

Representational Strategies and Social Critique Function in Portrayals of the Lower Class in Realist Literature

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of social class and economic inequality in realist literature. The analysis focuses on how realist and naturalist authors construct depictions of lower-class life and structural disparity through setting, characterization, and plot development. The discussion demonstrates that formal elements in realist fiction are systematically organized to convey socioeconomic determinism while simultaneously functioning as social critique of capitalist exploitation. The findings suggest that realist literature employs material details, limited point of view, and irony as narrative strategies for building critical awareness. The representation of children, the detailed portrayal of living conditions, and the depiction of institutional failures all contribute to the critical function of realist works. This research confirms that realist fiction maintains its relevance across time periods due to its focus on persistent structural inequality. The transformative potential of realist literature lies in its capacity to build empathy and understanding across class boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

Realist literature emerged as a response to the romanticism current dominating the nineteenth century. Realist authors shifted their focus from an ideal world toward concrete and observable social reality. They rejected exaggerated portrayals of life and chose to present societal conditions precisely as they were. This movement developed alongside major changes in social structure resulting from the industrial revolution and massive urbanization (Manhas, 2023). Poverty, labor exploitation, and economic inequality became core subjects elevated into literary works. Realist writers utilized major cities as settings that depicted the sharp contrast between luxury and suffering. They highlighted how the modern economic system created an ever-widening gap between capital owners and workers. Realist literature functioned as a mirror reflecting social conditions with documentary precision. This portrayal was not neutral, as every choice of word and scene contained moral judgment against the injustices occurring. Through their work, realist authors invited readers to clearly see social structures often hidden behind the progress of civilization (Kondali & Oković, 2022). These issues demonstrate that the current of

urbanization similarly presents its own challenges in maintaining social cohesion amidst a continuously developing urban society (Mardikaningsih, 2021).

The development of realist literature in Europe and America showed a close connection to social and political movements of its era. Authors such as Charles Dickens, Emile Zola, and Theodore Dreiser brought characters from the lowest strata of society into fictional narratives (Jo et al., 2023). They documented the conditions of factory workers, coal miners, and city slum dwellers with a level of accuracy reminiscent of journalistic reports. Naturalist literature, as a branch of realism, introduced biological and environmental determinism as determining factors in human fate. Characters in naturalist works were depicted as victims of hereditary forces and social pressures they were powerless to resist. This approach provided a scientific dimension to the portrayal of poverty and economic inequality. Naturalist authors utilized systematic observation methods to depict the influence of environments on human behavior. They believed literature could become an instrument to understand social laws governing public life. Consequently, realist and naturalist literary works

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served not merely as entertainment, but as valuable social documents. This tradition subsequently influenced literary development across various parts of the world, including Asia and Latin America. Heavy work pressure within factory environments similarly shaped the social dynamics and psychological conditions of workers who frequently became targets of discriminatory treatment (Udjari et al., 2021). Issues of waste and environmental management in industrial areas, which later gained attention through the implementation of circular economy principles (Mardikaningsih & Nuraini, 2022), were actually depicted much earlier within the grim portraits of factory laborer lives in realist works.

In Indonesia, the realist tradition in literature developed since the national awakening era through works by authors from the Balai Pustaka and Pujangga Baru generations. They began leaving behind classic stories themed around kingdoms and transitioned toward portraying the shackled lives of colonial society. Indonesian realist literature gained crucial momentum in the 1930s with the emergence of novels depicting class conflicts between nobility, the *priyayi*, and the common folk (Syofyan, 2022). Portrayals of life on plantations, in port cities, and within colonial bureaucratic environments became the hallmark of this period's realist works. Authors captured social tensions arising from the forced cultivation system and exploitative economics implemented by the Dutch East Indies government. They illustrated how colonial structures created hierarchies that determined access to resources and power. These works demonstrated authors' awareness of class issues beginning to form within colonized society. The realist tradition continued into the post-independence period with increasingly diverse themes. Post-independence Indonesian authors faced challenges in representing rapid social changes resulting from national development. Nonetheless, interest in portraying economic inequality never waned throughout the development of modern Indonesian literature. Such hierarchical structures are closely related to issues of identity, stigma, and survival strategies of certain groups within a multicultural society formed as a result of racial discrimination (Pakpahan et al., 2022).

Realist literature possesses formal characteristics that distinguish it from other literary genres. The use of geographically and historically identifiable settings serves as a primary feature reinforcing a work's claim to realism. Characters in realist literature are depicted as individuals typical of a specific social and economic environment (Maloku, 2015). They possess ways of speaking, dressing, and

acting that reflect the social class they occupy. Plotlines in realist literature tend to follow a cause-and-effect logic acceptable to common sense. Realist authors avoid improbable coincidences and prefer sensible story developments. They utilize points of view that enable readers to obtain an objective picture of the depicted world. The language used tends to be straightforward and avoids excessive rhetorical styles. Description in realist literature functions to build atmosphere and provide information about the material conditions of its characters. All these elements are organized to create the impression that the story presented is a believable portrait of real life. This type of character formation can be juxtaposed with findings that parenting patterns and school culture help determine children's discipline, confirming that a person's character is largely shaped by the environment in which they are raised (Djazilan & Darmawan, 2021).

The ability of realist literature to represent social class depends on the author's precision in capturing the details of material life and character psychology. Depictions of housing, types of employment, and consumption patterns serve as important markers in determining characters' social positions within a work. Realist authors are meticulous in presenting the differences between working-class and capital-owning class lifestyles (Gagnier, 1991). They depict how urban spaces are divided by class, with slum areas on one side and elite districts on the other. Differences in access to education, healthcare, and entertainment are represented through the lived experiences of characters in the story. Conflict in realist literature frequently arises from clashes of interest between different classes. Lower-class characters are depicted struggling to meet basic needs while upper-class characters grapple with entirely different issues. Realist authors also demonstrate how economic systems shape individual consciousness and behavior. They do not merely describe external conditions but explore how social class influences characters' ways of thinking and decision-making. This renders realist literature a complex social psychology document. Differences in access to basic services of this sort are likewise emphasized in studies on social stigma that restrict vulnerable groups from obtaining proper education and healthcare services (Oluwatosin & Da Silva, 2021).

Economic inequality in realist literature is frequently depicted through sharp contrasts between wealth and poverty within a single story space. Metropolitan cities become battlegrounds of class where luxury and poverty coexist in very close proximity. Descriptions of streets filled with beggars beneath the shadows of skyscrapers are common

imagery in urban realist literature (Kelly & Paz, 2023). Authors utilize lengthy descriptions of the living conditions of poor characters to emphasize their suffering. Slum houses with poor ventilation, a lack of clean water, and extreme overcrowding become hallmark settings of realist tales. Luxury homes with expansive gardens and abundant servants are portrayed as images of upper-class alienation and boredom. The extreme income disparities among characters in stories raise questions about the fairness of economic systems. Realist authors use concrete figures regarding wages, prices, and living costs to reinforce the impression of reality. They demonstrate that poverty is not a natural condition, but rather the result of specific policies and economic structures. Consequently, the depiction of economic inequality in realist literature contains a clear political message. The division of urban spaces between slum areas and elite districts exhibits patterns similar to the issues of daily mobility and citizen cohesion in continuously expanding suburban areas (Wisnujati & Mardikaningsih, 2021).

Characters in realist literature are treated as products of the social and economic environments that shape them. Working-class characters are typically depicted holding pragmatic worldviews directly tied to material needs (Maloku, 2015). They speak in dialects or language styles reflecting their educational background and environment. These characters frequently face difficult choices between maintaining their dignity or surrendering to economic demands. Realist authors show how economic pressure can drive individuals to commit actions contrary to their moral values. Female characters in the lower class experience different circumstances than men due to greater domestic workloads and economic vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, upper-class characters are depicted harboring different anxieties originating from efforts to maintain their social status. The psychological portrayal of upper-class characters often reveals alienation and the meaninglessness of life amidst material abundance. Social determinism is never presented as the sole determinant of a character's fate, but rather as a force that must be confronted through various means. Realist characters display agency despite frequently operating within very narrow boundaries. The shifts in inter-individual relations within urban societies depicted by these characters likewise reveal changes in human relational patterns within modern urban environments (Irfan & Al Hakim, 2022).

Plots in realist literature frequently follow real-life patterns that lack simple happy endings. The fate

of main characters is typically determined by the interaction between personal choices and social forces beyond their control (Manhas, 2023). The use of lengthy and detailed plots enables readers to observe the processes causing individuals to fall into poverty or rise in class. Realist literature rejects simplification in the form of easy moral victories or punishments for wrongdoers. Endings in stories within realist literature often remain ambiguous and leave questions without definitive answers. Some characters may manage to escape poverty through questionable sacrifices while others remain trapped within the cycle of poverty. Plots showing social mobility are frequently portrayed as painful processes filled with betrayals of one's origins. Realist authors provide no guarantees that hard work will always yield material success. They demonstrate that economic structures possess rules that frequently operate against the interests of the lower class. Consequently, plots in realist literature function as critiques against optimistic narratives regarding capitalism and meritocracy. This reality differs from assumptions that authentic leadership and positive work climates inherently drive organizational citizenship behaviors and individual success (Mardikaningsih, Halizah, Darmawan, Masithoh, & Nuraini, 2022), because the path toward social mobility in practice remains disparate between urban and rural societies (Amri & Khayru, 2021).

Social criticism in realist literature is manifested through the dismantling of myths supporting unequal economic systems. One frequently attacked myth is the belief that poverty results from individual laziness or stupidity (Osman & Jalaluddin, 2014). Realist authors demonstrate how hard-working and intelligent individuals can remain poor due to unfair systems. They depict situations where inheritance and social connections determine success far more than effort and talent. Realist literature also criticizes institutions that ought to protect ordinary people but instead perpetuate inequality. Judicial, educational, and political systems are frequently portrayed as tools for the upper class to maintain their power. Realist authors utilize irony and contrast to expose the hypocrisy of values embraced by society. They show that social orders considered natural actually stem from histories of domination and exploitation. This criticism is conveyed not through direct statements, but through consistent portrayals of lower-class suffering. In this manner, realist literature becomes a subtle yet effective form of cultural resistance. Similar irony is also evident within the world of education, where organizational active participation and student learning discipline turn out not always to be directly

proportional to the learning outcomes achieved, thereby likewise calling into question the fairness of prevailing systems (Arifin & Kurniawan, 2022).

Realist literature offers a perspective opposite to the dominant narratives regarding economic progress and social welfare. In realist works, technological advancement and industrialization are frequently depicted as bringing suffering to workers (Kondali & Oković, 2022). Modern machines symbolizing progress instead displace human labor and create mass unemployment. The resulting economic profits are not evenly enjoyed by all strata of society. Realist authors demonstrate that what is called progress frequently means the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few. They depict how urban growth creates slums and new social problems. Realist literature rejects the view that lower-class suffering is a necessary price to pay for progress. Through detailed and emotional portrayals, they make readers feel the human cost of modernization. This critique is highly relevant in an era when economic inequality continues to increase and social mobility grows more difficult. Realist literature reminds us that behind economic growth statistics lie ruined real lives. This issue remains relevant today, when worker productivity in the digital era is demanded to account for human creativity and innovation (Darmawan, 2023), while the automation of routine tasks instead demands new strategies in maintaining worker knowledge and engagement (Darmawan, 2024), and this same technology possesses the potential to either widen or narrow the gender gap in the workplace (Darmawan, 2024). Modern industrial efforts to implement sustainable supply chains and corporate social responsibility (Barzani, Darmawan, & Zulkarnain, 2022) are likewise not necessarily sufficient to correct the inequalities long depicted by realist literature.

The core problem underlying the importance of studying social class representation in realist literature is the tendency of literary criticism to focus on aesthetic aspects while ignoring the sociological dimensions of works. Many academic approaches to realist literature are more interested in narrative structures, language styles, or storytelling techniques than the social content conveyed. Excessively textual readings cause the social critique message within realist works to be neglected or treated as secondary. In fact, realist authors deliberately choose specific forms and styles precisely to convey social messages more effectively. This approach ignoring social dimensions results in an incomplete understanding of realist literature's contribution to social discourse. Literary criticism that overemphasizes the autonomy of art works fails to capture literature's

function as an instrument of resistance and awareness. This is especially evident in works depicting lower-class conditions where aesthetic and social aspects cannot be separated. This neglect also affects how literature is taught and studied in educational institutions. Yet, literature's capacity to build critical awareness regarding social inequality constitutes one of its most important values.

Another problem is the unclear mechanism of how realist literature is able to transform readers' awareness concerning social inequality. The process of receiving and interpreting social messages within literary works does not take place automatically and uniformly. Readers from different class backgrounds may interpret the same work in vastly different ways. Realist literature displaying lower-class suffering may evoke empathy or instead reinforce social distance depending on the reader's position. Literary reception theory demonstrates that meaning does not reside within the text itself, but rather emerges from the interaction between text and reader. This raises questions regarding the true effectiveness of realist literature as an instrument of social critique. Can works depicting inequality in specific ways alter readers' views or merely reinforce pre-existing beliefs? Understanding of the transformative mechanisms of realist literature remains limited and requires more systematic study. This question becomes important to evaluate claims that literature can play a role in social change. The lack of studies regarding this reception aspect represents a significant gap in realist literature scholarship.

Studies on the representation of social class in realist literature are important because literature serves as a public space where discourse regarding inequality can emerge and develop. In situations where discussions surrounding social class are frequently silenced or oversimplified by mainstream media, literature provides an arena for more complex exploration. Literature enables portrayals of lower-class experiences that cannot be conveyed through statistical reports or brief news items. The experiences of poverty depicted in realist novels present details that humanize and individualize structural suffering. Literature also gives a voice to groups that typically lack access to public spaces to voice their experiences. Through fictional characters, readers can imaginatively experience what is felt by those living in poverty. Literature's capacity to build cross-class empathy and understanding makes it an essential tool for social awareness. Amidst rising global economic inequality, studies on how literature represents and critiques inequality hold increasing relevance. Realist literature preserves historical records of class struggle that can serve as material for reflection for the present day.

This study aims to systematically outline the representation strategies employed by realist literature in depicting lower-class conditions, poverty, and structural inequality. This research seeks to identify formal elements such as setting, characterization, and plot development as means for authors to convey critiques against capitalism and class exploitation. By understanding these mechanisms of representation, this study can enrich theoretical insights into the social functions of realist literature. The practical contribution of this research lies in providing an analytical framework for readers and researchers in interpreting the social dimensions of realist literary works. Findings from this research can also serve as a medium of reflection for authors regarding how literature can be utilized as an effective instrument of social consciousness. On a broader level, this study attempts to demonstrate the relevance of classical realist literature for understanding ongoing issues of inequality in the present day.

RESEARCH METHOD

With a library research design to examine the representation of social class and economic inequality in realist literature. This design was chosen because it aligns with the research objective, which is interpretive in nature and does not require field data collection. Research planning needs to be tailored to the nature of the research questions posed, where research aiming to understand textual meaning and interpretation is more suitably approached using a qualitative method (Afzaal, 2023). Library research in this study is directed toward the collection and analysis of realist literary texts identified as significant works within that tradition. Text selection is conducted based on established criteria regarding genre representation, historical background, and the richness of social class depiction. This approach enables researchers to systematically explore how realist authors utilize narrative elements to construct portrayals of economic inequality. Qualitative research utilizing a library research design also provides flexibility in interpreting diverse textual data from various periods and cultures.

The research procedure in this library study follows systematic steps commonly used in qualitative research (Mason, 2018). The first stage is the identification and selection of primary texts to be analyzed based on their relevance to the research topic. Once the texts are selected, the next step involves intensive reading and recording of elements relevant to the representation of social class and economic inequality. This study employs content analysis techniques to identify thematic patterns

within the texts related to setting, characterization, and plot development. Subsequently, the collected data is analyzed interpretatively by connecting findings within the texts to relevant theories of social criticism and the sociology of literature. To ensure the validity of the findings, this study applies a theoretical triangulation strategy by employing multiple perspectives in interpreting the same data. Secondary data sources in the form of previous studies on realist literature are also utilized to enrich the analysis and provide comparative material. The entire research process is meticulously documented to allow for auditing and verification by other researchers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Realist literature utilizes setting as a tool for social class representation in a systematic and structured manner. Spatial settings in realist works are never neutral, as every location carries specific social meanings (Tally, 2017). Slum houses, factories, markets, and city streets are depicted with details that reveal the material conditions of their inhabitants. Realist authors spend many pages describing the spaces inhabited by the lower class with all their dirt, odor, and congestion. This description is not merely ornamentation, but a narrative element functioning to build environmental determinism. Characters in realist literature cannot be separated from the spaces they occupy because these spaces shape their habits and worldviews. Conversely, spatial settings inhabited by the upper class are depicted with excessive luxury to the point of evoking a sense of alienation. The use of setting as a class marker enables readers to recognize a character's social position even before the character is introduced. The contrast among various settings within a single work creates a clear social map of societal hierarchy. The use of cultural symbols and spatial narratives in literary works likewise plays a role in shaping and maintaining the social identity of their readers (Kurniawan et al., 2021). Through setting, realist literature asserts that social space is not something neutral, but is closely tied to economic structure.

Characterization in realist literature is constructed by paying attention to the socio-economic determinations that affect characters' lives. Lower-class characters are depicted as having limited choices originating from their material conditions (Gagnier, 1991). They work hard, but the fruits of their labor are always insufficient to meet basic needs. Realist authors demonstrate how poverty affects physical health, mental resilience, and characters' social relationships. Children from poor families are depicted growing up with

malnutrition and limited education. Conditions of this sort likewise hinder the development of children's social competence, which ought to be built through adequate and multidisciplinary education (Hariani et al., 2021). Female characters from the lower class frequently face dual burdens as workers and household caretakers. This characterization reveals that individuals are products of the social environment that shapes them. However, realist authors never render their characters mere passive victims, as every character possesses their own way of surviving. Some characters choose to compromise with the system while others rebel in risky ways. This diversity of responses to social determination demonstrates that realist literature continues to respect the complexity of human experience.

Plotlines in realist literature depict how economic systems determine the life paths of their characters. Events in stories frequently begin from conditions of poverty that subsequently trigger a series of decisions and consequences. Main characters in realist works often become trapped in situations where every choice carries detrimental consequences. Life pressures of this sort frequently reshape the aspirations and enthusiasm of the younger generation in undergoing their learning process (Rahman & Hariani, 2022). They must choose between surviving in poverty or taking risks that could worsen their situation (Manhas, 2023). Plotlines demonstrate that social mobility in capitalist societies is extremely difficult and requires massive sacrifices. Characters who manage to escape poverty often have to abandon meaningful moral values or social relationships. Conversely, characters who maintain their integrity frequently remain trapped in poverty. The use of plots following this logic of economic determinism functions as a critique against meritocratic narratives. Realist plotlines show that success and failure within the capitalist system are determined more by initial position and luck than by individual effort. Thus, plots become instruments for dismantling myths regarding economic justice.

Socio-economic determinism in realist literature does not signify the absolute denial of individual freedom. Realist characters always possess room to make decisions, even though that space is extremely narrow. Small choices made by characters in daily life constitute an important focus within realist narratives (Peng, 2021). Social support and an open attitude within an individual can encourage the courage to take new initiatives even amidst structural limitations (Ernawati et al., 2022). Decisions to remain in exploitative jobs or seek risky alternatives illustrate the dilemma of the lower class. Determinism in realist literature operates as a

statistical tendency rather than an absolute law. Many characters fight social determination and succeed or fail in ways that enrich the story. This depiction of determinism serves a dual function: demonstrating the power of social structures while honoring human capability. Realist literature rejects views that are overly optimistic or overly pessimistic regarding humanity's ability to change its fate. This balance between determinism and freedom is what makes realist literature feel authentic and non-dogmatic. The representation of determinism in realist literature provides lessons regarding limitations and possibilities within social life.

Realist literature constructs critiques against capitalism through the depiction of exploitative production relations between laborers and capital owners. Workers in realist works are portrayed as commodities who can be replaced at any time according to the employer's interests (Abdullah, 2019). The wages received by workers always remain below the value of the labor they produce. Realist authors describe in detail how surplus value derived from workers' labor is appropriated by capital owners. The production process in realist works is frequently depicted as a machine that drains the energy and soul of workers. Workers are treated no differently from machinery and are discarded when they are no longer productive. Treatment of this sort emphasizes the importance of social engagement for senior workers who are frequently marginalized alongside technological advancements within organizations (Darmawan, 2023a). On the other hand, capital owners are depicted living in luxury without having to engage in physical labor. This critique of capitalism is conveyed through narratives demonstrating injustice in the distribution of production outputs. Inequalities of this kind underscore the necessity of ethical leadership so that organizational culture can function fairly and sustainably (Mardikaningsih et al., 2022). Realist authors do not need to explicitly state that capitalism is evil because the portrayal itself speaks volumes. Readers are invited to observe how economic systems operate and who benefits from those systems. This implicit delivery method makes social critiques within realist literature more effective and enduring.

The critique of capitalism in realist literature is reinforced through the depiction of the psychological impacts of economic exploitation on individuals. Characters entangled within the capitalist system experience various forms of alienation and a loss of life's meaning (Shabir, 2016). Workers in realist works are frequently portrayed as losing their connection to the results of their own labor. They produce goods they never enjoy and work for the benefit of others.

This alienation also extends to interpersonal relationships where workers compete with one another merely to survive. Upper-class characters do not escape alienation either, as wealth leaves them isolated from real life. Excessive consumption and the endless pursuit of gratification characterize a hollow upper-class existence. The portrayal of alienation in realist literature demonstrates that capitalism damages humanity across all classes. This phenomenon highlights the importance of balancing the pace of technological development with thinking that continues to prioritize human values (Darmawan, 2023b). This critique becomes sharper because it encompasses the entire spectrum of society and reveals systemic damage. Readers are invited to feel how economic structures shape miserable life experiences for everyone.

Class exploitation in realist literature is depicted through mechanisms that are subtle and often difficult to recognize as injustice. Low wage systems, long working hours, and dangerous working conditions constitute institutionalized forms of exploitation (Nilsson, 2024). Realist authors demonstrate that exploitation does not always take the form of physical violence, but more frequently manifests as subtle economic coercion. Workers are forced to accept poor conditions because they possess no other options for survival. Exploitation also occurs through mechanisms of debt and economic dependence on employers. Realist characters frequently become trapped in cycles of debt that make it increasingly difficult for them to escape poverty. Children of workers are often forced to work from an early age to assist their families. Education, which ought to serve as a pathway out of poverty, is frequently out of reach for the lower class. Inequalities in educational access of this kind become one of the primary factors prolonging intergenerational cycles of poverty (Rojak & Khayru, 2022). This generational exploitation is depicted as one of the most painful injustices within the capitalist system. This detailed portrayal of exploitation builds the argument that capitalism is not only unjust but also unsustainable.

Realist literature utilizes child characters as special representations of the most vulnerable victims of economic inequality. Children in realist works are frequently portrayed as innocent creatures who become victims of cruel social conditions (Jha & Latha, 2024). They are born into poverty without choosing it and suffer due to the mistakes of previous generations. Portrayals of children's suffering carry a strong emotional impact because they involve values of care and protection. Children in realist works often lose their childhoods because they are forced to work

or care for younger siblings. Their education is neglected and their health is impaired due to malnutrition and a lack of medical care. This issue indicates that the effectiveness of policies in guaranteeing children's access to education and health remains a major challenge for low-income groups (Suwito et al., 2021). Realist authors use child characters to demonstrate that the economic system is not only unjust but also cruel. Children's suffering serves as a symbol of society's failure to protect its succeeding generations. This portrayal also functions as a critique of a society that allows poverty to persist. Through child characters, realist literature touches readers' emotional sides and builds deeper empathy.

Narrative techniques utilized by realist literature in criticizing capitalism include the employment of a point of view limited to lower-class experiences. Many realist works employ a first-person or limited third-person perspective that follows characters from the lower class (Al-Alami, 2019). This limitation of perspective enables readers to directly experience what it feels like to live in poverty. Readers do not gain access to the thoughts of upper-class characters, making the lower-class experience the primary focus. Narrative approaches of this kind essentially function as a form of social education that builds readers' sensitivity toward broader issues (Hariani & Mardikaningsih, 2022). This point of view also spares the narrative from overly academic or analytical views on poverty. Instead, readers are invited to experience poverty directly through the characters' perceptions. The use of this limited point of view strengthens the impression of reality and makes social critique feel more authentic. Readers are not told that capitalism is evil, but rather invited to feel its injustice firsthand. This narrative technique demonstrates that realist literature possesses a distinctive way of conveying social messages. The strength of this technique lies in its capacity to build awareness through experience rather than argumentation. This method of building awareness reinforces the notion that long-lasting behavioral change is more effectively achieved through experience and public awareness compared to mere information delivery (Gautama & Mardikaningsih, 2022).

Realist literature also utilizes irony as a subtle yet sharp instrument of social critique against the capitalist system. Irony in realist literature frequently emerges from the contrast between what is said and what actually happens in the story. Upper-class characters frequently speak about the value of hard work while they themselves never engage in physical labor (Aytür, 2005). Employers speak about care for workers while paying inadequate wages. Disparities of this sort indicate that good communication

strategies in managing change ought to be accompanied by real actions, not mere rhetoric (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022a). Social institutions such as churches or schools speak of justice while maintaining unjust structures. This irony creates a critical distance between readers and the presented narrative. Irony of this kind also reminds us that sincere work engagement should be built upon positive psychological factors rather than merely symbolic statements (Darmawan & Mardikaningsih, 2022). Readers are invited to observe the discrepancy between moral rhetoric and actual social practices. The use of irony enables social critique to be delivered in a non-preachy yet effective manner. Irony also provides a dimension of humor that makes social critique more easily accepted by readers. Nonetheless, irony in realist literature never diminishes the seriousness of the message conveyed. The combination of irony and realism creates a distinctive and enduring style of social critique.

Realist literature constructs the representation of poverty as a structural condition affecting all aspects of characters' lives. Poverty in realist works means not only a lack of money but also a lack of access to various resources (Çaya, 2016). Poor characters lack access to nutritious food, decent housing, and adequate medical care. They also lack access to education and information that can help them escape poverty. Limitations of this sort demonstrate that the utilization of technology can serve as a pathway to expand access to quality education for lagging regions (Kurniawan & Seran, 2024). This lack of access creates a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break. Children born into poverty grow up with limitations that make it difficult for them to compete later in life. Conditions of this sort likewise influence an individual's self-belief in facing change, including changes brought by technological development (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022b). Poverty also affects characters' social relationships as they are frequently alienated or scorned by society. Feelings of shame and low self-esteem are often depicted as psychological aspects of poverty. This portrayal of poverty as a structural condition refutes views that blame individuals for their fate. Realist literature demonstrates that poverty is the result of systems benefiting a select few.

Capitalism in realist literature is depicted as a system creating widening inequality over time. The beginning of a story may feature small disparities, but as the story develops, the gaps grow larger. Lower-class characters become increasingly depressed while upper-class characters grow wealthier and more powerful (Ranaldi et al., 2021). This process is depicted as a logical consequence of market

mechanisms that are not regulated fairly. Patterns of this sort show that organizations with flexible structures tend to adapt more easily to market dynamics and enhance their advantages (Darmawan & Mardikaningsih, 2023). Realist authors demonstrate that capitalism is not a neutral system, but rather a system that systematically benefits the capital-owning class. The accumulation of wealth on one side is always followed by the accumulation of poverty on the other. The mastery of knowledge and information similarly becomes a source of advantage reinforcing the position of those already favored in economic competition (Darmawan, 2023). Realist literature demonstrates that economic progress often means regression for those at the bottom. This process is depicted as natural within the capitalist system and not the result of individual failure. Consequently, realist literature builds arguments regarding the necessity of systemic change. The portrayal of this increasing inequality provides warnings that remain highly relevant in the present day.

Structural inequality in realist literature is depicted through institutions that ought to protect society but instead reinforce upper-class domination. Legal systems in realist works are frequently portrayed as operating to protect the property of capital owners rather than justice for the public (Aminah, 2018). Workers who fight against unfair treatment often end up in prison while their employers remain free. Education systems in realist literature are depicted as mechanisms of class reproduction rather than tools for social mobility. In fact, teachers' adaptation and the role of educational institutions ought to be capable of fostering discipline and learning participation equally for all students (Rozikin, Ghazali, & Darmawan, 2023). Schools in impoverished areas possess qualities far lower than schools in wealthy districts. Yet school environments play a major role in shaping adolescent social behavior through discipline and healthy interpersonal relationships (Multihakiki, Aliyah, & Hariani, 2024). Healthcare systems are likewise depicted as unfair because poor individuals cannot access the care they need. Similar pressures are experienced by educational institution leaders who must manage various organizational demands amidst resource limitations (Saputra, El-Yunusi, Mardikaningsih, Hariani, & Aliyah, 2023). Political institutions in realist literature are frequently portrayed as corrupt and serving the economic interests of the upper class. Ethical governance ought to serve as a primary principle for public institutions, including educational and religious institutions that play a role in shaping societal values (Rifa'id, Hariani,

Aliyah, & Khayru, 2024). The portrayal of these institutions demonstrates that inequality does not happen by chance, but is created and perpetuated. Critique against these institutions renders realist literature a comprehensive form of social critique. Readers are invited to see that the problem of poverty requires change across many fields simultaneously.

Realist literature utilizes material details as a way to reinforce the representation of social class and critiques against inequality. Descriptions of worn-out clothing, simple food, and damaged household furniture serve as important markers of social class. The use of these material details creates a strong impression of reality and makes readers feel the depicted conditions (Wood, 2021). Details regarding living costs, wages, and commodity prices become important elements within realist narratives. Characters in realist literature frequently calculate their money carefully to ensure basic needs are met. These economic calculations become an important part of story plots and character development. Details of this sort illustrate how work dynamics can tangibly influence an individual's psychological well-being and social relationships (Darmawan, 2023b). Material details are also used to demonstrate the contrast between lower-class and upper-class life. The use of precise details shows that realist authors conduct meticulous observations regarding social life. This thoroughness provides legitimacy to social critiques delivered through literary works. Material details in realist literature prove that literature can serve as a valuable social document.

The transformation of readers' consciousness through realist literature occurs through mechanisms of identification with characters experiencing social inequality. Readers are invited to view the world from the perspective of those suffering the most within the economic system (Altun, 2023). This identification enables readers to understand the experiences of others more deeply. Empathy built through identification with fictional characters can alter how readers view social reality. Readers accustomed to viewing poverty as statistics begin to see it as a concrete human experience. Realist literature also builds awareness by demonstrating that the depicted conditions do not have to occur. Instruction combining various methods has been proven capable of sharpening this type of critical thinking ability in readers or learners (Darmawan, Zahid, & Fajar, 2024). By demonstrating the possibility of a fairer world, realist literature opens space for social change. This process of consciousness transformation does not happen instantly, but through repeated reading experiences. Realist literature provides material for

reflection regarding values and social choices that need to be made. Reflection processes of this sort likewise play an important role in maintaining an individual's psychological well-being, as found among college students completing their final projects (Darmawan & Zahid, 2025). Literature's capacity to transform this consciousness renders it a valuable tool for social movements.

The social critique function of realist literature lies in its ability to maintain relevance across eras and cultures. Realist works from the nineteenth century can still speak about issues faced by contemporary society. The economic inequality depicted in the novels of Dickens or Zola can still be found in different forms in the present day. The ability of realist literature to remain relevant stems from its focus on enduring social structures (Baldick, 2004). Although external details change, patterns of class relations and exploitation mechanisms remain similar. Realist literature provides a framework for understanding social change while maintaining its focus on structural inequality. The dissemination of ideas of this sort is now increasingly facilitated through social media, which plays an important role in work distribution and publication in the digital era (Darmawan & Fajar, 2024). This cross-era relevance establishes realist literature as a valuable source of historical knowledge. Research on class representation in realist literature can provide perspectives regarding how inequality is understood across various periods. The ability to endure and adapt to changing times of this kind is also evident in how individuals build personal resilience when entering the new workforce (Liwak, Darmawan, & El-Yunusi, 2023). The social critique function of realist literature proves enduring over time because the issues raised remain a concern. Consequently, realist literature continues to serve as an essential instrument for building critical awareness in the modern era.

CONCLUSION

Realist literature possesses a systematic set of representation devices to depict social class and economic inequality. Setting, characterization, and plot in realist literature work in an integrated manner to construct depictions of socio-economic determinism and the critical function of capitalism. The representation of the lower class in realist literature is not merely decorative, but rather serves as the core of this genre's aesthetic and political project. Through material details, limited points of view, and irony, realist literature delivers sharp critiques against class exploitation and structural injustice. The ability of realist literature to build empathy and critical awareness through imaginative experiences makes it

an essential instrument for social reflection. This research asserts that reading realist literature is not only an aesthetic activity but also a critical exercise that opens up an understanding of social reality. Realist literature teaches that poverty and inequality are not destiny, but rather the result of choices and social structures that can be changed.

The implications of this study's findings encompass theoretical and practical aspects in literary studies and education. Theoretically, this research reinforces the sociology of literature approach, which emphasizes the relationship between aesthetic form and the social function of works. Understanding the mechanisms of representation in realist literature can serve as a foundation for developing sharper analytical methodologies when examining literary works with social dimensions. Practically, the results of this study can be utilized in literature instruction at schools and universities to enhance students' awareness of the social dimensions of literary works. Literature instruction that pays attention to aspects of class representation can help students develop critical thinking regarding inequality in their society. Further research is recommended to examine how realist literature is consumed and interpreted by readers from different class backgrounds. Studies on the reception of realist literature across various social groups can complement findings concerning the mechanisms of representation already identified. Consequently, research on realist literature and class representation still possesses a broad space to be developed further.

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