
Revealing The Concept Of Class Consciousness In The Literature

Class consciousness is a concept most readily associated with the work of Karl Marx. Marx did not specifically seek to evoke this in his work, yet class consciousness grew organically from interactions between different social categories of people. As a solely popularised Marxist term, it plays with the forces of production and the ownership of goods and commodities within a society. György Lukács, a Marxist philosopher, argued ‘that it is only with the development of capitalist society that the possibility of a genuine consciousness of reality emerged’. He endeavours to represent how the proletariat must seek to understand their own social relations in current society so as to become wholly conscious of their reality, which can only be comprehended once society itself builds that understanding to begin with. Bertolt Brecht argues that ‘people develop an uncritical and unconscious way of perceiving, interpreting and understanding their environment’. He describes how individuals build their social relations unknowingly and how they come to realise this through being exploited by the upper classes. This brings to light another Marxist term called false consciousness, an ideological term formalised in the work of Friedrich Engels. He argued ‘The real motive forces compelling [the individual] remain unknown to him... he imagines false or seeming motive forces’. It is a term that determines how individuals take to trusting in a distorted version of their own class identity, an idea quite prevalent in the thought processes of some of the characters to be discussed. This essay will evaluate the shifting of power dynamics between different social classes, including the realisation of the realities of people’s economic situations and how it impacts the overall determination of their social position. These thematic issues will be discussed in both Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*.

What can first be established in Chekov’s novel is the struggle of the upper class, represented through the main protagonist Madame Ranevsky (Lyuba). This class struggle is presented predominantly through the form of land ownership, which is made evident through the upper class’s inability to readjust to the new economic values; the land she owns loses its worth and its significance entirely. The tragic deterioration of the orchard as a symbol of wealth to the upper classes, and a place of happiness for Ranevsky as a child, exposes the kind of social chaos that affects people’s livelihoods, their overall economic positioning and – in this case – Ranevsky’s own memories. She reflects on the happiness she once drew from the nursery room: ‘The Nursery, my darling, such a wonderful room... I slept here when I was just a baby... (she weeps). And now I’m being a baby again...’ The rapid economic change impacts Ranevsky’s intangible childhood memories to an extent that destabilises her social status and demoralizes any positive indication of reaching that point of wealth in her life that she once had. It also infantilises Lyuba and shows how vulnerable she now feels – quite literally like a baby. Lyuba faces her consequences through her inability to stop spending, which is brought on through her personal traits. It is evidently her social standing that permits the way she acts towards others; her charismatic behaviour can be interpreted as irrational and solely liable for her economic downfall, again, due to her consistent spending and willingness to pay off other people’s loans. Her generosity acts to mask her dwindling financial condition, as she becomes increasingly unable to adapt to the ever-changing society around her. It is clear to suggest that her class consciousness stems from a historically informed sense of complacency – a feeling that her economic worth is untouchable and stable, when in reality, she slowly succumbs to the

false consciousness of her class structure. Lyuba's character is thus informed by the idea that class consciousness implies a class-conditioned unconsciousness of one's own socio-economic condition. Therefore we can determine that the orchard stands as both an excuse and figurehead for the past and all of the joy it brings to Lyuba, whilst also standing as a euphoric barrier against her acceptance of her harsh reality. This key characteristic can be reflected in the upper class's failure to fit with its new economic circumstances. With this, she becomes a character incapable of change and, even after losing the orchard, she refuses to modify her ways to fit to ever-changing economic values.

We can compare Lyuba's inability to readjust to the rapid development of Russian economy to the character Firs Nikolayevitch; an old Russian serf who lives on Lyuba's estate. He too is a character incapable of adapting to society's new norms, yet he is presented as a conduit between the past and the present; a bridge between what can be distinguished from the past and present systems. He is ultimately grounded to his serfdom background; a consciousness he cannot escape from. This new social transformation evokes the loss of the old ways and of Firs social significance as he no longer feels like he belongs anywhere. Where Firs loses his sense of belonging, he also loses the ability to fit into a new social class within an emerging modern society, as serfdom was a particular social class common within the feudal system. Firs slow adaptation to a newly established modern system reflected Russia's failure to industrialise and transition from an agrarian economy to a capitalist one. Where Russia 'undertook major economic reforms' such as 'the abolition of serfdom in 1861', Russia's industry still remained very small at the end of the nineteenth century in comparison to the rest of Northern and Western Europe. The past for Firs loses its sustainability through the eventual selling of the orchard. He does not have the ability, like Lyuba does, to mend her financial conditions, as she was born into an era of different socio-economic circumstances when compared with Firs. As Russian society develops, his death is not recognised by anyone at the very end of the play: this process of social change does not pay any attention to those who lose their validity, and Chekhov conveys this attitude. This point can be taken further to when Firs expresses the importance of cherries and how they brought in a lot trade and profit to businesses. The cherries become allegorical to Firs and other Russian serfs who were exploited by nobles for monetary gain, however, due to the progression of culture and society, Firs replies to Lyuba saying that these ways are 'Forgotten' where 'No one remembers' much like how Firs is forgotten by the other characters. His being and social standing does not match up to the others, and so it bears no true importance to them.

More significant still is the idea of a newly established bourgeois represented through Lopakhin. If Firs represents the fading of old ways, then Lopakhin introduces the new economic reality that faces modern Russia. Lopakhin is a member of the rapidly progressive upper middle-class – coming from a working class background – building a definitively new and strong financial position for himself, he adopts, unsatisfyingly so, a newly formulated class consciousness. Whilst he prides himself on his working background, he cannot commit to his other desires, such as his apparent love for Varya. This alludes to the fact that capitalism requires individuals to profit and consistently enlarge one's monetary gain. His class consciousness is built around providing a close and comfortable relationship with the future. Lopakhin's business attitude permeates a lot of his speech in the play: 'You will be charging vacationers no less than 25 rubles per annum per unit of land... by autumn there won't be a single patch of land left free, they'll snap it right up.' He shows little to no humanity in terms of love and friendship. With regard to class, Lopakhin and Torvald Helmer – the protagonist of Ibsen's Doll House - are very similar in terms of their business attitudes and their connections with other characters. Whilst

possessing empathy only for the ones they love, both of these characters equate as ideal products of the newly established socio-economic values. Their human attitudes have been formed by these socio-economic parameters, but they do not appear to question it in the first instance. Their now consolidated class consciousness has been elevated by their determination to make a solid social standing in the new modern system, demonstrating a need to modify their working standards in order to survive.

Similarly, Ibsen's narrative is grounded in nineteenth century Norwegian society, and focuses on the prevalent socio-economic issues that women faced. This impacted the women in the narrative greatly, most notably that of the protagonist Nora Helmer, but only through an awakening of her current class condition was she able to shape a new attitude that challenged contemporary social norms. In the beginning, Nora grasps to her status and her role of becoming the ideal product of an upper middle-class housewife. Her husband Torvald supplies her with money whenever she asks and she treats her friend Kristine condescendingly, despite her eventual transformation into Kristine's working attitude, as she is entirely dependent on herself – Nora's inevitable role reversal. Despite this, Nora is dominated by the way she perceives life through the lens of material worth and her own financial conditions. Nora and Torvald have risen through the ranks by saving but Nora disregards any notion of her lower class attitudes and spends uncontrollably. This demonstrates human thought as being the product of social and economic conditions: Nora completely disregards her cultural origins in favour of a new desirable social class consciousness. Additionally, Nora does not become aware of her economic enslavement to Torvald until the very end of the play. The narrative is read as a progression of her realisation, rather than a sudden one. She is indebted to him, as it is socially structured for a woman to be dependent on their husband, and she considers the idea of personal freedom to be accustomed to the acquisition of wealth: 'It's splendid to have lots of money, and no need to worry about things, isn't it?' She learns through this enslavement that it is indicative of sexual objectification, all of which encapsulates her relationship with Torvald. The end of the play displays her renouncement of her dependency on Torvald and his money and she discovers that personal and human freedom are not measured in economic terms; she re-examines the society of which she is a part of. It can be read that Nora's realisation of her social circumstances – whilst acknowledging her own importance and self-worth – reaps consequences on those around her, such as Torvald and the children. He is left without a wife and the children without a mother, demonstrating that Nora has permitted a kind of radical reconstruction that challenges current socio-economic norms. Nora's change of her class consciousness takes tremendous leaps throughout the play, which shapes the realities she believes to be accustomed to. The ramifications that follow are displayed through Nora's newly formed subjectivity, which infers how her class consciousness clouds her sense of thought, influenced by the socio-economic barriers that surrounded her.

Torvald grows accustomed to the circle of power that men exercise over women both socially and domestically, however, his political and economic position is threatened when Nora expresses her need to leave the household. This brings instant dread, fear and anxiety to Torvald, which he directs towards Nora upon opening Krogstad's letter: 'You have destroyed all my happiness. You have ruined all my future'. We see how Torvald droops from his power position and loses his masculinity as a result. Whilst this is regained after his awareness of his emotional outrage, Torvald represents the hidden stress of living in an upper middle-class environment. He must adhere to serving the new patriarchal laws without demonstrating publicly to his wife the challenges that follow suit. For Torvald, the consequences of realising his class expectations results in losing the woman he loves.

Moreover, the ideology of false consciousness is emphasised through the character of Kristine Linde. Nora adopts Kristine's role by the end of the play, but it is interesting to note how Kristine's character, at first presented as strong and entirely independent, inevitably reverts back to the stereotypical housewife role when confronting her old lover, Krogstad: 'I am a shipwrecked woman with no one to spar. I have no one to care for.' It reveals the vicious circle of socio-economic values and how they continuously shape the thoughts and feelings of those affected by them. Kristine inevitably ends up where she started, which is suggestive of what might happen to Nora later on down the line.

In both texts, the differentiation between class consciousness and how someone is able to shape their own destiny without socio-economic influences is quite blurred. Through both narratives we see characters that are both helpless and capable of fitting into their ever-adapting environments; however, it goes without saying that it is very hard to be able to act independently without harming or disrupting the societal order: with each character, regardless of their social class, once they recognise their social positioning, there is always an impactful consequence – something they may not perceive but we as readers infer – that affects how they carry on living their lives. Changes in the societal order would bring harm to some, which they try to minimise, but leads to positions of greater empowerment and opportunity for others.