

CLASS STRUGGLE IN RALPH HOSEA CHAPLIN'S POETRY: A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Class struggle emerges due to the gap between two conflicting classes: the bourgeoisie (capital owners) and the proletariat (workers). The oppression and unjust distribution of rights lead the working class to fight for equality. This condition has been immortalized in poetry by poets as a reflection of social realities. This research aims to examine the application of Marxist theory in literature by analyzing class struggle in Ralph Hosea Chaplin's poems, "The Commonwealth of Toil," "Sabotage," and "Solidarity Forever" (1917). The study employs a qualitative descriptive method using Marxist theory to analyze the representation of power relations and the struggle of the exploited class. The findings reveal that power is in the hands of the bourgeoisie, who exploit and oppress the proletariat without granting their rights. Moreover, the proletariat responds with resistance, starting from ideological awareness to verbal and physical confrontation against the bourgeoisie.

Keywords: Literature, Poetry, Marxism, Class Struggle, Bourgeoisie, Proletariat, Power Relations

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INTRODUCTION

Class struggle remains a pertinent issue today, demonstrating that societal development does not always ensure the well-being of all individuals and groups. According to Marxist theory, class struggle arises due to economic disparities and the control of production tools by the bourgeoisie, leading to exploitation and oppression of the proletariat. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx & Engels, 2013). The proletariat, being devoid of ownership of production means, must work under the bourgeoisie's control and often face unjust treatment, such as low wages and harsh working conditions (Hendriwani, 2022).

Marxism in literature serves as a lens through which these socio-economic conflicts are examined. Poets, especially those aligned with socialist ideals, have used poetry as a medium to highlight class struggles and inspire resistance. Ralph Hosea Chaplin, a renowned labor activist and poet, exemplifies this through his poems "The Commonwealth of Toil," "Sabotage," and "Solidarity Forever" (1917), which vividly portray the power dynamics between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. These poems depict the proletariat's journey from realization of oppression to collective action against capitalist exploitation (Das, 2023). "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains" (Marx & Engels, 2013).

1. Marxism: An Overview of Class Struggle

Marxism is a socio-economic philosophy that opposes capitalism by emphasizing the intrinsic class conflict between the bourgeoisie (the upper class) and the proletariat (the working class). Marx and Engels (2013) assert that the bourgeoisie governs financial relations, oversees the economy, and dictates social circumstances, so maintaining its supremacy over the proletariat. This economic framework engenders structural inequities, because wealth increase directly correlates with authority, relegating the proletariat to a subordinate status. Tama (2015) elaborates on this concept by asserting that capitalism sustains class hierarchy, perpetuating economic inequality through wage labor and private ownership of the means of production. The ruling class controls both material resources and ideological authority via institutions like as education, media, and government laws, so cementing their supremacy and constraining upward mobility for the proletariat. This view corresponds with Anggraini et al. (2023), who assert that Marxism retains its relevance in contemporary society, especially on worker exploitation, wealth concentration, and economic fairness. The inception of Marxism is hence intricately linked to the repressive characteristics of capitalism. Under the paradigm of Marxism a world is envisioned in which the proletariat would ultimately usurp the bourgeoisie, redistributing wealth and destroying class hierarchies. Although historical endeavors for Marxist revolutions have yielded differing levels of success, the core criticism of capitalism persists as a fundamental topic in modern socio-economic discussions (Anggraini et al., 2023). This viewpoint highlights the

enduring significance of Marxist theory in examining power relations and promoting economic transformation.

a. Class Structure in Marxism

Historically, society has been divided into various classes based on economic factors and social relations in production. Marx identified two primary classes: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who lack such ownership and work for the bourgeoisie (Marx & Engels, 2013). This economic inequality fosters conflict, as the bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat for profit, leading to a system where the latter is treated as subservient (Ducange & Burlaud, 2023).

The Bourgeoisie

The bourgeoisie is defined by its ownership of production tools and wealth, which grants them authority over social, economic, and political conditions (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 4). Their power stems from their ability to exploit the proletariat, ensuring their own wealth and dominance (Karmila et al., 2024). The bourgeoisie's revolutionary actions, while transformative, often result in the concentration of power and wealth in their hands, perpetuating oppression (Panae & Islahuddin, 2020).

The Proletariat

In contrast, the proletariat is characterized by its lack of power and resources, relying on the bourgeoisie for employment and survival (Marx & Engels, 2013). This class is often subjected to inhumane working conditions and must sell their labor to meet basic needs (Aliano et al., 2022). The capitalist system prioritizes the interests of the bourgeoisie over the welfare of the proletariat, leading to systemic exploitation (Frihanggrahita, 2022).

b. Class Struggle and Resistance

The inherent inequality between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat leads to social conflict and class struggle (Bezar et al., 2023). As the proletariat becomes aware of their exploitation, they begin to organize and resist.

Forms of Resistance

Marx & Engels (2013) classify four forms of resistances, i.e.

1. Dreaming: The proletariat's aspirations for a life free from oppression reflect their class consciousness and desire for change;

2. Forming a Community: Workers often form unions to advocate for their rights and wages, fostering solidarity and class awareness. These communities empower the proletariat to organize and resist effectively;
3. Verbal Resistance: Protests, speeches, and other forms of expression allow the proletariat to voice their demands against the bourgeoisie. Acts of destruction against tools of production symbolize their rejection of exploitation;
4. Physical Resistance: When verbal protests fail, the proletariat may resort to direct confrontation with the bourgeoisie, exemplifying their rejection of oppression. This physical resistance highlights the desperation and determination of the working class.

In conclusion, Marxism provides a critical lens through which to understand the dynamics of class struggle, emphasizing the ongoing conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The various forms of resistance employed by the working class reflect their quest for equality and justice in a system that perpetuates inequality.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how literature, specifically poetry, functions as a political tool in social movements. By analyzing Chaplin's works, this research seeks to understand how Marxist principles are reflected in literature and how poetry serves as a vehicle for class consciousness and resistance. This study contributes to the broader discussion of literature's role in political discourse and social justice movements (Syafitri, 2019).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the selected poems of Ralph Hosea Chaplin. Cresswell in Kristi et al. (2021) define qualitative research in connection with how a researcher in doing a research makes interpretations of the data. This research follows the textual analysis approach, focusing on the themes, imagery, and linguistic elements that reflect Marxist principles. The methodology consists of the following steps:

1. **Data Collection:** Primary data consists of Chaplin's poems, "The Commonwealth of Toil," "Sabotage," and "Solidarity Forever" (1917).

Secondary data includes scholarly articles, books, and research papers related to Marxist literary criticism.

2. **Close Reading:** Each poem is read multiple times to identify recurring themes, power structures, and resistance motifs.
3. **Thematic Analysis:** The study categorizes the poems based on key Marxist concepts such as class struggle, bourgeoisie oppression, and proletariat resistance.
4. **Contextual Analysis:** The poems are examined within their historical and socio-political context, linking their messages to early 20th-century labor movements.
5. **Interpretation through Marxist Theory:** The findings are analyzed using Marxist literary criticism, referencing key theorists like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to explain the power dynamics in the poems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Manifestation of Power Relations in "The Commonwealth of Toil," "Sabotage," and "Solidarity Forever"

The analysis of power relations in Ralph Hosea Chaplin's poems reveals stark contrasts between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, highlighting the social injustices stemming from economic disparities. Beyond a Marxist critique of exploitation, Chaplin's use of literary techniques intensifies the urgency and emotional impact of his message, drawing readers into the lived experiences of the working class. His poems serve as powerful tools for mobilization, blending artistic expression with ideological resistance, making them enduring works within the labor movement.

a. Power Relations in "The Commonwealth of Toil"

(i) Setting and Situation

The industrial backdrop of "The Commonwealth of Toil" serves as more than a mere setting; it operates as a metaphor for capitalist oppression. The phrase, "In the gloom of mighty cities" (Chaplin, 1917c, line 1) juxtaposes the grandeur of urban development with the bleak existence of laborers, emphasizing the paradox of progress built on exploitation. The sensory imagery in "Mid the roar of whirling wheels" (Chaplin, 1917, line 2), reinforces the relentless, mechanized

labor, dehumanizing the proletariat and reducing them to cogs in an economic machine. The comparison of workers to "chattel slaves of old" (Chaplin, 1917, line 3), further underscores their loss of autonomy and agency, drawing historical parallels that deepen the critique of industrial capitalism.

(ii) The Identity of the Bourgeois and the Proletariat

Chaplin's diction in "And our masters hope to keep us" (Chaplin, 1917, line 4), establishes the bourgeoisie as oppressive figures who not only control labor but also sustain the illusion of workers' dependence. The use of "masters" invokes historical connotations of servitude, reinforcing the power imbalance. Conversely, the proletariat is depicted as a collective entity experiencing shared oppression, yet their depiction is not solely that of victimhood. The line "And to coin our very life blood into gold" (Chaplin, 1917, line 6), utilizes hyperbole and metaphor to accentuate the exploitative transformation of human suffering into capitalist wealth. This line, rich in emotional weight, prompts the audience to empathize with the proletariat's plight while also igniting a sense of urgency for change.

2. Power Relations in "Sabotage"

a. Setting and Situation

The agricultural landscape of "Sabotage" introduces another dimension of class struggle, shifting from factory oppression to rural exploitation. The line "Sabotage, Sabotage, There's a harvest ripe for gleaning" (Chaplin, 1917a, line 2) employs repetition to create a rallying cry, framing labor unrest as an inevitable reaction to sustained abuse. The verb "gouge" in "Though they gouge us as they will" (Chaplin, 1917a, line 3), evokes visceral imagery of physical and economic suffering, reinforcing the violent nature of class exploitation. By expanding the scope of oppression to different economic sectors, Chaplin universalizes the proletariat's struggle, emphasizing that exploitation is systemic rather than isolated.

b. The Identity of the Bourgeois and the Proletariat

The Chaplin explicitly names the bourgeoisie as exploiters in "Exploitation is its name" (Chaplin, 1917a, line 8), stripping them of moral neutrality and emphasizing their parasitic existence. The proletariat, however, is depicted as possessing latent power, hinted at in "There's a power we have still" (Chaplin,

1917a, line 5). This acknowledgment of potential rebellion transforms the workers from passive victims into agents of change, appealing to the audience's sense of justice and activism. The poem suggests that through collective resistance, the working class can reclaim agency and disrupt the exploitative structures imposed upon them.

3. Power Relations in "Solidarity Forever"

a. Setting and Situation

"Unlike the previous poems, "Solidarity Forever" expands the framework of oppression beyond industrial or agricultural settings, framing it within colonial and systemic exploitation. The line "When the Union's inspiration" establishes collective organization as a counterforce to bourgeois dominance. "Through the Workers' blood shall run" (Chaplin, 1917b, line 2), highlights the sacrifices made by the proletariat in their struggle for justice. The phrase, "There can be no power greater" (Chaplin, 1917b, line 2), utilizes potent imagery of sacrifice, appealing to the audience's pathos and reinforcing the severity of the proletariat's struggle. By situating labor solidarity within a broader historical and ideological context, Chaplin underscores the necessity of unified resistance across different sectors and nations.

b. The Identity of the Bourgeois and the Proletariat

The bourgeoisie, personified as "the greedy parasite" (Chaplin, 1917b, line 8), are depicted as both exploitative and cowardly, requiring systemic oppression to maintain their control. The proletariat, however, emerges as resilient figures, strengthened by unity. "Solidarity forever! For the Union makes us strong" (Chaplin, 1917b, line 5), functions both as an assertion of power and a direct call to action, leveraging poetic form to inspire real-world mobilization. The emphasis on solidarity not only highlights the necessity of collective resistance but also fosters a sense of belonging and shared purpose among workers, reinforcing their ability to enact meaningful change.

4. Manifestation of the Exploited Class Struggles

Each of Chaplin's poems not only documents oppression but also actively encourages resistance. His use of literary devices such as repetition, metaphor, and imagery transforms these works into ideological instruments, amplifying their impact on audiences. The themes of hope, militancy, and unity permeate each

poem, ensuring that their messages resonate beyond their original context and continue to inspire future generations of activists.

a. Class Struggles in "The Commonwealth of Toil"

The proletariat's yearning for a better future is captured in "But we have a glowing dream" (Chaplin, 1917c, line 7), a phrase that introduces hope as a radical force against oppression. The contrast between "the nightmare of the present" and the workers' idealistic vision underscores the transformative potential of collective action. The phrase "When the earth is owned by labor" (Chaplin, 1917c, line 9), employs metonymy to redefine ownership, challenging capitalist notions of private property and advocating for an egalitarian economic system.

b. Class Struggles in "Sabotage"

Resistance in "Sabotage" is portrayed as direct action rather than passive endurance. The line "We will fight them as they fought us" (Chaplin, 1917a, line 7), implies a militant response to oppression, shifting the power dynamic. The repeated invocation of "Sabotage" (Chaplin, 1917a, line 5) serves as both a thematic reinforcement and a linguistic weapon, mirroring the urgency of revolutionary discourse. Chaplin's rhetoric in this poem encourages defiance and strategic disruption as means of reclaiming workers' rights.

5. Class Struggles in "Solidarity Forever"

"Solidarity Forever" presents collective struggle as an inevitable force for change. The phrase "But the Union makes us strong" utilizes syntactic simplicity and parallel structure to enhance memorability, ensuring that the poem's message is easily internalized and repeated. The line "Now we stand outcast and starving 'Mid the wonders we have made" (Chaplin, 1917b, line 13), uses irony to highlight the paradox of workers producing wealth they cannot enjoy, reinforcing the injustice at the heart of capitalist exploitation.

CONCLUSION

Ralph Hosea Chaplin's poems serve as powerful commentaries on the exploitation and struggles of the working class. Through vivid imagery and poignant language, Chaplin captures the essence of power relations and class struggles, highlighting the resilience and unity of the proletariat in their fight for

justice. The analysis of these poems reveals the enduring relevance of Marxist theory in understanding the dynamics of class struggle and the quest for equality in society. The study concludes that Ralph Hosea Chaplin's poetry encapsulates Marxist ideals by depicting class struggles, oppression, and resistance. The proletariat's journey from exploitation to collective action highlights the transformative power of class consciousness. Chaplin's poems illustrate how literature can function as a revolutionary tool, inspiring social change through poetic expression. This study reaffirms the relevance of Marxist literary analysis in understanding the interplay between literature and socio-political movements.

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