

Social and economic class differences in *Parasite*: A structural analysis of Bong Joon- ho's movie script

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ABSTRACT

Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* has attracted considerable scholarly attention due to its compelling portrayal of social inequality and class conflict within contemporary South Korean society. This study examines the representation of social and economic class differences in the *Parasite* movie script through a structural literary analysis. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the study uses library research as its primary method of data collection. The primary data consist of dialogues, scenes, and narrative elements contained in the official movie script, while supporting data are obtained from books, journal articles, and other scholarly references related to literary criticism, social class, and structuralism. Data were analyzed by identifying, categorizing, and interpreting narrative elements that illustrate class distinctions and the values embedded within the interactions between the Kim and Park families. The findings demonstrate that social and economic inequality is represented not only through differences in wealth, occupation, and living conditions but also through language, symbols, spatial settings, and interpersonal relationships. The film portrays class disparity as a complex social structure that influences human behavior, moral choices, and power relations. Rather than positioning one social group solely as the victim or the oppressor, *Parasite* illustrates mutual dependency between social classes while exposing structural inequalities that sustain exploitation. These findings contribute to literary studies by demonstrating how cinematic narratives employ structural elements to construct social criticism and encourage critical reflection on contemporary class relations.

Keywords: class difference; film studies; *Parasite*; social class; structural analysis



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INTRODUCTION

Film has long been recognized as more than a medium of entertainment; it also functions as a cultural text that reflects social realities, ideological conflicts, and power relations within society. Through characterization, narrative structure, dialogue, visual symbolism, and spatial representation, films provide audiences with opportunities to critically engage with complex social issues beyond their everyday experiences (Dewi et al., 2022; Natalia & Muhid, 2023; Seilatuw et al., 2020). Contemporary global art cinema has increasingly explored themes of inequality, economic disparity, and social exclusion, positioning cinematic narratives as powerful instruments for examining the consequences of capitalist development and uneven social structures (Ortiz-Moya & Moreno, 2019; Swezin, 2023). Viewed from

this perspective, films become valuable objects of literary inquiry because their narrative structures reveal how social realities are constructed, represented, and interpreted through artistic expression.

Among contemporary films addressing social inequality, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* has received extensive international recognition for its compelling portrayal of class conflict in modern South Korean society. The narrative follows the impoverished Kim family as they gradually infiltrate the affluent Park household through a series of calculated deceptions motivated by economic necessity. Rather than depicting poverty and wealth as isolated economic conditions, the film constructs class distinctions through the interaction of occupations, housing, education, language, lifestyle, and everyday social practices. These interconnected narrative components expose structural inequalities while simultaneously criticizing the social consequences of contemporary capitalism (Swezin, 2023; Chang, 2024). Consequently, the conflict presented in the film extends beyond the experiences of two families and becomes a broader representation of persistent class divisions in contemporary society.

A growing body of literature has examined *Parasite* from various theoretical perspectives. Swezin (2023) argues that the film exemplifies twenty-first-century global art cinema by portraying social inequality as a multidimensional consequence of capitalist systems. Likewise, Ortiz-Moya and Moreno (2019) explain that contemporary cinematic narratives increasingly represent uneven development, restricted social mobility, and widening economic disparities as central features of global capitalism. Complementing these perspectives, Chang (2024) interprets *Parasite* within South Korea's historical and geopolitical context, demonstrating how urban spaces and domestic architecture embody enduring socioeconomic divisions rooted in the nation's political and economic development. Collectively, these studies suggest that *Parasite* should be understood not only as a family drama but also as a sophisticated cultural critique of structural inequality operating at both local and global levels.

One of the most distinctive features of *Parasite* is its use of spatial representation to construct social hierarchy. The visual contrast between the Kim family's semi-basement apartment and the Park family's spacious modern residence symbolizes unequal access to wealth, security, and social privilege. Housing conditions, neighborhood locations, architectural design, and environmental quality function as narrative signs that distinguish one social class from another. Richardson and Bano (2021) argue that location, mobility, and living space significantly shape characters' identities and social status, while Chang (2024) further emphasizes that domestic spaces in *Parasite* represent historical and socioeconomic inequalities rather than merely serving as physical settings. These findings demonstrate that setting functions as an integral narrative element through which the film communicates broader meanings about class stratification and social exclusion.

In addition to setting, the film consistently constructs class identity through dialogue, language, behavioral patterns, and daily rituals. Differences in speech

style, manners, appearance, and interpersonal interactions distinguish the cultural identities of the Kim and Park families, revealing that social class is represented through both material conditions and symbolic practices. Richardson and Bano (2021) demonstrate that these narrative elements collectively shape representations of identity, status, and social mobility, illustrating how socioeconomic positions influence relationships among characters. Accordingly, class representation in *Parasite* emerges from the interaction of multiple intrinsic narrative elements rather than from isolated symbols or individual scenes.

Despite the growing number of studies on *Parasite*, scholars continue to debate the primary focus of the film's social criticism. Some researchers emphasize its direct critique of capitalism by highlighting restricted upward mobility, widening wealth inequality, and structural injustice within contemporary society (Ortiz-Moya & Moreno, 2019; Swezin, 2023). In contrast, other scholars argue that the film should be interpreted through broader symbolic, historical, and geopolitical perspectives, where class inequality reflects South Korea's industrialization, Cold War legacy, and national political economy (Bai, 2022; Chang, 2024). Although these perspectives differ in emphasis, they consistently acknowledge that *Parasite* constructs class inequality through a carefully organized narrative that integrates social, cultural, and historical dimensions.

Although previous studies have provided valuable insights into capitalism, symbolism, identity, and geopolitical interpretations of *Parasite*, relatively little attention has been paid to how the film's intrinsic narrative elements systematically construct representations of social and economic class differences through a structural literary perspective. Existing research predominantly examines ideological meanings or symbolic interpretations, whereas the interaction among characterization, setting, plot development, and dialogue as an integrated narrative structure remains underexplored (Richardson & Bano, 2021; Swezin, 2023). Addressing this gap is important because literary meaning is produced through the relationship among narrative elements, allowing readers and audiences to understand how social inequality is embedded within the structure of the story itself rather than conveyed by isolated symbols.

Therefore, this study adopts a structural literary approach to examine how characterization, setting, plot, dialogue, and narrative progression collectively construct representations of social and economic class differences in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* movie script. By emphasizing the interaction among intrinsic literary elements, this research extends previous studies that primarily focus on ideological or sociopolitical interpretations. The study is expected to contribute to literary criticism by demonstrating how structural analysis provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the representation of class inequality in contemporary cinematic narratives while enriching discussions on the relationship between narrative structure and social meaning.

Based on this background, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do characterization, setting, plot, and dialogue construct representations of

- social and economic class differences in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* movie script?
2. How does the interaction among intrinsic narrative elements produce broader meanings concerning class inequality and social hierarchy?

METHODS

Research design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using a structural literary approach to examine the representation of social and economic class differences in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* movie script. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to interpret meanings embedded in narrative elements rather than to quantify observable phenomena. The structural approach was adopted to investigate how intrinsic literary elements (including characterization, plot, setting, dialogue, and theme) collectively construct representations of class inequality within the narrative.

Data source

The primary data consisted of the *Parasite* movie script and scenes that portray interactions between characters from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The analysis focused on dialogues, narrative descriptions, and visual situations reflecting class distinctions, economic inequality, and social values. Secondary data were obtained from books, scholarly journal articles, and other academic sources discussing literary criticism, structuralism, film studies, and social class to support the interpretation of the findings.

Data collection

Data were collected through library research. The researcher repeatedly watched the film, carefully read the movie script, and identified scenes, dialogues, and narrative events relevant to the research objectives. Relevant excerpts were selected, classified, and organized according to the intrinsic elements examined in this study. Documentary sources from academic publications were also reviewed to strengthen the theoretical framework and contextual understanding of the research topic.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis process. First, all relevant dialogues and narrative descriptions were identified and coded according to the research objectives. Second, the coded data were categorized based on intrinsic literary elements, including characterization, setting, plot development, and thematic representation. Third, each category was interpreted using structural literary criticism to explain how the interaction among these narrative elements constructs representations of social and economic class differences. Finally, the findings were synthesized to explain the broader social meanings embedded in the movie script.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility of the study, data triangulation was conducted by comparing evidence from the movie script with relevant scholarly literature on structural criticism, social class, and film studies. The researcher also performed repeated readings of the script and cross-checked the consistency of interpretations across different scenes to ensure that the analysis accurately reflected the narrative structure rather than isolated incidents.

FINDINGS

Representation of social class differences

The analysis reveals that *Parasite* consistently represents social class differences through contrasting living environments, occupations, and daily lifestyles of the Kim and Park families. The Kim family is portrayed as belonging to the lower socioeconomic class, living in a semi-basement apartment and struggling to meet their basic needs. In contrast, the Park family occupies a luxurious modern residence, reflecting financial security and social privilege. The spatial contrast between the two households functions as one of the primary narrative devices illustrating class inequality.

The differences are further reinforced through employment status. Members of the Kim family initially survive through temporary work and unstable income before gradually obtaining employment within the Park household by concealing their family relationships. Meanwhile, the Park family maintains professional occupations and employs domestic workers to support their daily lives. These occupational differences symbolize unequal access to economic resources and social opportunities.

Table 1. Representation of social class differences in *Parasite*

Narrative element	Kim family	Park family
Residence	Semi-basement apartment	Luxury modern house
Economic condition	Financial hardship	Financial stability
Occupation	Temporary and informal employment	Professional and business ownership
Lifestyle	Survival-oriented	Comfort and security
Social position	Lower class	Upper class

The comparison demonstrates that socioeconomic differences are represented through multiple interconnected narrative elements rather than through wealth alone. Housing, occupation, and lifestyle collectively establish the social hierarchy that drives the conflict throughout the story.

Representation of economic inequality

Economic inequality emerges as the central source of conflict throughout the narrative. The Kim family's financial difficulties motivate them to manipulate

circumstances to obtain employment in the Park household. Their decisions are consistently influenced by economic necessity rather than personal ambition alone. The Park family, on the other hand, remains largely unaware of the structural inequalities that shape the lives of those working for them.

The movie also presents economic inequality through physical symbols. Differences in housing location, architectural design, interior decoration, access to private transportation, and everyday consumption patterns reinforce the unequal distribution of wealth. These recurring symbols consistently distinguish the two families throughout the narrative.

Table 2. Indicators of economic inequality

Indicator	Representation in the movie
Housing	Semi-basement versus luxury residence
Employment	Informal work versus stable professional work
Consumption	Limited necessities versus abundant resources
Mobility	Public transportation versus private vehicles
Living environment	Flood-prone neighborhood versus protected residential area

The findings indicate that economic inequality is represented not only through financial resources but also through environmental conditions, occupational opportunities, and everyday living experiences.

Social values reflected in the movie script

The analysis identifies several social values embedded in the narrative. Family solidarity is evident through the close cooperation among members of the Kim family as they attempt to improve their living conditions. At the same time, the story illustrates how desperation may encourage unethical behavior, including deception and manipulation.

Another prominent value concerns social prejudice. Characters repeatedly associate social class with personal worth through appearance, manners, language, and body odor. These recurring references reveal that discrimination extends beyond economic status and becomes embedded in everyday interpersonal interactions.

The narrative also highlights the coexistence of dependence and inequality. Although the Park family occupies a higher social position, they rely heavily on the labor provided by the Kim family. Likewise, the Kim family depends on the Park family for economic survival. This reciprocal dependence demonstrates that relationships between social classes are interconnected despite substantial differences in wealth and status.

Table 3. Social values identified in the analysis

Social value	Evidence in the narrative
Family solidarity	Cooperation among Kim family members
Economic survival	Employment pursued through deception
Social prejudice	Judgments based on class identity
Power relations	Employer–employee hierarchy
Mutual dependence	Reciprocal reliance between both families

Overall, the findings demonstrate that *Parasite* constructs representations of social and economic class differences through a combination of characterization, setting, plot progression, dialogue, and symbolic narrative elements. These structural components work together to portray class inequality as a multidimensional social phenomenon rather than merely an economic issue.

DISCUSSIONS

Narrative Structure as a Representation of Social and Economic Class Inequality

The findings demonstrate that *Parasite* represents social and economic class inequality through the interaction of characterization, setting, plot development, dialogue, and visual symbolism rather than through isolated narrative devices. The gradual infiltration of the Kim family into the Park household functions as the central narrative mechanism through which differences in wealth, opportunity, and social status are continuously revealed. Rather than presenting inequality as a single social issue, the narrative organizes multiple intrinsic elements into a coherent representation of structural class disparity. Consequently, social inequality is embedded throughout the story and becomes the organizing principle that connects every major narrative event.

This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that *Parasite* constructs meanings of class through the interrelationship of narrative components rather than through individual symbols. Swezin (2023) argues that the film exemplifies global art cinema by portraying inequality as a structural consequence of contemporary capitalism, while Richardson and Bano (2021) highlight the contribution of characterization, setting, and mobility in representing social identity. Similarly, Chang (2024) explains that the narrative organization of *Parasite* reflects broader socioeconomic structures rooted in South Korea's historical development. These studies collectively support the argument that the film functions as a cultural text whose narrative structure becomes the primary medium for communicating class inequality.

However, the present study extends these discussions by demonstrating that the representation of class differences is generated through the continuous interaction among intrinsic literary elements. Rather than examining characterization, setting, or symbolism separately, this study shows how these elements operate collectively to construct a unified representation of social hierarchy. This structural perspective provides a more comprehensive explanation of how narrative organization shapes social meaning within the film.

Spatial Structure and Social Hierarchy

The analysis further reveals that physical space functions as a structural device that organizes social hierarchy throughout the narrative. The contrast between the Kim family's semi-basement apartment and the Park family's modern hillside residence represents more than a visual distinction between poverty and wealth. Instead, these locations mediate the relationship between characterization and plot development by illustrating unequal access to security, comfort, and social privilege.

Repeated movements between lower and upper spaces reinforce symbolic boundaries separating the two families, allowing spatial organization to become an integral component of the film's critique of capitalist inequality.

These findings correspond with Richardson and Bano (2021), who argue that residential location and spatial mobility significantly influence representations of social identity and class status. Chang (2024) likewise demonstrates that architecture and domestic space in *Parasite* embody historical and socioeconomic inequalities rather than functioning merely as physical settings. Previous scholarship recognizes that space contributes substantially to the construction of class identity within the narrative.

The present study further argues that setting should not be interpreted independently from other narrative elements. Instead, space acquires meaning because it interacts continuously with characterization, dialogue, and plot progression. This interaction strengthens the structural coherence of the narrative and demonstrates that spatial representation functions as a constitutive element in communicating social inequality.

Economic Necessity and Moral Decision-Making

Another important finding concerns the relationship between economic hardship and individual moral decisions. The analysis indicates that the deceptive actions undertaken by the Kim family are primarily motivated by financial necessity rather than by inherent criminal tendencies. Conversely, the Park family's privileged socioeconomic position limits their awareness of the structural disadvantages experienced by lower-class individuals. As a result, the narrative avoids presenting either family as entirely virtuous or entirely blameworthy. Instead, moral decisions are consistently portrayed as products of unequal socioeconomic structures.

This interpretation aligns with Swezin (2023), who argues that *Parasite* critiques systemic inequality instead of assigning responsibility solely to individual characters. Ortiz-Moya and Moreno (2019) similarly explain that contemporary cinematic narratives frequently portray unequal development as a structural condition influencing human behavior. Chang (2024) further emphasizes that the social conflicts depicted in *Parasite* emerge from broader historical and economic structures rather than isolated personal failures.

Accordingly, this study suggests that moral conflict in *Parasite* should be interpreted as an outcome of structural inequality rather than individual ethics alone. This perspective shifts attention from judging characters' behavior toward understanding the socioeconomic conditions that shape their decisions, thereby reinforcing the film's broader critique of contemporary capitalism.

Social Prejudice as a Mechanism for Reproducing Inequality

The findings also demonstrate that class inequality is reproduced through cultural and behavioral markers beyond economic wealth. Differences in language, etiquette, appearance, daily routines, and even body odor repeatedly function as indicators of social identity that influence how characters perceive and evaluate one

another. These symbolic markers reinforce invisible social boundaries and normalize unequal relationships in everyday interactions.

This observation supports Richardson and Bano (2021), who argue that identity and mobility are represented through language, behavior, and social performance rather than material resources alone. Chang (2024) similarly notes that cultural practices and domestic environments contribute to the symbolic construction of class identity within the narrative. Together, these studies indicate that prejudice operates through ordinary social interactions, making inequality appear natural and socially acceptable.

The present findings therefore suggest that *Parasite* represents class discrimination as a multidimensional phenomenon reproduced through everyday cultural practices. Such a representation broadens the understanding of inequality by demonstrating that symbolic and cultural distinctions are as influential as economic differences in maintaining social hierarchy.

Interdependence Between Social Classes

Another important finding of this study is the paradoxical relationship of interdependence between the upper and lower social classes. Although the Park family occupies a dominant socioeconomic position, their comfortable lifestyle depends heavily on the labor and services provided by the Kim family. Conversely, the Kim family relies on the Park household as their primary source of income and social mobility. This reciprocal relationship demonstrates that the two families are not isolated social groups but are interconnected within the same socioeconomic system. Consequently, *Parasite* portrays class relations as a complex network of dependence in which unequal power relations coexist with mutual necessity.

This finding is supported by previous studies that interpret *Parasite* as a multidimensional representation of class relations rather than a simple conflict between the rich and the poor. Richardson and Bano (2021) argue that the interactions between the two families illustrate how identity, mobility, and social status are continuously negotiated through everyday relationships. Likewise, Chang (2024) explains that the title *Parasite* should not be interpreted as referring exclusively to one social group because the narrative reveals various forms of dependence embedded within contemporary capitalist society. Swezin (2023) further suggests that global art cinema frequently portrays social inequality through interconnected class relations rather than through rigid social dichotomies.

The present study extends these interpretations by demonstrating that reciprocal dependence is systematically constructed through the interaction of characterization, dialogue, setting, and plot development. Rather than depicting one family as the sole “parasite,” the narrative encourages audiences to recognize that unequal social systems generate relationships in which both dominant and subordinate groups become structurally dependent upon one another. This interpretation strengthens the argument that *Parasite* critiques systemic inequality instead of assigning moral responsibility to a single social class.

Methodological Contribution of Structural Literary Analysis

The findings also demonstrate that a structural literary approach remains highly relevant for examining representations of social inequality in contemporary cinema. By analyzing characterization, setting, plot, dialogue, and symbolism as interconnected narrative components, this study explains how literary meaning is generated through the internal organization of the narrative rather than through isolated scenes or visual symbols. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of how cinematic texts communicate complex social issues while maintaining narrative coherence.

Previous scholarship has primarily examined *Parasite* through ideological, sociological, or geopolitical perspectives, emphasizing capitalism, class conflict, or historical context (Swezin, 2023; Chang, 2024). Although these approaches have significantly contributed to understanding the film's social criticism, they often prioritize external contexts over the internal organization of the narrative. Richardson and Bano (2021) likewise acknowledge the importance of characterization and spatial representation but place greater emphasis on identity and mobility than on the interaction among intrinsic narrative elements.

The present study contributes to this body of literature by demonstrating that structural literary analysis provides an alternative analytical perspective capable of explaining how social meanings emerge through the integration of narrative components. This methodological contribution complements existing ideological and sociological interpretations by highlighting that narrative form itself constitutes an essential mechanism for representing class inequality. Consequently, the study reinforces the continuing relevance of structural analysis within contemporary literary and film criticism.

Interpretative Nuances and Scholarly Debate

The findings should also be interpreted in light of ongoing scholarly debates concerning the primary meaning of *Parasite*. Some scholars interpret the film as a direct critique of capitalism, emphasizing restricted social mobility, economic injustice, and widening class disparities within contemporary society (Swezin, 2023; Ortiz-Moya & Moreno, 2019). From this perspective, the narrative functions as a realist portrayal of structural inequality, illustrating how capitalist systems perpetuate social exclusion and unequal opportunities.

In contrast, other scholars emphasize the symbolic and historical dimensions of the film. Bai (2022) argues that *Parasite* follows a distinctive narrative pattern characteristic of Korean art cinema, where symbolic structures encourage multiple interpretations rather than a single ideological reading. Similarly, Chang (2024) situates the film within South Korea's geopolitical history, arguing that architecture, urban space, and domestic environments reflect historical transformations associated with industrialization and Cold War legacies. These perspectives demonstrate that the meanings of *Parasite* extend beyond contemporary class conflict and are closely connected to broader cultural and historical experiences.

Rather than viewing these interpretations as contradictory, the present study

considers them complementary. The structural literary approach adopted in this research demonstrates that the film accommodates multiple layers of meaning because its narrative elements operate simultaneously at symbolic, social, and historical levels. Consequently, the representation of class inequality in *Parasite* should be understood as a multidimensional narrative construction that integrates structural organization with broader cultural contexts. This perspective provides a more balanced interpretation by recognizing both the internal coherence of the narrative and the external realities that shape its social significance.

Future Research Directions

Although this study demonstrates the usefulness of structural literary analysis in explaining class representation in *Parasite*, several limitations remain. The analysis focuses exclusively on the intrinsic narrative structure of a single movie script. It therefore does not examine other interpretative dimensions that may further enrich the understanding of the film. Future studies could integrate structural analysis with complementary theoretical approaches, such as semiotics, Marxist literary criticism, discourse analysis, or multimodal analysis, to explore additional layers of meaning embedded in contemporary cinematic narratives.

Future research may also conduct comparative analyses between *Parasite* and other films addressing social inequality, such as *Joker* or *Shoplifters*, to investigate similarities and differences in the narrative construction of class relations across diverse cultural contexts. Such comparative studies would contribute to a broader understanding of how contemporary cinema represents inequality through different narrative strategies while also revealing the influence of national histories, cultural values, and socioeconomic conditions on cinematic representations of class. Expanding the scope of analysis in this way would strengthen both literary criticism and film studies by providing a more comprehensive understanding of how narrative structures communicate social meaning across cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how social and economic class differences are represented in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* movie script through a structural literary approach. The findings reveal that class inequality is constructed through the interaction of intrinsic narrative elements, including characterization, setting, plot development, dialogue, and visual symbolism, rather than through isolated narrative devices. The contrasting living environments, occupations, language use, social interactions, and cultural practices of the Kim and Park families collectively portray a hierarchical social structure shaped by unequal access to economic resources, social mobility, and cultural capital. The study further demonstrates that physical space functions as a structural representation of social hierarchy, moral conflicts emerge from unequal socioeconomic conditions, and cultural markers contribute to the reproduction of class prejudice in everyday life. In addition, the reciprocal dependence between the two families indicates that class relations are characterized not only by conflict but also by complex forms of interdependence embedded within contemporary capitalist society. These findings confirm that structural literary

analysis provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how narrative organization generates broader social meanings and extends previous studies that have predominantly emphasized ideological or sociopolitical interpretations of *Parasite*. Although this research is limited to a structural analysis of a single movie script, it highlights the continuing relevance of structural approaches for examining representations of inequality in contemporary cinema. Future studies are encouraged to integrate structural literary analysis with complementary theoretical perspectives, such as semiotics, Marxist literary criticism, discourse analysis, or multimodal analysis, and to conduct comparative investigations with other films portraying class inequality in different cultural contexts to enrich further understanding of the relationship between narrative structure and social meaning.

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