values, status, power and many others. Conflict can also be defined as a social process in which two people or groups try to get rid of the other party by way of destroying or making it powerless.

b. Social Disintegration

Social disintegration is a perceived decline in integrity (unity and oneness) or the destruction of the unity of organization in society. The emergence of disintegration in society is a result of differences in roles and social status in the form of jealousy and prejudice.

3. Research Method

Creswell (2003, p.3) stated that research designs are plans and procedures for research that span decisions from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis. In this research, the writer used a descriptive qualitative method with the Karl Marx theory. According to Gerard (2001), the qualitative method is usually not concerned with testing of hypotheses previously from the theory. While, according to Litosseliti (2010, p.52), qualitative description is concerned with structures and patterns, and how something is. Qualitative studies are inductive studies which derived from the results of our research. Further, it is explained that qualitative also tends to focus on how the research must follow concerning structures and patterns. There is an argument about qualitative methods that qualitative data are data in the form

of words. This method was intended to describe the social class and the impact on life that is reflected in the novel "Little Women" written by Louisa.

In collecting data, the writer used note-taking by using a piece of paper as instrument for research. After reading the novel *Little Women* and the other supporting references, the writer made some notes to classify the important units or sentences that were related to the problems of the research and read some book to get the theory. In this study, the writer applied some procedures of collecting data as follows:

1. Reading the novel carefully and understood the novel deeply.
2. Identifying social class and the impact in the novel.
3. Writing down the data from the novel on a piece of paper.
4. Classifying social class and the impact based on the theory.

The collected data are then analyzed by referring to the theory adopted in this research into some classifications about social class. Furthermore, the researchers give argument and further analysis about the effect of the differences in the social class in the novel.

4. Discussion

4.1 Social Conditions Between Lower Class and Upper Class

The first social condition depicted by the author in the novel is a portrayal of the differences in houses inhabited by the lower class and the upper class.

It was a comfortable room, though the carpet was faded and the furniture very plain, for a good picture or two hung on the walls, books filled the recesses, chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloomed in the windows, and a pleasant atmosphere of home peace pervaded it. (Alcott, 2020, p.14)

The Moffats are very stylish. The humble Meg was initially afraid to see the splendor of their house and the elegant inhabitants. (Alcott, 2020, p.138)

Based on the quotation above, it can be seen how the condition of the house lived in by the March family, which is included in the Lower Class. Their house appears simple, and they only have old belongings that they have been using for years. In stark contrast, the house inhabited by the Moffat family belongs to the upper class. It is big and grand, making Meg feel intimidated and hesitant to enter the Moffat family's house.

Another social difference that can be highlighted from this novel is the lifestyle. The lower class has to work much harder than the upper class to meet their basic needs.

"All my life I will be forced to work hard, have little fun, and then become an ugly, sour-looking old woman, because I am poor and cannot enjoy life like other girl, too bad!" (Alcott, 2020, p.59)

At the Kings's house, Meg sees everything she wants everyday. The foster children's sister often went out, and Meg often saw the pretty dance dresses, flower bouquets, and heard great gossip about the theatre, concerts, sledding, and other fun stuff (Alcott, 2020, p. 63)."

From the quotations above, it is clear how the difference in life between the lower class and also the upper class are directly experienced by one of the protagonists, Meg. Meg is a sixteen-year-old girl who has to work hard to provide for herself by becoming the head babysitter. By becoming a nanny, Meg feels jealous of the life lives of the children she cares for. They can wear nice clothes and go out to do fun things, which are things that Meg desires deeply.

“That work, cultivating experience, and an early taste of independence will benefit the lives of these young girl” (Alcott, 2020, p.62)

He also saw how money was wasted on trifles, money that was so precious to Meg. Poor meg rarely complains, but there is a sense of injustice that sometimes makes her the envy of anyone. (Alcott, 2020: p.63)

From the quotes above, show that families in the lower class must spend their youth working hard to meet the daily needs of their family and must also learn to live independently at a young age. In contrast, at the same age, girls from upper-class families live by wasting money on things that are not really needed. Considering how hard she works, seeing these girls waste money that is so valuable to Meg certainly evokes feelings of envy in her heart.

Not only felt by the eldest Meg, the difference in social class conditions also caused jealousy for the youngest, Amy.

“I think it’s unfair that there are girls who have beatiful things, and there are girl who don’t have anything, (Alcott, 2020, p.9)”

“Susie Perkins come to school today wearing beautiful carnelian ring. I want it so badly, I wish I could be Susie.” (Alcott, 2020, p.71)

From the quotation, it can be seen that Amy feels envious of her friends and other girls who possess beautiful belongings while she does not. For example, when her school friend, Susie Perkins, wears a gem-studded ring to school. Seeing things like that makes Amy feel jealous and daydream about having similarly beautiful possessions as her friend.

Economic differences are not only evident in the community but also among School-children.

“You see, my friends always buy pickled limes, and unless you want to be seens as a cheapskate, you should buy them too. Everybody sucked on it in class, and traded it on pencils, bread rings, paper dolls, or whatever, at recess. If a child likes another child, he gives that child limwes. If he was angry, he ate one in front of the friend he didn’t like, and did’nt share any on it. They treat each other, and I’ve had so many, but haven’t returned any yet, but I have to, because owing limes is a debt.” (Alcott, 2020, p.108)

Pickled limes are quite expensive and that means not all students can afford to buy these pickled limes. This indirectly makes it a standard for the lives of these school children. When other children cannot afford to buy and bring the pickled limes, they

will ostracize the child, and they will assume that the child is stingy. They perceive the lime pickle as valuable due to its high price.

4.2 Impact of Social Class

The impact of the social class depicted in the novel is the emergence of conflicts such as bullying. This is experienced by one of the protagonists in the novel.

"I don't think your suffering is as heavy as mine. You don't have to go to school with arrogant girls, who make fun of me if I don't understand a lesson, laugh at my clothes, label me daddy because our dad isn't rich, and always make fun of me because I have an ugly nose."
(Alcott, 2020, p.11)

From the quotations above, you can see how Amy was treated by her schoolmates. Being part of the upper class makes her friends feel better than Amy. Anything related to Amy they make fun of. It wasn't enough to make fun of Amy's physique, they even made fun of her father just because his father was not a rich man.

"Mary Kingsley insisted Amy borrow her watch until recess, and Jenny Snow, the sharp-tongued young girl who had once taunted Amy for not having a lime, promptly shook off her hostility, and offered to correct Amy's answers in the additional questions. The hard one. But Amy did not forget Miss Snow's snarky remark about "some people whose noses are too flat to smell other people's limes, and stiff people, who are too proud to ask (Alcott, 2020, p.109)."

It can be seen from the quotation above that Amy was bullied by her school friends, because she never brought limes to school. Pickled limes were a popular snack among school children at that time, and they were quite expensive. Because the March family did not have enough money, therefore, Amy never bought and brought pickled limes to school to share with her friends, causing Amy to be said to be stingy by her schoolmates.

Social disintegration is another impact that arises from the existence of social class. This is described in the novel as the jealousy felt by the protagonist, who is part of the lower class, towards the upper class.

"We can't be lazy like now. But, it seems good to get a pretty lavish meal and a bouquet of flowers, go to a party, then ride the carriage home, read and relax, and not have to work so hard. Well, like everyone else. I've always envied girls who live like that; I like convenience (Alcott, 2020, p.58)."

"She tries hard not to feel jealous and is always grateful, but it's completely natural for a young girl to want beautiful things, interesting friends, accomplishments, and a happy life (Alcott, 2020, p.63)"

"Poor Meg rarely complains, but there is a sense of injustice that sometimes makes her the envy of everyone else, (Alcott, 2020, p.63)"

It can be seen from the quotation above that Meg feels jealous of the lifestyle that belongs to the upper class. She wants to do many things and also have the beautiful things that girls from the upper class have. The girls from the upper class spend their time having fun and also taking care of themselves. While the March girls cannot do these things, because most of the time they use to work hard.

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the problem in the novel, the finding is found. That the social conditions between the upper and lower classes depicted in the novel have had several impacts on the life of the protagonist.

The social condition between the upper class and the lower class experienced by the protagonist is the existence of economic differences. The economic differences in the novel are described not only by the condition of the houses they live in, but also by the clothes they wear, what they own, as well as the way they spend their free time. Girls from the upper class filled their time with parties, hanging out, grooming themselves, going to theaters, concerts and doing other fun things. Meanwhile, the March girls, who come from the lower class, only spend their time working, and rarely do the fun things the other girls do.

Being part of the lower class has several impacts experienced by the protagonists. From the analysis, it can be found that there are two negative impacts experienced by the protagonists. The first is one of the protagonists who experiences bullying by his schoolmates because he does not have some of the things that other children have. The second is the jealousy felt by the protagonist towards the upper class. There are many things that can be done by the upper class, but not by the lower class like, taking care of yourself, having fun, and also beautiful things that only the upper class has.

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