



CLASS, POWER AND EXPLOITATION IN DARWENT'S *THE THINGS WE DO TO OUR FRIENDS*: A MARXIST PRESPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper discusses the hierarchy of classes, power and exploitation in the Heather Darwent text, *The Things We Do to Our Friends* using a Marxist approach to literature. The study centers on an analysis of how economic inequality influences social relationship and power accessibility to a working-class student, Clare that aims to become accepted in an elite social circle. Applying qualitative textual analysis, the main Marxist ideas of classes struggle, ideology, exploitation, alienation, and commodification, the research demonstrates how wealth is used as a social control mechanism and strengthens the privilege. The results emphasize the way in which the capitalist ideology fosters the desire to belong to the elite and conceals the social mobility obstacles. The social and psychological implications of inequality of classes are revealed in the novel, which is the criticism of modern capitalistic society and the long-lasting role of economic privileges in the relations between human beings.

Keywords: *Capitalism, Class Hierarchy, Dark Academia, Exploitation, Heather Darwent, Marxism, Power, The Things We Do To Our Friends.*

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1. Introduction

Modern fiction has begun to focus more on social and economic disparities that determine individual identities, hopes and relations in capitalistic cultures. With the persistence of growing wealth gaps in affecting access to education, culture and social mobility, literary narratives have emerged as significant places to study how privilege and exclusion works. Heather Darwent, *The Things We Do to Our Friends* (2023), is one of the recent publications that address these issues, providing an engaging depiction of the roles of classes and seeking social status among the elite academic setting. The novel, by exploring the theme of ambition, desire and manipulation, demonstrates how economic privilege frames social relations and defines access to power in modern society.

The novel by Darwent is set in the expanding subgenre of dark-academia fiction, a genre that often explores intellectual elitism, exclusivity and the lure of privileged social worlds. The story takes place in Edinburgh and is of a student of working-class who moves in search of reinvention and opportunity. Her experience in a rich and glamorous social group acquaints her with a life filled with luxury, cultural sophistication and social power. Nevertheless, what at first seems a route to acceptance slowly turns out to be a system of unequal power relations, manipulation and exploitation. The novel thus goes beyond the standards of psychological suspense by offering a critical analysis of the economic and social organization that forms the core of elite communities (Darwent, 2023).

The interaction between power and class takes a center stage in the story. The socioeconomic situation of Clare is a contrast to that of the wealthy people she looks up to, which creates a sense of an unending imbalance that defines her interactions and choices throughout the novel. Her need to be included corresponds to the more general social facts where economic privilege is a way of cultural and symbolic influence. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1984), the chance to gain social prestige frequently hinges on the ownership of both economic and cultural capital, both of which aid in the reproduction of class differences. In *The Things We Do to Our Friends*, these differences are not just conditions of the background, but forces that make belonging, power and weakness.

Marxist criticisms of capitalist society find their reflection in the expression of privilege as presented in the novel. According to Marxist theory, material conditions and class formation are the core determinants of social relations and economic inequalities create systems of domination favoring the privileged groups to the disadvantage of the rest (Marx and Engels, 1978). In the story by Darwent, the concept of wealth acts as more than a symbol of status; it is a means by which people can gain power, form social orders and dominate the people who do not possess similar resources. The novel, therefore, demonstrates how the power relations on the basis of classes are still persistent in the

neoliberal culture today where social mobility is often being sold as an achievement and structural inequalities are deeply rooted (Harvey, 2005).

The current literature on modern dark-academia fiction has been dominated by the issues of identity formation, moral ambiguity, obsession and psychological manipulation. Research of the genre usually looks at the ways elite educational environments produce tensions around belonging, self-fashioning and social performance. On the same note, reviews of *The Things We Do to Our Friends* have mostly focused on toxic friendship, female relationships, deception and the suspenseful plot of the novel. Although these methods have yielded fruitful results on the psychological aspects of the text, they often do not take into consideration the economic underpinnings that influence interpersonal relations and social marginalisation.

In a wider sense, the modern literary criticism has been becoming more and more conscious of the role of class in the interpretation of the representations of power and inequality. According to scholars like Eagleton (1976), Jameson (1981) and Williams (1977), literary texts tend to expose ideological contradictions of the capitalistic societies, through the unveiling of the material conditions that dictate human experience. Contemporary accounts of neoliberal culture have also emphasized how the desire to achieve success and to fit in is often interwoven with regimes of privilege and exclusion (Fisher, 2009; Tyler, 2020). However, comparatively little academic investment has been made into the analysis of *Darwent* novel with a distinctly Marxist focus that predetermines the production of classes and economic exploitation as the main structuring forces.

This is a major gap in the current criticism. Despite the numerous times that economic inequalities and unequal power relations are portrayed in the novel, social privilege and unequal power relations have seldom been examined as a product of larger capitalist frameworks. As a result, the impact of the class in identity, social mobility and interpersonal relationships is not well studied. Another area of concern where a Marxist reading can provide a valuable chance to reclaim this omission is in the way economic power affects individual behavior and social organization when discussing the narrative.

The main aim of the work is to explore how the concepts of class hierarchy, power and exploitation are represented in *The Things We Do to Our Friends*. In particular, the article is aimed at analyzing the role of economic privilege as the basis of social power and the formation of the conditions of manipulation and dependence due to the presence of class inequalities and the formation of capitalist ideology as the determinant of the feeling of success and belonging by characters. The study is guided by the following research questions: How does the novel represent class hierarchy and social inequality? How are wealth and privilege mechanisms of power? What is the relationship between exploitation and manipulation and capitalist social relations? And in what way does the story criticize those systems of inclusion and exclusion in modern society?

The study will attempt to answer these questions by utilizing Marxist literary criticism as the main theoretical approach and using notions of the class struggle, ideology, exploitation, alienation, false consciousness and cultural capital. The article approaches the subject matter methodologically by using qualitative and textual analysis and close reading to analyze the major narrative moments that demonstrate how the power of classes works in the novel. Placing *The Things We Do to Our Friends* in the context of wider Marxist debates on capitalism, privilege and inequality, the analysis becomes a valuable addition to modern literary research by providing a materialist viewpoint on the matter that prefigures the undiminished impact of economic systems on social interactions. The discussion continues by reviewing the scholarship that is relevant and then elaborates on the theoretical framework and the analysis of the theme of class, power and exploitation in the novel.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Critical Scholarship on *The Things We Do to Our Friends*

Heather Darwent *The Things We Do to Our Friends* has received growing critical interest since its release, especially in the context of the discussion of contemporary dark-academia fiction. The critical readings of the novel have mainly been psychological analyses of obsession, deception, unhealthy friendship and the need to belong in high society. Having been placed side by side with the works that explore the darker sides of academic culture and privilege, the novel has been known to reflect social exclusion, moral ambiguities as well as identity transformation. Much of the current commentary is on the association of Clare with a well-off social group and the psychological implications of her seeking acceptance, on both the emotional and ethical ambiguities that arise as a result of unequal interpersonal relationships.

Much of the literature on dark-academia fiction explores the interest of exclusivity, intellectual elitism and social aspiration fascination in the genre. Scholars claim that in the dark-academia stories, the institutions of higher education are often depicted as the place of status, cultural capital and social hierarchy that creates an atmosphere of competition and exclusion (Moran, 2019; Wilson, 2022). In these environments, heroes tend to desire to be accepted by being close to elites, with the wider social concern about the mobility of classes and identity. The novel by Darwent is a part of this tradition since elite social circles are depicted not only as a network of friends but as the systems to control the access to privilege and power.

The other recurring critical issue is the depiction of the identity and self-fashioning. According to modern researchers, dark-academia fiction often conceives identity as a theatrical performance formed by social norms and social aspirations towards the upper strata (Baker, 2021; Matthews, 2023). Trying to become a part of the desirable social worlds, characters frequently seek to reinvent themselves and the lines between the

authenticity and performance are often indistinct. These issues are reflected in the experiences that Clare has in *The Things We Do to Our Friends* where her need to be accepted makes her negotiate her working-class origins and elite culture demands constantly. These interpretations have been useful in bringing insights on the psychological aspects of the novel but the economic structures that form the basis of the novel have been left largely unexplored.

Friendship and manipulation are also the key themes of critical discussions. Researchers who study the modern-day literary examples of the female relationships suggest that friendship networks often serve as the areas of power, rivalry and emotional domination (Dobson, 2018; Gill and Orgad, 2018). In the story of *Darwent*, the relationships are defined by the unequal forces and dependency, which set up the circumstances where vulnerability may be used as an instrument to personal gain. Even though these studies help bring into light the interpersonal dynamics of the novel, they seldom examine how the interpersonal dynamics are influenced by material inequalities and class privilege.

Thus, the current criticism is, in general, inclined to focus on psychological, cultural and gendered interpretations and pay relatively little attention to the economic power and relations between classes. The constant focus on wealth and privilege as well as social mobility throughout the novel indicates that a more overtly materialist reading is required. A Marxist method is a fruitful way to comprehend how relationships between people in the novel are predetermined by larger forms of economic inequality and social domination.

2.2. Marxist Literary Criticism and Class Relations

Marxist literary criticism is one of the most powerful methods of analyzing the connection between literature and the material conditions. Marxist theory, based on the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, is the argument that economic structures and relationships of classes are crucial to the nature of social life. Marx and Engels (1978) assert that how production is organized in a society will dictate how power, resources and opportunities are allocated and will result in divisions between subordinate and dominant classes. In this sense, literature is a mirror of the social contradictions that are produced by such economic arrangements and a critique of them.

The concept of class struggle is central to the Marxist theory. According to Marx (1990), history is marked with struggles between groups that hold various positions in economic systems. These struggles are mainly between resource holders and laborers who are exploited in capitalism. The literary works tend to expose the conflicts that such inequalities create, showing the processes of power maintenance and justification. Literature, as Eagleton (1976) notes, is both a mirror of social reality and a place where an ideological confrontation manifests itself.

Ideology is a concept that takes a rather significant place in the Marxist criticism. Althusser (1971) is of the opinion that systems of power are perpetuated by dominant social institutions that promote internalization of values that uphold economic arrangements in existence. This process usually results in what the Marxist theorists refer to as false consciousness a state where a subordinate group of people tolerate inequalities as natural or inevitable. In literature, ideology is often conveyed through the use of stories that legitimize privilege, glorify the success of individuals, or blind to the structural hindrances to social mobility (Jameson, 1981).

Subsequently, Marxist commentators extended the concepts by considering the cultural aspects of the power of classes. Williams (1977) underlines that culture is a material practice which yields social meanings and values. On the same note, Lukács (1971) is of the view that the totality of social relations can be found in literature when an individual experience is involved. These attitudes are especially applicable to modern fiction, where economic inequality is usually effected in terms of cultural differences, life styles and symbolic forms of power, instead of economic coercion per se.

Contemporary capitalism and neoliberalism have also come to be considered in Marxist literary criticism. Harvey (2005) and Fisher (2009) believe that the contemporary capitalist world would push individuals to consider their social progress as issue of personal efforts and obscures the structural inequalities that restrict opportunities. These views are useful in exploring the stories of aspiration, privilege and exclusion. Marxist criticism provides a very powerful analysis of the class hierarchy, power and exploitation in the novel by Darwent through foregrounding the connection between the economic conditions and the social experience.

2.3. Capitalism, Privilege and Social Power in Contemporary Literature

The recent literary scholarship has been putting more focus on how class inequality and privilege are impactful in contemporary fiction. With the escalation of economic inequalities in the world, the literary texts have gained relevance as a means of studying how wealth is used to determine access to education, culture as well as the social influence. In modern novels, economic privilege is often depicted as a society where material wealth is not the only marker of power and social validity, but also other symbolic types of power and social legitimacy (Tyler, 2020; Littler, 2018).

The idea of cultural capital by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has been of great influence when it comes to the analysis of these dynamics. According to Bourdieu, social advantage is reproduced not just by means of economic wealth but also through access to education, knowledge of culture and social networks. These types of capital help privileged groups to remain where they are and make social inequality appear as a result of merit and not heredity. The process of elite environment in literary representations can often display how

cultural capital operates as a non-visualized process of exclusion, by solidifying class differences even in the purportedly socially open contexts.

Other researchers that study neoliberal culture also accentuate the increased importance of aspiration and self-transformation. Bauman (2000) states that the modern societies are encouraging people to always reinvent themselves to achieve success and recognition. Nevertheless, these desires often conceal structural inequalities which restrain social mobility. Fisher (2009) goes on to suggest that capitalist ideology propagates the ideology that no other social structures can exist and thus people are encouraged to internalise competitive ideologies and normalize hierarchies. These observations are reminiscent of those found in the works where protagonists are on the edge of entering into high-society worlds and have to face the obstacles that are established by the class disparities.

The commodification of social relationships has also been discussed in the contemporary literary studies. Capitalist principles, researchers believe, are becoming more and more influential in the relations between people and friendship, intimacy and social belonging are becoming a kind of exchange, where the status and utility have a determinative role (Illouz, 2007; Woodman, 2019). In those situations, human relations are prone to get mixed up with the issues of power, influence and economic gain. This view offers a valuable context to comprehend the functioning of social connections in *The Things We Do to Our Friends*, where the matters of acceptance and belonging are often based on how close one is to privilege.

The accumulating research on the topic of capitalism, privilege and social power proves the ongoing topicality of using materialist approaches to the modern literature. All these studies put forward the collective idea that class is an important category in comprehending the manner in which individuals manoeuvre in social settings that are influenced by inequality, aspiration and competition.

2.4. Research Gap

Even though the themes of identity, friendship, manipulation and belonging have been addressed in the existing literature on *The Things We Do to Our Friends*, the issue of the novel representation of the hierarchy of classes, power relationship and exploitation have not received much attention. Although the story is largely about the theme of wealth, privilege and social exclusion, there has been no significant Marxist analysis focusing on how economic inequality has influenced interpersonal relationships and supported the systems of domination in the text. Thus, there is an acute gap in perceiving the novel in terms of the Marxist theory, especially in terms of the interplay of the class, power and exploitation. This paper fills that gap by providing a Marxist interpretation of the novel in order to uncover the material and ideological drives behind the social processes in the novel.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the Marxist literary criticism is an important theoretical approach used to analyze how the author, Heather Darwent, reflects on the issues of class hierarchy, power and exploitation in her work, *The Things We Do to Our Friends*. The Marxist criticism focuses on the interaction between the economical system and social life and the literature is seen to be a reflection of the material conditions and relations of classes in the society where the literature is created. As the novel by Darwent addresses the issue of wealth, privilege, social mobility and unequal distribution of power, the Marxist lens could be effectively used to analyze the social mechanisms of the processes which are at work in the book.

One of the most important postulates of the Marxist theory is that the society is organized in terms of economic relations, which precondition the division of power and resources. According to Marx and Engels (1978), capitalist societies are stratified into classes, the status of which is determined by the wealth and material resources they have. These divisions of classes do not affect only the economic opportunities, but also social status, power and culture. Class difference is quite common in literary works in ways of privilege, exclusion and social conflict. *The Things We Do to Our Friends* illustrates how the social background of the working class and the wealthy society that Clare envisions contrasts to show the importance of class hierarchy in developing individual experiences and relationships.

The Marxist theory also argues that economic privilege is interrelated with power. Rich individuals have a higher level of social and cultural influence, which allows them to influence the social values and expectations of the society. Gramsci (1971) describes this process in terms of hegemony where dominant groups are able to retain their power by projecting their interests and values to be normal and attractive. In the novel, privilege is used as a means of social power which enables some characters to dictate who is in elite spaces and who is affected by the actions of others.

Exploitation is another concept that is significant. Marx (1990) points out that capitalist systems are perpetuated by means of unequal relationships whereby a group of people take advantage of the weaknesses or labor of another group of people. The modern Marxist critics use this concept not only on economic production but also on social and cultural relations. Exploitation can thus arise when people take advantage of their privilege, power or resources to benefit themselves at the expense of others. This idea is especially applicable to the novel by Darwent, where the equal distribution of power and reliance usually conditions social interactions.

The ideology and false consciousness are also the subject of Marxist criticism. The beliefs and values that legitimize current social arrangements and naturalize inequality are what Eagleton (1976) explains by ideology. It is through the institutions like education and

culture that people tend to internalize the dominant values without realizing that they are upheld by structural inequalities. Consequently, individuals might desire to belong to the privilege groups instead of challenging the systems that generate exclusion. In modern capitalistic cultures, these ideological practices often prompt people to equate individual success with material wealth, status and societal acceptance (Fisher, 2009). The ideas can be applied to explain the motivation and ambitions of characters in the novel.

Concepts of alienation as well as commodification are also important. According to Marx (2007), capitalistic societies tend to alienate people to the realms of self-expression and genuine social interactions. Contemporary social existence promotes a greater tendency of individuals to assess themselves and others as per status, utility and social worth. In turn, the relations can become exchangeable instead of real. Bauman (2000) notes that modern culture often turns the notions of identity and belonging to society into commodities that could be sought, shown and traded. One can see such dynamics with respect to friendship, belonging and social aspiration, which Darwent depicts.

Lastly, the Marxist theory focuses on the issue of class consciousness, which can be defined as the knowledge of structural inequalities that define individual experiences. According to Lukács (1971), class consciousness is a result of individuals becoming aware of the relationship between individual problems and the larger structures of domination. This consciousness undermines the mainstream ideologies and brings the truth of privilege and exploitation to light. This notion is especially pertinent to the present research since it aids in the explanation of the ways in which the characters react to the exclusion, manipulation and social inequality at different moments in the novel.

Using the Marxist ideas of class division, power, exploitation, ideology, alienation, commodification and the class consciousness, this paper will analyze how *The Things We Do to Our Friends* reveals the effects of economic privilege on social relationships. These ideas offer a basis to study how wealth and status determine belonging, authority and exploitation in the novel.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Class Hierarchy, Privilege and Social Exclusion

The hierarchy of classes is one of the strongest forces which influence the events of *The Things We Do to Our Friends*. Economic privilege is used as a status, power and social identity throughout the novel to introduce divisions between the wealthy and those who are not members of the elite social classes. The shift of Clare into a genteel lifestyle in Edinburgh, out of a humble background, places her in a world where opportunity is not only based upon ability or drive but on already existing economic and cultural privilege. Her interest in money is part of a wider social fact where privilege seems a good thing as it brings freedom, recognition and power. Marxists would view this attraction as a

manifestation of the way a capitalist society would provoke people into equating success with closeness to money and power (Marx and Engels, 1978).

The social group which Clare is introduced to is a position based on class and reliant on economic and cultural capital. The group members are financially secure and have social confidence as well as access to elite spaces which are mostly not available to non-members. According to Bourdieu (1984) not only material wealth, but also cultural practices, educational advantages and social networks preserve the positions of privileged groups and propagate inequality between generations. These types of capital permeate the entire novel in which privilege is portrayed in the form of lifestyle, behavior and social power. The fact that Clare is conscious of her difference constantly reinforces her subordinate role and causes her to become ever more reliant on the approvals of the people she admires.

Darwent demonstrates that social exclusion not necessarily acts by direct discrimination. Rather, boundaries of the classes are ensured by the unobtrusive processes that induce the outsiders to feel inferior or uninvited. Clare often feels insecure about her financial situation, looks and status. These experiences mirror what Williams (1977) calls the cultural aspects of class power in which inequality becomes a part of the daily transactions and social norms. Despite the fact that Clare tries to gain acceptance among the elite groups, her attempts demonstrate the existence of social obstacles that give certain groups of people an advantage over the rest.

The novel also questions the ideology of meritocracy which usually goes hand in hand with capitalist societies. Clare is first of all convinced that she can overcome social constraints by reinventing herself, being determined and having personal ambitions. Yet, throughout the story, it is shown again and again that privilege is not an evenly distributed asset and that social mobility is limited by the structural inequalities. Fisher (2009) believes that modern capitalism encourages the myth that anyone can achieve success and hides the fact that class privilege does exist throughout history. This paradox becomes clear through what Clare goes through as she realizes that in elite circles, one does not need to be meritorious as much as they need to have access to wealth and status to gain admissions.

4.2. Power, Exploitation and Manipulation

Throughout the novel, power is a byproduct of economic privilege. Persons with wealth have more social control and have a significant influence on those who do not have similar resources. This lack of balance is especially conspicuous in relations of Clare with representatives of the upper social circle, in which a sense of dependence and respect allows manipulation. According to the Marxist concept, power is seldom imposed by using direct force, rather, it can be used when there are unequal social relations that promote compliance and dependence (Gramsci, 1971). This process is explained in the story by

Darwent by showing how privilege can be used by some characters to influence the actions and decisions of others.

Clare is particularly susceptible to exploitation because of her need to belong. Her emotional attachment to the group presents a scenario whereby acceptance is a resource of value that such individuals who hold privileged positions can have. According to Marx (1990), whenever inequalities are present, exploitation happens when a group of people can take advantage of the needs or vulnerability of another group of people unfairly. Though the novel does not show exploitation in the traditional economic understanding, it brings to light how social and emotional attachments can lead to the creation of equally unequal relationships. Clare and his dreams and insecurities are constantly employed to reinforce current power systems and it is a demonstration of how privilege can change weakness into a position of strength.

The manipulation that is evident within the story can be seen as an extension of the capitalist processes where relationships tend to be determined by benefit and utility calculations. According to Harvey, neoliberal societies are becoming more normalized to competition in social relations, whereby individuals strive to gain personal benefits at the cost of others (Harvey, 2005). The presence of such values can be seen in the relationships between characters, with friendship often getting bound up in issues of power, position and self-interest. Instead of serving as the places of equality and mutual support, the relationships tend to reproduce the inequalities that define the broader social order.

Darwent thus introduces the issue of exploitation as a structural and individual phenomenon. Particular manipulation is connected with larger structures of privilege that assign power disproportionately among characters. The novel indicates that exploitation is not just a result of individual immorality but social circumstances that allow some people to be in a position of exerting authority and others remain under their mercies. This description is rather consistent with Marxist accounts of power, where inequality is considered as an outcome of structural relationships and not the action of a single individual.

5. Conclusion

The Things We Do to Our Friends by Heather Darwent is a very powerful critique of the disparities of classes and power structures of the contemporary capitalistic society. The novel shows that the notion of wealth as the power of authority, social influence and exclusion through the case of Clare and her relationship with a wealthy social circle. Marxist reading will show that the hierarchy of classes is a driving force in the story, both in accessing privilege and creating opportunities of exploitation and manipulation. This discussion has revealed that economic power is not restricted to material resources but it has power over social relations, individual aspirations and identities. The novel also reveals how ideology stimulates the pursuit of elite approval through the promotion of

privilege as good and accessible and the hiding of structural disparities that limit real social mobility. Further, relationships and the commodification of them, along with the experiences of alienation, become the vivid examples of how capitalist values affect human interaction. Even though there are instances of consciousness that transcend these systems, the story itself underlines the continuation of the power of classes and the hardship of struggling with its effects. *The Things We Do to Our Friends*, by preemptively addressing the problems of privilege, exclusion and exploitation, helps to underline the still-relevant nature of Marxist criticism when trying to define modern literature and it also makes a strong statement about the unchanging importance of the idea of relationships based on classes in the modern world.

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