

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CLASS IN SCOTT FITZGERALD'S *THE GREAT GATSBY*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is the exploration and analysis of literary works that are reflective of the theory of Marxist structuralism. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitz Gerald portrayed the social classes with the characteristics in the story. This research used qualitative research to collect the data. The researcher read several books and articles that described and explained the identification process with Marx's theory. As mentioned above, the object collected from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald is caused by a close and interrelated relationship between Fitzgerald and his works. This research resulted and was discussed in structuration, which is focused on revealed characteristics and added comprehension theory to provide it. One of the characteristics that depicts Bourgeois is Tom. It is caused by the arrogant attitude that Tom shows from the beginning of the story to the end, which is related to Fitzgerald's perspective of Bourgeois. However, there is Gatsby, who comes from Proletarian and implicitly shows how Fitzgerald was before being the Bourgeois. It is also explained with theories that come from his personal essay, *My Personal City*. The purposes of the author can be seen in the details of social phenomena that were added to his literary work, namely *The Great Gatsby*.

**Keyword:** *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald, Social Classes, Structuralism, Marxism

## INTRODUCTION

Many people say that literature is a representation of the world's movements. Every phenomenon that happened was depicted as if it were real. One aspect that changed in the world's movement to be more modern will be affecting each other. Somehow, economic aspects have an effect on social aspects, and so on. They have a connection with each other. However, according to Nyussupova et al. (2021, pp. 39), there is a wealth partnership with other countries that includes 138 members of the country inside. It is explained that "therefore, the establishment of conditions for the most effective formation, development, and implementation of human capital becomes decisive for ensuring sustainable economic growth and successful post-industrial transformation of modern society." This explanation shows that there is an interconnection between the economy and human capital that indirectly involves social forces as well. Humans live in this world with the tools of transaction that everybody calls 'money'. However, people who have a lot of money are actually somebody who has done a lot of transactions. It means they can occupy the highest throne of social life.

The way economies flow can be seen in literature because literature always depends on humans. According to Eagleton (2002, pp. 30), there is a quote that states, "For Goldmann, literary works are not in the first place to be seen as the creation of individuals, but of what he calls the 'transindividual mental structures' of a social group,



by which he means the structure of ideas, values, and aspirations that group shares." This text actually explained how literature works by taking a representation of human life. It was never focused on 'person' or even 'personal', but on 'group' and 'impersonal' things. Therefore, this statement also supports the idea that the phenomenon that happened to humans is something they can use as material to change into literature.

The historical background is taken from the Routine Encyclopedia of International Political Economy, written by RJ Barry Jones, he says that social class is a set of social science concepts and political theories that focus on models of social stratification that occur in society and its diverse people. According to him, society is divided into two classes, namely the bourgeois class of society and the proletariat class of society. The bourgeoisie is a higher class of society compared to the proletariat, which is made up of peasants. The proletariat class works very hard but gets very little benefit.

In literary terms, Marxism is always related to the participation and problems of the capitalist system. Both have differences, such as the class of society, how they see society, and the classes that are reflected in their personalities. In this case, the research will focus on money, class, and wealth, which is the central theme, and how these affect a person's life, which can drive the plot and show how the characters behave, interact, and think as portrayed by other characters. The researcher uses Marxist theory to answer questions of economics and social class. According to Doyle, he explains that it was not Karl Marx himself who invented social class. He used the concept, but his analysis was not thorough, despite all his major writings containing the widespread concept of class. In Karl Mark's view, the concept of class was only at the base of the social structure. Therefore, the concept of class was not explained in detail by Karl Marx, but he only explained the circumstances that occurred at that time.

According to Doyle, the definition of social classes is closely related to Marx's concept of historical materialism. In this case, the human ability to meet diverse needs depends on engaging in social relations with others through production activities. According to Marx, classes arise when there is a production relationship involving the division of labor. So it can be concluded that the division and ownership of the means of production are factors in the emergence of social classes.

In literary works, it means that the writing, besides containing beauty in every sentence expressed by the author, can describe a phenomenon that can occur in society. So also in the novel *The Great Gatsby* by Scott Fitzgerald, in which there are several reflections of social class and economic phenomena in people's lives during the 1920s jazz era. When Scott wrote this book, the amount of cash characterized where the class was. In fact, in the class of "rich people," there is the term "new" cash, or people who have just experienced being rich for the first time will be viewed with hatred and suspicion by people who have had wealth for many years. In this, Fitzgerald illustrates Marxist ideas about the various classes and their translation of how the classes characterize the experience for them. Therefore, there is Marxist's basic concept of genetic structuralism from Goldman which explaining more with Rokhmansyah in Sholihah, Basid and Darusti (2018, pp. 508) that stated when it comes to the structure of literary works, Goldman maintained that it is thematic, centered on the interactions between characters and the objects that surround them. This statement would be the guide to identifying social class that happened in a story.

In this research, the researcher will use the descriptive analysis method that understands, explains, and analyzes the data as a whole (Ratna, 2018). With a definition supported by Creswell, JW (1998), which defines "qualitative research as the process of

investigating understanding, based on various methodological traditions, investigating social or human problems," This essay will focus more on how social class is expressed based on existing theories in literary sociology.

This research will use more analysis, investigation, and interpretation of problem observation to identify subjects, meanings, and patterns, as well as case studies and document analysis. The author has read several books and articles to analyze the novel. The data is taken from Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* as the main data source for this research, as well as articles from several journals related to the object of this research.

This research aims to find more discussion about social class that still has continuity and is a phenomenon that seems to never stop. This statement related to Marx (in Eagleton: 2002, pp. 12) that quoted, "But when Marx speaks of strive(ing) to reproduce its truth at a higher stage', he is clearly speaking of the communist society of the future, where unlimited resources will serve an unlimitedly developing man." In this quote, Eagleton gives an interpretation of Marx's theory, which gives a statement about how communist man will increase in the future. However, researchers want to identify the characteristics of each social class, both Bourgeois and proletarian, not only by theory but also in reality. It is related to the function of literature in representing things in this world.

In this case the researcher will use sociological field theory a scientific approach that assesses the behavior of society and what phenomena occur in society. Initially, sociology only dealt with events and was always related to norms, but over time, this has changed to become increasingly specific so that it can be identified as something that produces a lot of novelty. Sociology is certainly related to other aspects such as economics, religion, politics, education, and so on. The relationship between aspects of sociology and other aspects is because science has the same object, namely humans.

Humans are basically creatures that need other humans in their lives. They cannot live alone. Therefore, they establish relationships with each other. Humans cannot determine whether the outcome of these relationships will result in something good or bad. They can only determine how they behave but cannot determine how others behave towards them. Many things are factors in how the relationship takes place. This factor is then studied more deeply and produces sociological phenomena.

Basically, humans are thinking creatures. This was expressed by Decartes (1765), who revealed that when humans have thoughts and views, they actually exist and live. The mind can move wildly and can spread to everything. When someone is more inclined to think in a social direction, he can pour these thoughts into the mind, and the writing will be related to the social phenomena around him. One of the writers who did this was F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote a work entitled *The Great Gatsby*.

This work actually tells about the life of a millionaire character named Gatsby. Gatsby was a poor man who didn't have anything at first. But because of his efforts to create something new, he managed to achieve what he aspired to. This is one example of a change related to sociology, namely the change in social strata experienced by Gatsby's character. Basically, humans are thinking creatures.

What Fitzgerald wrote in his work reflects things related to life. This is in accordance with what Damono said in "Sociology of Literature: A Concise Introduction" (1778, pp. 1), namely, "Literature displays images of life, and life itself is a social reality."The phrase emphasizes the fact that literary works are actually a picture or

representation of human life itself and emphasizes the evidence that the social life raised in the object of *The Great Gatsby* could be a reflection of actual social life.

This is also consistent with the following quote: "Literary genres are often the social attitudes of a particular group and not the social attitudes of the whole society." (Damono: 1978, pp. 4). In this case, the researcher can believe that literature can describe the reality that covers a certain group of people. Then, in this object, it is believed that the society in it is a society of bourgeois and proletarian groups that exist in the setting of time and space. The approach in literature that aims to examine what happens in society is known as literary sociology (Damono, 1978, p. 2).

The sociological approach is to look at literature through a social lens. *The Great Gatsby*, as mentioned, brings together the Bourjois and the Proletarians in one setting so that there are some significant differences. These differences show the impact of social class or structure in society. In this case, the appropriate theory to study is the theory of Marxism as the originator of structuralism. Eagleton is a critic who continues the discussion of structuralism using the power of interpretation so that the understanding of structuralism can be more detailed.

There is one quote from his book that reveals, "But the superstructure contains more than this: it also consists of certain 'definite forms of social consciousness' (political, religious, ethical, aesthetic, and so on), which is what Marxism designates as ideology. The function of ideology, too, is to legitimize the power of the ruling class in society; in the last analysis, the dominant ideas of society are the ideas of its ruling class." This quote provides a statement that the birth of social classes can make a significant difference and, in the end, can give birth to a new ideology in the middle of society. So Eagleton considers that structuralism does not only determine differences in the economic side but all things and aspects of life in society. On this theoretical basis, the researcher is willing to examine and identify structuralism in *The Great Gatsby*.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

*The Great Gatsby* is one of the works published by Fitzgerald in 1925. Overall, *The Great Gatsby* is a work that reveals the journey of a person, namely Gatsby, in the eyes of Nick, also known as the narrator. According to Damono, there was a time when Plato and writers in Europe were talking about the relationship between writers and their environment. Environment in this case is closely related to "weather" and "geography" and drags in something else, namely "national character" (1978, pp. 16). When the interpretation of the theory flows in a more specific direction, such as the character of a nation, there is certainly a connection and impact of human relationships that are born in the form of literary works. This, among other things, is one of the theories that can reveal that Fitzegard could have revealed his social situation at that time based on his personal experience in the literary works he wrote.

In his work *The Great Gatsby*, he reveals that Gatsby is a poor man from the Egg West: "I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors were educated there for many years. It is a family tradition." (Fitzgerald: 1925, pp. 53). Although Gatsby reveals that he studied at Oxford, Nick, the person he is talking to, knows that Gatsby is lying about his identity. Nick, as the narrator, indirectly reveals that the fact that Gatsby can study at Oxford is not real. This reveals that Gatsby could not get the same education as the people around him, so he lied to cover it up. This statement is supported by the

following quote: "Then came the war, old sport. It was a great relief, and I tried very hard to die, but I seemed to bear an enchanted life. I accepted a commission as first lieutenant when it began." (Fitzgerald, 1925, pp. 54) This quote reveals how Gatsby actually wanted to give up on living his life as someone who had no power. According to Eagleton, the culture of the proletarians tends to be weaker than that of the Bourgeois. Proletarians will try to achieve their benefits while the Bourgeois survive by creating new ideas (Eagleton, 2002, pp. 37). By claiming to be studying at Oxford, Gatsby would have a new personal brand and power because he was attending a renowned institution. However, he is actually very fragile.

However, when looking at Fitzgerald's background, it can be seen that Fitzgerald and Gatsby have similar backgrounds. Gatsby's character is made into someone who managed to get out of the Proletarians and enter the Bourgeois. This is similar to what happened to Fitzgerald, who managed to become a Bourgeois after making various efforts. From this, it can be seen that the author's connection between the Proletarians and the Bourgeois in his life journey is proof that the environment can be an influence on the birth of a literary work.

Another thing that can be revealed to identify the social class division here is when Gatsby throws his first party after becoming a Bourgeois. He invites all the rich people in the world and then expands his connections. However, Tom, as a child born into a rich family, can characterize this party as unique to him. This is expressed in the following quote: "This is an unusual party for me. I haven't even seen the host. I live over there," I waved my hand at the invisible hedge in the distance, "and this man Gatsby sent over his chauffeur with an invitation." (Fitzgerald, 1925, pp. 39). Such uniqueness is found in the later parties hosted by Gatsby. In this regard, Fitzgerald expressed his views on what he wrote. Fitzgerald (1920–1940, pp. 30) revealed that "as a member of the newly rich class, I assure you that this picture is entirely libelous. I myself, for example, am a mild, slightly used young man of twenty-seven, and what corpulence I may have developed is for the present a strictly confidential matter between my tailor and me." It is what he said that provides verification of Gatsby's character, which is considered a representation of the author's life.

On the other hand, Fitzgerald's view of the Bourgeois is revealed slowly as the story progresses. One way to identify social class in *The Great Gatsby* is how Fitzgerald describes Tom's character as a parable of the Bourgeois. This can be seen from the following quote: "Is it a boy or a girl?" she asked delicately. "That dog? That dog's a boy." "It's a bitch," said Tom decisively. "Here's your money. Go and buy ten more dogs with it." (Fitzgerald, 1925, pp. 22). Based on the quote, Fitzgerald wants to reveal the bad habit of the Bourgeois, who feel they have more power than others. This makes him think he can behave arbitrarily toward others. According to Subekti and Prihandini (2022, pp. 191), the bourgeoisie is always portrayed as someone who is more rude and selfish when dealing with lower-class people. From this statement, the character of Tom, who is made to seem as if he hates Gatsby, is a parable to reveal the reality of the treatment of the Bourgeoisie towards the Proletarians. Fitzgerald's view on the birth of power in the Bourgeois has a similar pattern to Eagleton's statement. He argues that the superstructure can move in both legal and political aspects. These two aspects are the most important in the structure of human life. Therefore, they will indirectly have more power than other humans (Eagleton, 2002, p. 5).

Gatsby, as a proletarian in this work, is depicted with his ambition to get Daisy's love. Daisy is a character created by FitzGerald as a fake who lies to herself. Just like what other

Bourgeois do. As a bourgeois, Daisy never felt happy about her marriage to Tom. This is expressed in the following quote: "She was feeling the pressure of the world outside, and she wanted to see him and feel his presence beside her and be reassured that she was doing the right thing after all." (Fitzgerald: 1925, pp. 90). The quote from the work reveals that her marriage to Tom was never happy, and she always wanted Gatsby to be with her. This is also reinforced by the quote in the previous paragraph on the same page: "...and I knew that except for the half-hour she'd been alone with Gatsby, she wasn't having a good time." (Fitzgerald, 1925, pp. 90).

Meanwhile, her happiness with Gatsby must be taken away because Gatsby has no power other than his wealth to protect Daisy. A far cry from what Tom did to her. The connection between power and social status is expressed by Eagleton (2002, pp. 31) as "the so-called noblesse de robe, the court officials who were economically dependent on the monarchy and yet became increasingly powerless in the face of that monarchy's growing absolutism." From this statement, it can be concluded that the Bourgeois need strength in order to defend their social status. This statement reveals why Daisy had the heart to kill Gatsby and Tom in the end. Because she needs Tom to maintain her social status as the Bourgeois. This is revealed by Nick's view that Tom and Daisy are a careless couple who put money above all else. Fitzgerald through Nick also reveals why the characters of Daisy and Tom ultimately belong together (Fitzgerald: 1925, pp.153).

## CONCLUSION

Literary works are a reflection of real life related to the author. This is evidenced by the birth of the literary work *The Great Gatsby*, written by F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1925. At first glance, this work only contains the autobiography of a character named Gatsby. However, when examined more deeply, there are several similarities between the plot that explains Gatsby's background and the background of the author who gave birth to the character, Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald, who was born into a poor family, eventually succeeded in achieving his goals. However, when seen from the narrative he wrote in *The Great Gatsby*, there is a form of structuralism to be revealed. Fitzgerald illustrates structuralism in the division of social classes into the Bourgeois and the Proletarians, symbolized by Tom and Daisy for the Bourgeois and Gatsby as the Proletarian. This form of identification is described based on characterization expressed through narration and analyzed using structural and power theories from Marxism and further explanation using Eagleton's theory. Tom and Daisy are portrayed as people who always have full power and are afraid of losing it. On the other hand, Gatsby, who has achieved his dreams, is still trying to gain power in his new social status, the status of being a Bourgeois.

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