

THE VOICE OF THE OPPRESSED: MARXIST CRITISM IN THE POETRY OF “THE BALLAD OF THE LANDLORD”

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Abstrak

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This study analyzes Langston Hughes' poem "The Ballad of the Landlord" from a Marxist literary perspective to examine the representation of economic injustice between the owner class and the working class. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the data were collected through close reading of selected lines from the poem. The analysis focuses on recurring themes of economic exploitation, power imbalance, and resistance. The findings show that economic exploitation is the most dominant theme, reflected in unequal rent demands and neglected living conditions. Power imbalance is represented through institutional threats and criminalization, indicating the role of legal systems in maintaining class dominance. Resistance appears in limited forms through the tenant's verbal protests, showing constrained efforts to challenge injustice. Overall, the poem highlights the dominance of the owner class over the working class and presents a humanistic critique of capitalist social relations. This study demonstrates that Marxist literary criticism is effective in revealing class conflict and economic inequality in literary texts.

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INTRODUCTION

Literary works such as Langston Hughes' poem "The Ballad of the Landlord" often reflect social injustice, especially against the lower classes by capital owners. This can be understood through a Marxist critical approach (Sayers & Sean, 2021). Class struggle occurred between the lower and the upper class arises over interests and ideas. Thus, class struggle takes material and ideological forms. Material forms occur when there is a fight over the opposed class interests, which are both economic and political (Das, 2023). Here, ideological forms become relevant as they reinforce the power of the upper class. The eviction mediation process shows that the relationship between landlords and tenants is never one of equality there is a structural asymmetry of

power, whereby landlords have far greater negotiating capacity, leverage, and legal resources than tenants, who are poor and have minimal access to advocacy (Hare, 2020). As asserted (Li, 2023), property owners control tenants' interior design and lifestyle choices.

This study examines Langston Hughes' poem entitled "The Ballad of the Landlord". Hughes points to the social injustice in the American society and the exploitative white property owners. Being black, the landlord expects the tenant to live quietly in this broken house since he would not be given a fair treatment by the law if he dares to complain (Mutia, 2023). This literary work describes that systematic reform (a prevention revolution) is needed so that tenants are not constantly in a weak position their voice and housing claim need to be protected and recognized by the legal system, not just dealt with through evictions (Gilmore 2020). This study uses Karl Marx's theory. It is explained that the relationship of social class between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is mutually hostile and contradicts each other, and from that conflict it is seen how the struggle is carried out by an oppressed class (Nurhajjah & Z, 2023).

Previous studies have examined literary works from Marxist perspectives and highlighted literature as a medium for social critique. A study by Rahmatullah and Gupta shows that Marxism can function as a tool for marginalized groups to express resistance against social and political oppression (Rahmatullah & Gupta, 2023). Similarly, Thenmozhi and Geetha argue that literary texts often serve as counter-narratives by providing space for oppressed voices, particularly in the context of caste-based discrimination in India (Thenmozhi & Geetha, 2023). Other studies also demonstrate how literary works expose the exploitation of the working class by the bourgeois class through unequal distributions of power and rights (Hanifah et al., 2025). In addition, oppression is frequently represented through diction and themes that reflect domination by landlord classes and capital owners (Wayan, 2022). Research by Keene, Vargas, and Harper further reveals how structural inequality operates in real life, showing that limited access to legal assistance significantly affects tenants' housing stability and well-being (Keene et al., 2024). Despite these contributions, previous research on Langston Hughes' poetry has largely focused on issues of race and social discrimination. More recent Marxist-oriented studies, however, emphasize economic class inequality and examine how the voices of oppressed groups are represented, silenced, and contested within literary texts. Nevertheless, there remains a research gap in analyzing Hughes' poetry from a Marxist perspective that foregrounds class inequality, particularly in relation to how the "voices of the oppressed" articulate resistance against social and economic hegemony. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in interpreting "The Ballad of the Landlord" as a representation of economic injustice that transcends racial contexts, positioning the poem as a universal critique of class inequality and housing exploitation in modern society.

In an effort to reveal deeper class inequalities through literary works, this study is designed to answer the main question: "How does 'The Ballad of The Landlord' represent economic injustice between the owner class and the working class from a Marxist perspective?" This study aims to reveal the economic inequality or injustice between the owner class and the working class, which is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of literature in criticizing the capitalist system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marxist Criticism

Marxism is a way of understanding the world as both a critique of existing social conditions and a means for transforming them. It begins with a materialist conception of history, in which priority is given to material conditions and practical social activities rather than to the development of abstract ideas (Heyman, 2018). Developed from the concept of class struggle, Marxism is grounded in historical materialism. It is often described as a political economy that provides anthropology with fundamental theoretical concepts, particularly in understanding deep human history, social change, conflict, social inequality, economics, and labor. Marxism argues that the means of production shape history and that a society's economic base determines its social structure and collective consciousness. From this perspective, Marx contends that ongoing class conflict will eventually lead to a proletarian revolution and the establishment of a classless society, which occurs when the productive forces come into contradiction with existing relations of production (Kolley, 2024).

Marxist literary criticism is based on the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels regarding the economic base and cultural superstructure. It views literary works as part of an ideological system shaped by historical and socio-economic conditions rather than as purely aesthetic creations (Eagleton, 2013). Marxist literary criticism stems from Marx's ideas about the base (economy) and superstructure (ideology, culture, literature). In this case, literature is a part of the superstructure that cannot be understood separately from the material and social conditions and society, even though the superstructure has relative autonomy (Eagleton, 2013).

Social Class

Social class consists of groups of people with similar social status who see each other as social equals. Each class has distinct values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral norms and is organized within a hierarchical structure ranging from lower to higher social status. This hierarchy influences how economic agents perceive social differences and positions within society (Pahlevi, 2020).

Although Savage et al. (2013) identify seven social class categories, this study limits the classification into four main classes: the elite class, the middle class, the working class, and the precariat. This simplification is intended to focus the analysis while still reflecting the complexity of modern class structures shaped by economic, social, and cultural capital. Such a limitation allows the discussion of class relations to remain conceptually clear and relevant to the research framework.

From a Marxist perspective, social class is fundamentally shaped by relations of production. In this view, capital emerges when private property is used as a means to exploit the working class. Capital is understood not merely as wealth or money, but as a system of production relations in which capitalists control the means of production, while workers who lack ownership are compelled to sell their labor power (Jimoh, 2021).

Capitalism is a political-economic system centered on capital accumulation, private property, and the exploitation of wage labor (Harvey, 2014). Within this system, private ownership of the means of production places control over economic resources in the hands of capital owners rather than workers (Sayer, 2015). Wage labor positions workers in an unequal relationship with capitalists, as surplus value generated through production is



appropriated by capital owners. Competitive market mechanisms further reinforce this inequality, making class exploitation and stratification structural features inherent in capitalism (Wallerstein, 2011).

Examples of capitalist are:

- **Industrial capitalists**
Industrial capitalists own the means of production such as factories and machinery and employ wage labor to produce commodities. Their primary goal is to generate surplus value by extracting labor beyond what workers are paid. This form of capitalism directly illustrates exploitation within the production process (Harvey, 2018).
- **Financial capitalists**
Financial capitalists generate profit through interest, stocks, credit, and other financial instruments rather than direct production. Their power lies in controlling capital flows and debt relations, which often shape economic dependency. This form of capitalism intensifies inequality by prioritizing speculation over productive labor (Lapavitsas, 2019).
- **Digital capitalists**
Digital capitalists control platforms, data, and algorithms that organize social and economic activities. They monetize user behavior and information, turning data into a new source of capital accumulation. Labor exploitation appears in more hidden forms, such as unpaid digital labor and platform dependency (Srnicek, 2017).
- **Property capitalists**
Property capitalists profit mainly from rent, land ownership, and real estate speculation rather than production. Their accumulation of wealth is driven by controlling space and housing access. This often contributes to urban inequality and the marginalization of lower-income groups (Aalbers, 2016).

The proletariat refers to a group of workers who do not own the means of production and therefore rely entirely on selling their labor to survive. This position places them in a vulnerable situation, as the profits generated through the production process are controlled by capital owners rather than by the workers themselves (Wright, 2015). Standing (2016) asserts that the most vulnerable group of modern workers, known as the precariat, share characteristics similar to those of the traditional proletariat: they have no job security, no control over the means of production, and depend on low wages to survive. There is an example of proletariat:

- **Factory workers / manufacturing workers**
They do not own production tools, work for wages, and experience deskilling/strict management in the production process (Schaupp, S. 2021).
- **Service and retail workers**
Although they do not engage in “physical production,” they still sell their labor for wages and are included in contemporary studies as part of the proletariat (Sutherland et al, 2019).
- **Migrant workers & domestic workers**
In contemporary political economy literature, migrant workers are often positioned as a proletariat that is vulnerable to transnational exploitation (low wages, weak protection), (Evagora et al, 2022).



- Farm laborers / agricultural workers
The transformation of land into wage relations (proletarianization) places farmers/agricultural workers as proletarians in many contexts (Nanthavong et al, 2022).

Ideology and Economic Justice

Marxist ideology is the medium through which conflicting class interests operate. It emphasizes that ideology is not merely “false consciousness,” but a network of practices and discourses that bind subjects to the capitalist order and obscure the class basis of social inequality (Rehmann, 2022). Thus, Marxist ideology provides a critical framework for revealing how capitalism generates economic injustice by normalizing exploitative class relations. Marx and Engels compiled critiques of capitalism as a system that produces economic injustice, even though they did not always use the terms “justice.” (Duan, 2023).

Hamadi (2017) explained that there are several characteristics in ideology and economic justice, such as:

1. Ideology operate through social and cultural consciousness
 - Ideology is the ideas, values, and feelings that shape human social consciousness. Marx stated that “ideologies are the changing ideas, values, and feelings through which individuals experience their societies”
 - Ideology works by disguising the interests of the dominant class as the interests of the entire society, so that individuals do not realize how the social system really works (false consciousness).
2. Literary works can either reinforce or challenge the dominant ideology
 - Marx stated that literature is part of the cultural superstructure and therefore often “legitimizes the power of the ruling class” reinforcing the dominant ideology. Literature is viewed as part of the “superstructure”: it not only reflects socio-economic reality, but can also reveal ideology, injustice, and class conflict rooted in the structure of production and distribution (Nanik, 2024)
3. Economic justice becomes the central focus of criticism against such inequality
 - Economic justice is a condition in which wealth and resources are distributed fairly, so that economic disparities can be reduced and every individual has the same opportunity to fulfill their basic needs. Economic justice rejects the accumulation of wealth by certain groups and emphasizes equality, protection of vulnerable groups, and social responsibility in the economic system (Amin, 2023).
Through the Marxist Social Realism approach, poetry is understood not only as an aesthetic work, but also as a tool of resistance against the dominant ideology that oppresses the lower classes. This idea is relevant to *The Ballad of the Landlord*, because Langston Hughes' poem also depicts the unequal social relationship between landlords and tenants as a critique of capitalism and structural racism (Ahmed, 2021).

Violence and Oppression

Structural violence refers to injustice embedded within economic, legal, and public service structures such as systemic poverty and limited access to healthcare or education that causes prolonged suffering despite being non-physical in nature (Macassa, 2021). This form of violence sustains the hardship of oppressed classes by limiting their opportunities and making social mobility difficult. Meanwhile, oppression denotes systematic discrimination in which injustice disproportionately targets specific groups, reinforcing

unequal power relations and social exclusion (Williams, 2023).

Groothuis (2021) also explains the meaning of violence and oppression as,

- **Violence** is not limited to physical acts but also includes social and psychological pressure used to intimidate, create fear, and suppress opposition.
- **Oppression** refers to a systematic process in which ideology controls institutions, restricts freedom, and silences dissent, often disguised as social justice rhetoric that results in ideological and institutional domination. Groothuis also shows that oppression often arises through the control of narratives in the media, public spaces, and educational institutions, thereby depriving the public of the ability to express different views. When ideology dominates institutions, this power produces a form of structural oppression that is not immediately visible but undermines civil liberties.

Racial discrimination remains prevalent in the low-income housing market, as demonstrated by a correspondence experiment that compared landlords' responses to prospective tenants with different racial identities. Chan and Fan (2022) found that African-American tenants received fewer and slower responses, as well as less polite language, than their white counterparts. These findings indicate that barriers to housing access are shaped not only by economic constraints but also by racial biases embedded in landlords' practices, reinforcing structural inequality within the housing system.

Application of Marxist Theory to Poetry

Poetry can serve as a medium for social protest through its depiction of class injustice, economic exploitation, and structural oppression experienced by oppressed groups. Poetry is also capable of revealing the social reality dominated by capitalism and providing a space for marginalized voices (Ahmed, 2021).

Poetry often depicts class conflict by representing unequal relations between the ruling class and the working class through imagery, diction, and narrative voice (Bennett, 2020). The use of imagery, symbolism, and metaphor enables poets to critique class domination without directly reproducing political discourse, making social criticism more accessible to readers (Rivkin & Ryan, 2020). Moreover, poetic form itself can reflect inequality, as fragmented structures and repetitive patterns often mirror the exploitation and alienation experienced by the working class (Eagleton, 2013).

Literature, particularly poetry, therefore functions as a medium of social critique by challenging capitalist ideology and exposing economic injustice embedded in everyday life (Tyson, 2023). Through this process, poetry provides a space for marginalized voices to articulate resistance against structural oppression and class disparity (McLaren, 2021).

In Marxist literary analysis, attention to voice, tone, and imagery is essential for revealing class disparity and economic injustice within poetic texts. The poetic voice often represents the perspective of the working class or other marginalized groups, allowing readers to engage with experiences shaped by exploitation and social inequality (Bressler, 2021). Through this perspective, poetry can expose unequal power relations embedded in everyday life. In *The Ballad of the Landlord*, for instance, imagery of a broken house and unpaid rent reflects the imbalance of power between the landlord and the tenant, showing how economic control operates through property ownership. The tenant's narrative voice emphasizes marginalization by articulating demands that are consistently ignored, reinforcing the unequal relationship between the owner class and the working class. These elements work together to highlight how material conditions shape social relations and



individual suffering. As a result, poetry functions as a form of social critique by making class exploitation visible and emotionally resonant for readers (McLaren, 2021). By combining voice, tone, and imagery, poetic texts reveal the realities of capitalist injustice while amplifying voices that are often silenced within dominant social structures (Bennett, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2017).

The object of this research is the quotation found in the poem "The Ballad of the Landlord" that reflect economic injustice, power imbalance, and class struggle between the landlord and the tenant. The data consist of selected lines and stanzas taken from the poem, which are then classified based on Marxist theoretical concepts such as class struggle, economic exploitation, power relations, ideology, and resistance.

The research instrument consists of a categorization table and coding based on Marxist literary criticism. The checklist functions as a guide to identify textual patterns that correspond to Marxist concepts, while the categorization table organizes the data according to theoretical indicators. This instrument ensures that each selected utterance aligns clearly with the Marxist framework applied in this study.

Table 1. Categorization Table

No	Quotation	Character	Category	Reason
1.	-	Tenant/Landlord	-	-
2.	-		-	-
3.	-		-	-

The data collection technique used in this research is close reading. According to Morgan (2022), textual documents are valuable sources for qualitative analysis because they contain cultural and ideological meanings. The data source was Langston Hughes' poem "The Ballad of the Landlord," with particular focus on quotation that indicate economic oppression, class inequality, and resistance. The researcher conducted multiple readings of the poem to identify relevant lines that reflect Marxist concepts.

The data were collected through close reading of Langston Hughes' poem "The Ballad of the Landlord." The researcher identified lines and stanzas that reflect economic injustice and class relations. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis by interpreting recurring themes of exploitation, power imbalance, and resistance through a Marxist perspective.

In summary, this research applies a qualitative descriptive approach supported by close reading and deductive content analysis to examine how "The Ballad of the Landlord" represents economic injustice and class conflict. The methodological framework, consisting of categorization, coding, and interpretation, enables the researcher to reveal

how the poem articulates the voice of the oppressed working class from a Marxist perspective.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study are drawn from ten selected lines in Langston Hughes' poem "The Ballad of the Landlord," which reflect recurring themes of exploitation, power imbalance, and resistance. Through qualitative textual analysis, each line was examined to understand how everyday experiences of the tenant reveal broader class relations. The analysis shows that economic exploitation is the most prominent theme, followed by power imbalance, while resistance appears in limited but meaningful forms. One clear example of economic exploitation is found in the line "Ten Bucks you say I owe you?", which expresses the tenant's confusion and frustration in facing unilateral financial demands from the landlord.

The poem also highlights power imbalance through the landlord's reliance on institutional authority, particularly when the conflict escalates to police intervention and legal punishment. Lines such as "Police! Police! Come and get this man!" and "JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL!" show how systems of law work against the working class rather than protecting them. At the same time, the tenant's voice of resistance emerges through simple but firm protests, such as "Till you fix this house up new," reflecting an attempt to claim dignity and basic living rights. Together, these patterns portray the unequal relationship between the owner class and the working class, where exploitation and control dominate, and resistance is present but constrained by structural power. The categorized findings are presented in the table below, followed by further discussion in the next section.



Table 1. Categorization Table

No.	Quotation	Character	Category	Reason (Expert Citation)
1	“My roof has sprung a leak.”	Tenant	Material Injustice	Reflects systematic oppression that targets specific groups (Williams, 2023).
2	“These steps is broken down.”	Tenant	Neglect / Unsafe Housing	Fits Jimoh’s idea that the owner class maintains dominance by withholding proper living conditions (Jimoh, 2021).
3	“Ten Bucks you say I owe you?”	Tenant	Economic Exploitation	Aligns with class conflict where owners impose economic pressure on workers (Nurhajjah & Z, 2023).
4	“Till you fix this house up new.”	Tenant	Voice Resistance	Expresses resistance, of consistent with poetry as a tool for marginalized protest (Ahmed, 2021).
5	“You gonna get eviction orders?”	Landlord	Institutional Threat	Demonstrates oppression through institutional intimidation (Groothuis, 2021).
6	“You gonna cut off my heat?”	Landlord	Structural Violence	Matches the definition of structural violence embedded in systems (Macassa, 2021).
7	“You gonna take my furniture and throw it in the street?”	Landlord	Economic Threat	Represents ideological justification of harmful capitalist practices (Rehmann, 2022).
8	“You talking high and mighty.”	Tenant	Power Imbalance	Reflects ideology that elevates dominant groups above the oppressed (Hamadi, 2017).

No.	Quotation	Character	Category	Reason (Expert Citation)
9	“Police! Police! Come and get this man!”	Landlord / System	Criminalization	Supports the idea that institutions maintain capitalist power (Eagleton, 2013).
10	“JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL!”	Judge / System	Structural Racism & Oppression	Shows how class conflict becomes institutional punishment (Das, 2023)



Discussion

Economic Exploitation as the Core of Class Injustice

The findings indicate that economic exploitation is the most dominant theme in “The Ballad of the Landlord.” This exploitation is represented through unequal economic demands imposed by the landlord, particularly in relation to rent payments and neglected living conditions. Lines such as “Ten Bucks you say I owe you?” and “My roof has sprung a leak” reflect the tenant’s position as a working-class individual who is financially burdened while simultaneously denied basic living standards. From a Marxist perspective, this situation illustrates how the owner class benefits economically by treating housing as a commodity rather than as a basic human need.

Marxist theory emphasizes that exploitation occurs when the ruling class gains profit by maintaining unequal economic relations. In the poem, the landlord’s refusal to repair the house while continuing to demand rent demonstrates how capitalist housing systems prioritize profit over human welfare. The tenant’s repeated complaints about unsafe and neglected conditions reinforce the idea that economic injustice is not incidental, but structural, embedded within the landlord–tenant relationship.

Power Imbalance and Institutional Control

Beyond economic exploitation, the poem strongly represents power imbalance through the involvement of legal and institutional authority. Lines such as “Police! Police! Come and get this man!” and “JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL!” reveal how conflicts rooted in economic inequality escalate into institutional punishment. This reflects a Marxist understanding that state institutions, including the police and judicial system, often function to protect the interests of the owner class rather than to ensure justice for the working class.

The criminalization of the tenant highlights how power operates not only through economic pressure but also through legal force. The tenant’s protest is reframed as criminal behavior, while the landlord’s neglect and exploitation remain unquestioned. This imbalance demonstrates that the working class has limited access to power and is vulnerable to repression when challenging economic injustice.

Resistance as a Limited but Meaningful Class Response

Although resistance appears less frequently than exploitation and power imbalance, it remains a significant theme in the poem. The tenant’s line “Till you fix this house up new” represents an attempt to assert dignity and demand fair treatment. From a Marxist perspective, this form of resistance reflects an early stage of class awareness, where the oppressed begin to recognize injustice and voice their dissatisfaction.

However, the poem also shows that such resistance is constrained by structural power. The tenant’s protest does not lead to change but instead results in punishment, illustrating how resistance by the working class is often suppressed within capitalist systems. Despite its limitations, the presence of resistance is important because it gives voice to the lived experiences of the oppressed and exposes the inhumanity of unequal class relations.

Hughes’ Humanistic Marxist Critique

Through simple language and everyday dialogue, Langston Hughes presents a humanistic critique of capitalism that centers on the lived experience of the working class. Rather than abstract theory, the poem conveys economic injustice through ordinary



struggles leaking roofs, broken stairs, unpaid repairs, and sudden encounters with police. This approach aligns with Marxist literary criticism, which views literature as a reflection of material conditions and class struggle.

Overall, the discussion reveals that “The Ballad of the Landlord” portrays economic exploitation as the foundation of class injustice, reinforced by institutional power and met with limited resistance. The poem ultimately amplifies the voice of the oppressed working class, exposing how capitalist structures dehumanize individuals and silence their demands for justice.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Langston Hughes’ “The Ballad of the Landlord” clearly represents economic injustice between the owner class and the working class through everyday interactions between a landlord and a tenant. From a Marxist perspective, the poem reveals how economic exploitation operates through unequal rent demands and neglected living conditions, placing the tenant in a disadvantaged position. These conditions show that housing functions as a commodity controlled by the owner class rather than as a basic human need.

In addition, the poem demonstrates a strong power imbalance through the involvement of legal and institutional forces. The use of police intervention and legal punishment reflects how social institutions tend to protect the interests of the owner class while marginalizing the working class. Although resistance is present through the tenant’s verbal protests, it remains limited and constrained by structural power. Overall, the poem presents a humanistic critique of capitalist social relations by amplifying the voice of the oppressed and exposing the mechanisms that sustain class domination. This study affirms the relevance of Marxist literary criticism in understanding literature as a reflection of social inequality and class struggle.

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