

# The struggle between social classes

Society



Rich girl marrying a poor boy or vice versa—this is a very recurrent theme in love stories of all times. In the film genre, this theme also serves as a topic of interest as it reveals the conflict between the upper and the lower classes in society. In Jack Clayton's (1959) film, *Room at the Top*, the director shows how the struggle between the two classes operates in the British society after the World War II. Depicting a poor man's struggle as he tries to alter his place in society, the film attempts to mirror the reality that the poor will likely give in to the intention of the rich in view of economic struggle.

Analysis of the characterisation, plot, theme, and motifs used in the film provides viewers a better knowledge of the two social classes.

**Characterisation** The beginning of the film strongly suggests representations of the lower class. The main character, Joe Lampton (played by Laurence Harvey) is depicted sitting comfortably on a train, with his feet raised on the opposite seat, thus showing his mended socks. The introduction alone shows the man's class standing, as he cannot afford to buy a new pair of socks, and resorts instead to wearing an old and tottered pair.

This attitude of settling with the second best or whatever is available is reflected in his choice of women. Realising the difficulty of having Susan Brown as his girl due to the conflict in their social standing, Joe resorts to Alice Aisgill (played by Simone Signoret), his colleague, despite their big age difference. A number of juxtapositions are presented in the film. For instance, in spite of Joe's financial incapability as symbolised by the socks, he wears the usual coat and tie as he reports for work.

Whilst the first denotes poverty, the other suggests decency. Note that the coat and tie is customary in the British society especially in business affairs.

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As such, he and his colleagues wear the same type of clothing, which somehow levels off their status with that of the rich. Nevertheless, this does not change Joe's social standing, and the way Susan's family and friends view him. Based on his position as an accountant in Borough's Treasurer's Department, Joe is unquestionably educated.

However, this does not necessarily help raise his social status as one belonging to the working class. This implies that it is not enough for a person to obtain education and a white-collared job in order to rise in the social hierarchy. Rather, marriage to a rich girl such as Susan, the daughter of a factory owner, could change one's fortune as proposed later in the film. Juxtaposition is likewise established between the characters. For instance, Joe's character is presented in opposition with Susan's suitor, who is influential and sociable.

Joe, being a newcomer in the Dufton, seldom socialises with his colleagues, and instead relates closely with a few of them, including Alice, whom he falls in love with later. He is also seen in contrast with Susan, the girl who attracts him a lot. Their social standing primarily draws the line between them. Whilst Joe needs to work hard and establish connection with his colleagues, Susan does not need to work, and instead spends her time acting in local theatre. Also, whilst Joe transfers to Dufton to obtain employment, Susan is free to go on vacation as she pleases.

Moreover, juxtaposition is also established between the two female characters, Alice and Susan. Aside from the women's ages and marital status, they also differ in social status, in that Alice is an average office worker, whilst Susan is the daughter of an owner of a factory. This social

difference between the two results in a struggle between them as Susan gets pregnant. Although Joe loves Alice more, and has planned to marry her, Mr. Brown's (Susan's father) proposition convinces Joe to change his mind, thus making way for the bourgeois to win over the proletarian.

In addition, Alice's former marriage to their colleague also makes less favourable, especially since her former husband would not agree to divorce. Considering this, the film does not only present struggles between social classes; it also demonstrates struggles based on gender as the women's fate depends on Joe's final decision. Further to the contrast between Alice and Susan, the former demonstrates more freedom of will, as she does things she likes, ie, shiftscareer, separates from her husband, and establishes relationship with Joe.

Her habit of cigarettesmokingthroughout the film shows Alice's easy-going and independent character; although it reflects her tensions in life at the same time. In contrast, Susan is pictured as a fresh and young girl, healthy-looking and innocent. Her social status prevents her from associating with the lower class, such as Joe, but it does not ultimately defeats her will to be independent. Plot The plot of the film supports the idea of struggle between the social classes. It shows a single unified structure, with the conflict appearing near the end, as Joe decides to marry Susan due to the latter's pregnant condition.

His decision conflicts with his wish to marry Alice. Thus, when the latter finds out, she gets totally devastated, and drowns in her sorrow and alcohol, which later leads to her death by car accident. Earlier in the story, Susan's parents try to separate her from Joe by making her take a vacation. This motive

demonstrates the struggle between social classes, in that the bourgeois discriminates the other, by preventing marriage between them. Later on, as Mr. Brown realises his daughter's condition, he tries to buy off Joe, and offers to make him rich if Joe does what he commands.

Initially, Joe exercises his pride and rejects the offer, but realising that Alice cannot be married with him, and that life with Susan would make his life comfortable, he agrees to the proposition and marries Susan. As such, the class struggle is evident. Mr. Brown uses his money and power to buy off Joe. For his part, Joe cannot disagree with Mr. Brown for he sees this opportunity to escape his current social status. Being Susan's husband, Joe does not need to work anymore, and all else will go smoothly because Susan is very wealthy.

However, just as Joe attempts to escape his own social structure, he is haunted by it, with the death of Alice. Along with the proposition of Mr. Brown to make Joe a rich man is the defeat of the proletarian class. As Joe accepts the offer, he disremembers Alice's sacrifices and love for him. What is sadder about it is knowing how little time it takes Joe to decide about leaving Alice. As shown in the film, everything happens over one dinner, too short a time to change plans or think things over; thus implying the power of money to further establish social injustice and discrimination, and in turn disregard social equality.

Theme The main theme of the film, which is the struggle between social structures, relates to Marxist perspectives. Specifically, the presence of the two opposing structures, the bourgeois (as presented by Susan and her family) and the proletarian (Joe, Alice, and the other employees) implies the

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conflict in the film. As Marx & Engels (1848) claim, there is a social struggle that exists between the bourgeois or the middle class, “ that sprouted from the ruins of feudal society,” and “ established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

” In the film, as Mr. Brown gives Joe the marriage proposal, he implies designing Joe’s entire life—his marriage and career, in order to make sure it fits the structure that Susan is born with. Such plan illustrates “ a new condition of oppression,” a new form of struggle for the proletariat. Physical attraction is what leads to the theme of social struggle. Everything starts as Joe becomes attracted to Susan and vice versa. Indeed, the two social classes would not conflict with each other if not for Joe’s feelings for Susan.

In this consideration, one may see that the effort to reach or blend with another social class may result in a much worse conflict between them. However, such conflict could later lead to “ permanently changing social relations within the system” (Strasser and Randall, 1981, p. 44). Thus, Susan’s pregnancy leads to “ the development of new patterns of social relations,” between him and the Browns. Suddenly, Susan’s parents accept Joe as their daughter’s husband, owing to the reputation that they try to maintain in society.

Motifs As mentioned above, the proletariat or working class is given focus in the film. Clayton uses realistic setting and motifs to depict the lives of the working class of the 50s. Amongst these include the dark, small houses where Alice and Joe spend their love affair, the male boarding house where Joe resides with her friend Soames, the local train which characterises the

transportation means of the common people, and Joe's seemingly abandoned house where he brings Susan the night they elope.

The use of realistic setting thus emphasises the life lived by the proletarians. Juxtaposition is likewise applied to the setting. When Joe visits Susan, he is amazed by the huge house, which consists of the long halls, partitioned rooms, and the big lawn. Servants are available any moment they are needed. This is in full contrast with Alice's place, which is dark and small. Aside from setting, the behaviour of the characters likewise mimics the ways of the working class.

For instance, cigarette smoking is used vehemently throughout the film, giving impression of the start of the "new wave" era (Wickham, n. d. ), although such practices may be deemed destructive of the image of the working class. Likewise, the affair between workers despite being committed is also hinted on, which reveals the low regard for morality of the said social class. Furthermore, the Alice's fate at the end also reveals the proletarian's lack of strength to face reality, the tendency to be alcoholic, and the low self-esteem amongst them.

In contrast, the ways of the bourgeois are seen in better light. They are dressed neatly on each occasion; specifically, Susan's mother shows modesty by the way she behaves and carries herself even whilst at home, whilst Susan shows coyness towards Joe. However, the proletarians are pictured with more social dynamics than their counterpart. This is seen as Soemes introduces Joe to their officemates. Everyone, despite their positions in the company, welcomes Joe with glee, whilst Susan's suitor intimidates him.

During the party where Joe and Susan meet again, the guests seated with the Browns look at Joe with contempt, after finding out that he does not belong to their social circle. In sum, whilst the proletarians are depicted as misguided and weak, the bourgeois are seen as virulent and vile. The monotonous music that the director employs does not entirely affect the whole of the film, yet it helps highlight important scenes such as the introduction, the falling in love and break up between Joe and Alice, the news about Alice's death, the wedding, etc.

Likewise, the actors' costumes, which are limited to office and home settings, depict the simplicity of the people in the 50s. The director's effort to make everything look realistic, from the setting, the costumes, the love scenes, the dialogues to the props, allows the viewers to see the film in a realistic perspective. Moreover, the plot structure, which shows the dilemma of a man in choosing between the woman he loves but cannot possess and the woman who merely attracts her but is prepared to be his wife, adds to the realism of the film.

The only element that seems irrelevant yet not impossible is the time when Joe encounters the mob just before his wedding. This scene is irrelevant to the plot, but may have been added to achieve catharsis. Since Joe is the cause of Alice's accidental death, he is made to pay for what he does before he marries Susan. Despite the irrelevance of the mob scene to the plot, it nevertheless presents other aspects of the proletarians.

As depicted in the film, the men that beat Joe are not scavengers; rather, they are working men, considering the way they are dressed up. Based on this scene, the proletarians in the British society are pictured as ruthless just



like the bourgeois who would buy off people's freedom in order to make their daughter happy. As Joe decides to leave Alice for Susan, the film once again shows that in the face of struggle between the two classes, it is usually those in the upper class that emerge as the winner, leaving behind the poor at the losing end.

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