

ISRG Journal of Economics, Business & Management (ISRGJEBM)



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: Isrg J Econ Bus Manag

ISSN: 2584-0916 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjebm/>

Volume – II Issue-I (January- February) 2024

Frequency: Bimonthly



Exposing Economic Disparity: Exploring the Plight of the Poor in O. Henry's "Skylight Room and Estrella Alfon's "Servant Girl" Through a Marxist Lens

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| **Received:** 06.01.2024 | **Accepted:** 10.01.2024 | **Published:** 11.01.2024

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Abstract

In the world of literature, stories often serve as mirrors reflecting the myriad complexities of human existence. Within these narratives, socio-economic disparities and class struggles have recurrently found their place, shedding light on the pervasive challenges faced by the underprivileged. This analysis delves into the poignant portrayals of economic inequality and the plight of the poor as presented in two captivating narratives: O. Henry's 'Skylight Room' and Estrella Alfon's 'Servant Girl.' Through a Marxist lens, this examination seeks to unravel the underlying power dynamics, exploitation, and alienation that shape the lives of the marginalized characters within these stories.

Keywords: *alienation, socio-economic disparity, Marxism, inequality, poverty*

Introduction

The distribution of wealth and resources in a society is far from equitable, the voices of the marginalized often remain muted. 'Skylight Room' by O. Henry (the pen name of William Sydney Porter) and 'Servant Girl' by Estrella Alfon provide insightful windows into the lives of individuals who navigate the harsh realities of economic destitution and social hierarchy. O. Henry, renowned for his trademark twist endings and exploration of the human condition, weaves a tale that centers around a young woman who resides in a dingy apartment, the eponymous 'Skylight

Room.' Meanwhile, Estrella Alfon, a prominent Filipino author, pens a narrative that follows a young woman employed as a servant, encapsulating the essence of 'Servant Girl.'

The selection of 'Skylight Room' and 'Servant Girl' for this comparative analysis is rooted in their shared thematic exploration of the socio-economic struggles of the downtrodden. These stories offer a compelling contrast in their narratives, character dynamics, and cultural contexts, making them ideal candidates for a nuanced examination of the Marxist themes of economic disparity and class

struggle.

O. Henry, a master of the short story genre, presents 'Skylight Room' as a vivid depiction of life in a cramped and dreary boarding house. The story revolves around a young woman whose aspirations are stifled by her impoverished circumstances, and it skillfully encapsulates the limitations and yearnings of the working class within a bustling metropolis.

On the other hand, Estrella Alfon's 'Servant Girl' brings to life the life of a young domestic worker in the Philippines during the early 20th century. Through the lens of the titular servant girl, Alfon unveils the socio-economic intricacies of a society marked by colonial influences and the inherent disparities between the wealthy elite and the laboring poor.

By comparing and contrasting these two narratives, this study aims to draw out the unique nuances of economic inequality and class dynamics within distinct settings, cultures, and time periods. The juxtaposition of 'Skylight Room' and 'Servant Girl' enables a comprehensive analysis of how Marxist themes resonate across different contexts, highlighting the universal impact of economic disparity on the lives of individuals across the socio-economic spectrum.

Further, through the prism of Marxist literary criticism, this study endeavors to uncover the hidden layers beneath the surface of these narratives, revealing the subtextual messages that illuminate the socio-economic struggles, exploitation, and alienation faced by the characters. The ensuing exploration promises to shed light not only on the intricacies of 'Skylight Room' and 'Servant Girl' but also on the broader societal implications of economic inequality and the resilience of those caught in its grasp.

Interestingly, these stories transcend mere narratives, becoming conduits through which, the underlying social structures and the intricate web of class divisions are dissected. Marxist criticism, rooted in the philosophy of Karl Marx, offers a unique perspective by analyzing literature as a reflection of the prevailing socio-economic systems and the power dynamics inherent within them. At its core, Marxist criticism seeks to unmask the often-unseen forces at play, revealing how the dominant ruling class exploits and perpetuates the suffering of the working class, thus igniting a critical dialogue on the societal implications of economic disparity.

As we embark on this literary exploration, the following pages will unveil the layers of economic inequality prevalent within the stories. The characters' struggles for survival, juxtaposed against the opulent lifestyles of the elite, lay bare the stark contrasts between the haves and the have-nots. The 'Skylight Room' serves as a microcosm of a society divided, where the young woman's dreams are hindered by her meager circumstances, while the characters in 'Servant Girl' grapple with the dehumanizing effects of servitude and societal expectations.

Remarkably, this analysis will delve into the concept of alienation, a central theme in Marxist thought. Alienation refers to the detachment and estrangement experienced by the working class from their labor, themselves, and the products they create. Through the characters' experiences, we will explore how the laboring poor in both narratives are systematically isolated from the fruits of their efforts, reinforcing their marginalized status within a larger capitalist framework.

The lenses of 'Skylight Room' and 'Servant Girl' offer a poignant and compelling perspective on the inherent disparities that pervade

society. By applying Marxist criticism, this study will unravel the layers of power, exploitation, and alienation that bind the characters in their respective struggles. As we venture forth, we shall unravel the intricate threads that connect literature, class struggle, and societal critique, ultimately illuminating the ways in which these narratives serve as mirrors to our own world – a world where the plight of the poor continues to be a distressing reality.

Theoretical Background

The present study operates within the framework of Marxist literary criticism, a theoretical lens that emerged from the foundational concepts laid out by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. At its core, Marxist literary criticism seeks to unravel the intricate relationship between literature and the prevailing socio-economic structures, casting a critical eye on the power dynamics, class struggles, and economic disparities that shape both the narratives and the real world.

Karl Marx's critique of capitalism provides the foundation for this analysis. He argued that society is divided into distinct classes – the bourgeoisie, who own and control the means of production, and the proletariat, who perform labor. This inherently unequal system leads to the exploitation of the working class, as surplus value generated from their labor benefits the bourgeoisie disproportionately. Marx also introduced the concept of alienation, where the worker becomes estranged from the product of their labor and even from their own human essence due to the capitalist mode of production.

In the context of literature, Marxist criticism probes how literary works mirror and reinforce these socio-economic disparities. It scrutinizes characters' relationships, social interactions, and portrayals of wealth and poverty, shedding light on the broader implications of economic inequality. By examining how literature reflects and critiques the dominant ideologies and power structures, Marxist criticism opens avenues for discussions on social transformation and justice.

In the analysis of O. Henry's 'Skylight Room' and Estrella Alfon's 'Servant Girl,' the Marxist lens will uncover the ways in which these narratives portray the marginalized characters' struggles against an oppressive system that perpetuates their economic subjugation. The lens of economic disparity and class conflict will offer deeper insights into the characters' experiences, enabling a nuanced understanding of their lives and the broader societal implications of their circumstances. Through this theoretical framework, the study will illuminate the complex interplay between literature, ideology, and the socio-economic realities that continue to shape our world.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research methodology focusing on textual analysis through the lens of Marxist literary criticism to explore the themes of economic disparity and class struggle in O. Henry's "Skylight Room" and Estrella Alfon's "Servant Girl". The research methodology involves data collection, data analysis using thematic analysis and the application of Marxist principles to generate themes from the stories.

1. **Data Collection Methods:** The primary data sources for this study are the two selected short stories: "Skylight Room" by O. Henry and "Servant Girl" by Estrella Alfon. These narratives serve as textual artifacts that provide insights into the socio-economic contexts,

characters' experiences, and power dynamics inherent in the portrayal of the poor. These stories were analyzed in-depth, drawing evidence and quotes to support the identified themes.

2. **Data Analysis Using Thematic Analysis:** Thematic Analysis which is a qualitative research technique, is employed to uncover and interpret underlying themes within the selected stories. This analysis involves systematic identification and familiarization, coding, and interpretation of patterns and meanings inherent in the texts. The thematic analysis process consists of the following steps:
 - a. Familiarization: Repeated readings of the stories to immerse in their content and understand the nuances of characters, settings, and narrative contexts.
 - b. Initial Coding: Identifying initial codes or keywords that represent relevant concepts related to economic disparity and class struggle.
 - c. Searching for Themes: Grouping similar codes into potential themes that reflect the central ideas and concepts presented in the stories.
 - d. Reviewing Themes: Refining and reviewing the identified themes for coherence and consistency, ensuring they accurately capture the essence of the socio-economic themes within the narratives.
 - e. Defining and Naming Themes: Clearly defining and naming each theme based on its content and context within the stories
 - f. Data Interpretation: Interpreting the themes within the broader context of Marxist principles, unraveling the socio-economic dynamics, power relations, and implications of economic disparity and class struggle.
3. **Generating Themes Using a Marxist Lens:** The generation of themes from the stories using a Marxist lens involves applying key concepts from Marxist theory to the narrative elements. This includes identifying instances of exploitation, alienation, bourgeoisie-proletariat relationships, unequal distribution of wealth, and the impact of economic systems on characters' lives. Themes will be generated through the following steps:
 - a. Identification of Socio-economic Contexts: Scrutinizing the characters' socio-economic backgrounds, their occupations, and the broader societal structures that influence their circumstances.
 - b. Detection of Power Dynamics: Analyzing how characters from different classes interact, exploring power imbalances and instances of domination and submission.
 - c. Economic Exploitation: Identifying instances where characters are exploited or deprived of the fruits of their labor by the ruling class, revealing economic inequalities.
 - d. Alienation and Disconnection: Recognizing moments when characters experience alienation, detachment from their labor, and estrangement from themselves due to their socio-economic conditions.
 - e. Conflict and Resistance: Examining characters' responses to their economic conditions, including acts of resistance, rebellion, or attempts to improve their situations.

By employing this research methodology, the study aims to

uncover the multi-dimensional portrayals of economic disparity and class struggle in *Skylight Room* and *Servant Girl*, offering a comprehensive analysis of how these themes intersect with the narratives' socio-economic contexts through a Marxist lens.

Results and Discussion

Literature is genuinely encompassing as it also speaks of the life of the people—a reflection of the reality that all who lived can relate to. The women protagonists in the stories went through unjust treatment by society, leaving them powerless and penniless. However, they remained kind, humble, and hopeful despite their miserable life.

Pennywise, the two stories were perceived through the theory of Marxism. Karl Heinrich Marx developed this critical literary lens wherein he believed that this literary criticism is valuable because it enables readers to see the role that class plays in the plot of a text (Corporate Finance Institute, 2021). It emphasizes a categorical society, socioeconomic status, and power relations among various segments of society and the representation of those segments (Team, 2022). All these being mentioned were evidently featured in the two stories, notably when the protagonists experienced unjust treatment by society because of their financial incapacity.

Life offers boundless possibilities and opportunities that if someone thrives on altering the convention of live altogether, there is a high chance that it will come true. Unfortunately, there are inevitable circumstances in reality that life would be so unfair. No matter how much a person desires to cut the generational deprivation of life, affluence would become highly elusive.

Class struggle

The social standing or class of an individual is referred to as socioeconomic status. Ultimately, income is the primary variable that measures the socioeconomic status. Examining socioeconomic status frequently reveals inequities in resource access, as well as issues of privilege, power, and control. Since income identifies a person's socioeconomic status and given that the nature of work of the women

protagonists in "The Skylight Room" and "Servant Girl" are low-paying jobs, this became the reason they got easily exploited by the people above them. Miss Leeson works as a typist, and she receives an insufficient amount of salary, which is not enough to meet her daily needs. On the other hand, Miss Rosa works as a housemaid with no pay but a free stay at her mistress' house.

Miss Leeson of *The Skylight Room* portrays a strong independent woman. The story happened in New York, written in 1906. According to Liberto (2021), in New York in the 1900s, half of the American children lived in poverty. Most teens did not attend school; instead, they labored in factories and fields. Hence, at an early age, Miss Leeson works for herself alone, and she earns a living by working as a typist. In paragraph 19, it is mentioned that she goes out to work every day, and during the night, she would bring home papers with handwriting on them and make copies with her typewriter.

Unfortunately, there is a time that she doesn't have formidable papers home to copy. Hence, she tried searching for a new job, but *she only got refusals from the employers she tried to approach (para. 35)*. Since she lost her career, she came to a point that she lacks money to pay her expenses. She hardly pays her rent and cannot buy food for herself. Due to these struggles, she went

through, her body gave up. She felt too weak and let herself fall upon the iron cot (*par. 18*). In due time, Clara, the assistant of the landlady, found her in her room, passed out and unconscious. She lost her job, struggled to pay her expenses, and became weak, but she regained hope when she knew that the doctor who revived her was named Billy Jackson, and she thought that was a sign for her to keep going.

This scenario relates to Marxism Theory because this shows the struggles of a person who works in a low-paying and dangerous job. This portrays that although a person has work and receives a salary if it is low-paying, it will never be enough to afford daily needs.

Correspondingly, Miss Rosa, the protagonist in "Servant Girl" worked as a housemaid without getting paid. The only benefit that she acquires from serving the mistress is the opportunity to live inside the house. Since she only acts as a housemaid, her mistress freely abuses her any time she wants. The exploitation of the mistress to Miss Rosa is evident in *par. 11*:

... she finally swung out an arm, and before she quite knew what she was doing, she slapped Rosa's face.

The mistress again hit Miss Rosa when she accidentally broke the bottle of wine that the mistress asked her to buy as cited in the line:

*Rosa came back with a broken bottle empty of all its contents. Sudden anger at the waste and the loss made her strike out with closed fists, not caring where her blows landed until the girl was in tears. It is often touched when she, Rosa crying and cowering, but now the woman was too angry to pity (*par. 20*).*

Miss Leeson introduced herself as *a poor little working girl who is incapable of paying 8 dollars for a rent (*par. 11*)*. Coincidentally, the room described in *par. 4* which is a 7x8 feet skylight room with dark lumber closet on each side is not yet occupied, hence she availed the room as it is mentioned in *par. 18*, *I'll take it* sighed Miss Leeson, sinking down upon the squeaky iron bed.

This particular situation of Miss Rosa indicates that if someone is penniless, she gets easily exploited by the more fortunate people (The School of Life., n.d.). Being needy means being powerless and which results in maltreatment and discrimination. If a person is financially incapable and is dependent on someone, other people will take advantage of the situation and make you their servant who will suffice their pleasure.

Economic disparity

Residential property is considered the most valuable asset people will own and therefore provides the potential to be used as socioeconomic status (SES) measure (Coffee, N.T., Lockwood, T., Hugo, G. et al., 2013) Location is generally recognized as the most critical determinant of residential property value. Many people's most valuable asset is their home, which can be used to create a residential property wealth indicator that reflects their socioeconomic status (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Hence, the places featured in "The Skylight Room" and "Servant Girl" where Miss Leeson and Miss Rosa respectively live indicate these two's social status.

The economic status of Miss Leeson, the protagonist in The Skylight Room, is introduced when she searches for an apartment that she can afford. *I'm just a poor little working girl. Show me something higher and lower (*par. 11*)* introduced herself as a poor little working girl who is incapable of paying eight dollars for a rent. Coincidentally, the room described in paragraph 4 which is a 7x8

feet skylight room with dark lumber closet on each side is not yet occupied which in *par. 18*: *I'll take it!* Sighed Miss Leeson, sinking down upon the squeaky iron bed. She was left with no choice but to avail of it since it only costs two dollars, and it would be a lighter liability on her part. Because of this, she finally found a shelter that would not cost her a lot, and she already settled with it despite the humiliation she suffered from Mrs. Parker—the landlady, when she knew that she is not a doctor nor a dentist in the *par. 10*:

Mrs. Parker gave her the incredulous, pitying, sneering, icy stare that she kept for those who failed to qualify as doctors or dentists, and led the way to the second floor back.

When Miss Leeson admitted that she is neither of those two professions, Mrs. Parker was not pleased. When Mrs. Parker knows that Miss Leeson is just an ordinary woman working in a low-paying job, she automatically loses the drive and pride to roam Miss Leeson in the whole apartment, knowing that she cannot pay as much as she expected. In other words, Mrs. Parker disrespected Miss Leeson for being an employee of a low-paying firm. The theory of Marxism can be related to this because the respect that one person can have depends on the socioeconomic class they belong to. Respect appears all too often to be directly awarded according to earnings. And, in a related move, if a person doesn't have much economic endorsement, it can be challenging for their character or views to be taken seriously by the society.

Accordingly, the economic status of Miss Rosa is introduced in *par. 1*:

Alone in her mistress' house, she could hear the laughter of women washing clothes in the public bathhouse from which she was by only a thin wall. She would have liked to be there with the other women to take part in their jokes and their laughter and their merry gossiping, but they paid a centavo for every piece of soiled linen they brought there to wash, and her mistress wanted to save this money.

It can be derived from this line that Miss Rosa is dependent and submissive to her mistress to the extent that she could sacrifice her own pleasure to make sure she could fulfill what her mistress told her to do so. The poor Miss Rosa remained docile towards her mistress because she was afraid of getting cast out of her house.

This particular situation of Miss Rosa can be associated with The Labor Theory of Value of the Marxism Theory (Team, T. I., 2022). Marx asserted that as owners of the means of production, capitalists must have a privileged and powerful position, allowing them to exploit workers ruthlessly. Although the capitalist pays workers the correct wage, the capitalist somehow forces workers to work longer hours than are required to create the worker's labor power. If a capitalist pays each worker \$5 per day, he can force them to work twelve hours a day, a common workday during Marx's time. As a result, if one labor hour is worth one dollar, workers produce twelve dollars' worth of goods for the capitalist while only being paid five dollars. The bottom line is that capitalist's profit by extracting "surplus value" from workers. In relation to the story of Servant Girl, Miss Rosa is serving as a housemaid for her Mistress without being paid any amount. Since Miss Rosa only depends her living and shelter on the mistress, she allows herself to get exploited and abused. Hence, the Mistress who acts as the capitalist can control Miss Rosa anytime in any way she wants.

Further, the protagonists of *The Skylight Room* and *Servant Girl* are victims of adversities. Miss Rosa has an abusive mistress, becomes delusional, and is hated by fellow maids. On the other hand, Miss Leeson faced financial problems, lost her low-paying job, and even came to a time when she struggled to provide for her own food. Both these characters didn't want to live their lives this miserable; it's also evident in the story that both of these characters are hardworking and are dedicated to change their social status. Miss Rosa and Miss Leeson were forced to live a life they never dreamed of and continuously struggled because of the social class indifferences. Moreover, the *Skylight Room* and *Servant Girl* represent the reality that if you are poor, you receive unfair treatment from society and will be deprived of ample opportunities as it is asserted in Marxist Theory that the expanse of respect that can be given to someone depends on the socioeconomic status or class. Due to extreme poverty, both the protagonists of *The Skylight Room* and *Servant Girl* settled for the bare minimum; Miss Leeson settled for a tiny skylight room because it is what she could only afford, while Miss Rosa settled to live with her abusive Mistress because she does not have a place to stay. At the end of the stories, the two remained optimistic despite how they struggled to make a living. They both look at a ray of hope—Miss Leeson kept her hope that someday, she would be able to overcome poverty. On the other hand, Miss Rosa hoped that eventually, her Mistress would already treat her nicely.

Conclusion

The world is a place where everyone is facing challenges in life. Each day feels like a competition that someone needs to win in the end. People are fighting for survival and intend to forget the essence of actually living life. One of the challenges is poverty, one of the most pervasive issues that a person endures. People are too preoccupied with earning a living. After all, they have already developed the mindset that it is all about gaining and nothing else, which is heartbreaking because they intend to think that way for the rest of their lives. However, here comes literature; it never fails to awaken people's minds and sensibilities that there is so much more to life. It tackles how beautiful life is that being in a difficult situation like poverty is a phase, not the endpoint. With this, it creatively offered two accounts of women from different frames of location and time yet overlap with their obstacles and how they tried to cope.

Literature is the most potent instrument to recognize and change the accustomed beliefs and traditions that society currently has. These stories and literary pieces mirror our world's reality, history, and truths that most women are powerless and voices unheard, which is unreasonable. Literature has become a wake-up call of how scattered society's preference is. It is impressive how literature is impactful in combining and connecting different beliefs, people, and cultures. From the famous quote of Vissarion Belinsky, "Society finds its actual life in literature." Therefore, literature contributes so much to people and life. It unravels reality and how people should deal with life through less judgment and more rational.

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