

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

This thesis examines how classism is portrayed in the main characters from middle and upper classes of John Cheever's short stories. The stories were written in the twentieth century. Those stories are *The Housebreaker of Shaddy Hill*, *Reunion*, and *The Swimmer*. Three of the stories are chosen from the anthology of *The Stories of John Cheever*, and they contain the classist issue of American society in early twentieth century.

Classism happens in American society in 20th Century and it influenced many aspects of life such as economy, social, education, etc. William Henry Harrison said in his speech on October 1st, 1840 "... all the measures of the government are directed to the purpose of making the rich richer and the poor poorer." The significant economic growth The United States from exports to the rest of the world after The United States came out of World War II as the only intact industrial economy in the world created a large middle class and stable working class. Skilled and/or unionized working-class people began to own homes and had pensions; the children and grandchildren of poor immigrants and African Americans went to college in large numbers and populated the new sprawling middle-class suburbs. Anti-Communist McCarthyism repressed

union organizer and others who spoke up against classism (Bluestone & Harrison, 1984).

Classism is criticized by Marxism. In her work *Critical Theory Today*, Tyson said “Classism is an ideology that equates one’s value as a human being with the social class to which one belongs.” The class used to be the standard of success measurement; in other words, there is no other thing that is more important than economic material and how to pursue the high class stratification. There are five groups in America as America’s underclass, lower class, middle class, and the highest is upper class and “aristocracy”. The highest is considered as the best position. The upper class and “aristocracy” are economically privileged; they enjoy luxurious lifestyles, affected by economic recessions and have a financial security.” (55)

On the contrary to the upper class, the underclass and the lower class are economically oppressed; they suffer from ills of economic privation and hit by economic recession. One of the implications of Classism is alienation, a social condition in which men’s own powers become independent forces which control their actions (Howard 8). Marxism sees progress as coming about through the struggle for power between different social classes (Barry 157). This means that Marxism criticizes the operation of classism happens between two different social classes or more.

People may find some short story writers and novelists who depict classism in their works. One of them is an American novelist and short story writer named John

William Cheever who likes to write American story. He was born as the second child of Frederick Lincoln Cheever, who was a prosperous shoe salesman and Mary Liley Cheever in May 27, 1912 who died in June 18, 1982. Cheever was sometimes called “the Chekhov of the Suburbs.” He spent much of his childhood in a large Victorian house at 123 Winthrop Avenue, in the genteel suburb of Wollaston, Massachusetts. In 1926, Cheever begun attending Thayer Academy, a private day school, but he found the atmosphere stifling and he was finally transferred to Quincy High in 1928. A year later he won a short story contest sponsored by the Boston Herald and was invited back to Thayer as a "special student" on academic probation. That was his first recognition. As the time went on, Cheever became one of the most important short fiction writers of the 20th century (Cheever iv). John Cheever was more known as a short story writer than as a novelist. Cheever was awarded the National Medal for Literature by the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The Stories of John Cheever won the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Cheever was awarded the National Medal for Literature by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His works have been included in the Library of America. Cheever’s popular literary works include *The Enormous Radio*, *Goodbye, My Brother*, *The Five-Forty-Eight*, *The Country Husband*, *The Swimmer*, *The Housebreaker of Shaddy Hill*, and *Reunion*. He also wrote several novels such as *the Wapshot Chronicle*, *the Wapshot Scandal*, *Bullet Park*, and

Falconer. The Stories of John Cheever won the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award. (v)

This study elaborates the portrayal of classism in the short stories included in the anthology of *The Stories of John Cheever*. Those short stories are *The Housebreaker of Shaddy Hill*, *Reunion*, and *The Swimmer*. The classism experienced by the main characters is chosen to be the object of the study since it portrays the gap between upper and middle class society. Cheever criticizes the operation of classism happened in America during twentieth century. Marxist literary criticism is used to analyze these short stories. Using the theory of Marxist Criticism established by Karl Marx, the writer is going to analyze the classism experienced by the main characters in these three short stories; the analysis includes how they obsessed and pursued the highest class stratification in America.

The Housebreaker of Shaddy Hill is a story about a young man named Johnny Hake, who had a happy family (a wife and four kids) and a good job. His parents were divorced when Johnny Hake was five years old. Johnny Hake lived in suburban area called Shaddy Hill. Unfortunately, something bad happened to his career. He was fired from his job. When he conducted his own business, it did not run very well. Because of it, there were tense and frustrations occupied his house. Eager to keep up appearances, however, he did not tell his wife about the financial crisis. He was envy with the life of the bourgeoisie class and tries to equalize his class position with them.

He lost his happiness and his life became miserable because of alienation. Finally, Johnny realized that money was not everything and could not buy happiness.

Meanwhile the second story, *Reunion*, is a short story about a reunion of a son and a father after long time separation as the result of divorce. The son, Charlie, and the father were from the rich family. In the beginning of the story, Charlie seemed happy to see his father again because his father had a good appearance as a gentleman. When his father asked him to have lunch in a restaurant, they entered three different restaurants in America. At that time, Charlie saw the way his father treat the waiters. Then, he knew his real father who was arrogant and overbearing. Charlie became disappointed and he decided not to see his father again in the future.

The last story, *The Swimmer*, is a story about a man named Neddy Merrill who lived in a suburban area but acted as a glamorous city gentleman. The story told Neddy how swims into pool to pool until he gets home. In his journey, he made a stop and did drinking and party with his group of rich friends. However, beneath this security and comfort, he lived in a fake and unhappy life. The experiences lead him into the misfortune that pushed him down in the social ranks and his world. He lost track of friends and did not even know about their moves or illnesses. He cheated on his wife, abandoned his mistress, and consequently ended up alone.

These short stories portray classism. The first one portrays the struggle of a middle class to be a member of the upper class. The second portrays the behavior of an upper class person who becomes bossy in order to gain respects from his subordinates.

The last story portrays how a rich man tries hard to maintain his position as a bourgeoisie. The three stories share the same thing namely the social class minded. The main character in each story struggles to occupy the highest class. In general, the class structure in these short stories is divided into classes that are lower class (proletarian), middle class and upper class (bourgeois). The main characters in these short stories show us how they will do everything to be in the upper class. These three short stories describe how the classism forms them as a person.

The three stories contain the evidence of classist operation in America during twentieth century. The classism is depicted in daily lives of the main characters. The main characters show that their satisfaction of material things never cease. As Marx argues that through developing of social labor men become capable of increasingly developing production and have a growing ability to achieve the satisfaction of higher and higher needs (Howard and King 5). They try to achieve high socio economic class because the bourgeoisie is considered to have the economic power and gain social and political control of their society. Furthermore, the secondary group of American society tries to remove this inequality. According to Tyson (53), the truth about Marxism is: it is a movement of everyone, especially the secondary group of society to move up to a higher social class by advancing their economic power. Therefore, the secondary group in this thesis is the second class of American society who wants to elevate their class position.

B. Statement of the Problem

Based on the background of the study, the writer states the problems as follows:

1. How is classism portrayed through the main characters of the selected John Cheever's short stories?
2. How do the short stories criticize classism in America of the twentieth century?

C. Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is:

1. To explain the portrayal of classism in main characters of John Cheever's short stories.
2. To elaborate the way John Cheever criticizes the classism in America during twentieth century through his short stories.

D. Significance of the Study

This study is expected to be very useful for the readers or anyone who wants to study about Marxist criticism, especially classism. The writer hopes that our

understanding about classism makes us more critical about Marxist concepts that appear in the life of society. It also will help everybody to understand the importance of classism and how it affects people's behavior reflected in literary works. The writer also hopes that this study will be very useful for people who study English literature, especially those who study classism so they can use the analysis to have a good understanding of the classism. The theories of Karl Marx may help them to be more critical when they want to use this theory for their own study. Those theories will make readers able to apply in their work easily.

E. Scope and Limitation

This study focuses on the classism of the main characters behavior in the short stories and also the effects of their behavior toward people. The main characters in these short stories show how they obsess to meet better life. They show us how they do everything to be in high socio economic class. The focus of this thesis is the character of Johnny Hake *The Housebreaker of Shaddy Hill*, the father in *Reunion* and Neddy Merrill in *The Swimmer*.

First, Johnny Hake as the first character in Cheever's *The Housebreaker of Shaddy Hill* is the father who has a family (a wife and four kids) and a good job. The way he criticizes the life of his neighbors which is the upper class and tries to equalize his class position with them will be analyzed here. Second, the father as the second

character in Cheever's *Reunion* who is arrogant and pride. The way the father treats another people whom he considers as the inferior class will be analyzed. And last, Neddy Merrill's character in Cheever's *The Swimmer* who is glamour and unfaithful. The consequences of his behavior toward their family and friends will be analyzed too. All of them are from the secondary group in their society.

F. Theoretical Background

In this paper the writer uses classism as the approach. Tyson said in *Critical Theory Today*, that Marxism focuses on the material and ideologies of socio-economic systems that shapes the psychological experience and behavior of individuals and groups (64). The material that a person or a group of people have will influence their socio-economic systems. Their social and economy life will represent their life. Historically, Marxist criticizes the operation of classism which influence the social and economy in society as stated in Tyson's *Critical Theory Today*, "Classism is an ideology that equates one's value as a human being with the social class to which one belongs (59)." It means a class structure has already been divided into some classes. In general, they are lower class, middle class and upper class. In capitalist society, the upper class or mostly known as the bourgeois is the most powerful class. It is predicted that the class struggle happened since the Victorian era.

The theory that the writer uses to analyze the main characters' classism of these short stories is Marxist criticism by Karl Marx. Karl Marx criticizes the way classism operated in the class structure. According to Bressler (194), the employers (the bourgeoisie) have the economic power and gain social and political control of their society. They savor the luxurious lifestyles affected by economic recessions and have a financial security. In *The Political economy of Marx*, Howard stated that the development of men become capable if they have a growing ability to achieve the satisfaction of higher and higher needs (5). As what we have known, the main characters in these short stories are obsessed with wealth, glory, and pride. They also tend to be considered as a high socio economic class. The classism brings misery and shapes them as a person. Therefore, this theory will be very useful to help this study.

G. Methods of the Study

The writer uses primary and secondary sources to collect the data in order to explain the main questions with sufficient supports. The primary source will be taken from John Cheever's short stories (*The Housebreaker of Shaddy Hill*, *Reunion*, and *The Swimmer*). The writer uses qualitative research. The use of qualitative research aims to have more understanding toward classism and its implementation in the stories. Articles, books, journals or any printed and online materials are used as reference to support this idea. The steps in analyzing this study are shown as follow:

1. Close reading. The writer reads the selected short stories of John Cheever, *The Housebreaker of Shaddy Hill*, *Reunion*, and *The Swimmer*. Then, the writer tries to comprehend the plot of the stories and understand the characters in John Cheever's short stories, especially the main characters.
2. The writer finds the secondary sources on Marxist criticism. The writer finds the relevant theory, articles and journals to be used to support the analysis.
3. The writer identifies the parts of the stories which portray classism. Then, the writer finds which part of the short stories that can be identified as classism. Next, she analyzes the ways classism is portrayed in the short stories.
4. The writer synthesizes the findings into a coherent argument. In this case, the classism in John Cheever's short stories *The Housebreaker of Shaddy Hill*, *Reunion*, and *The Swimmer*. The writer analyses the short stories with the theory of Marxism by Karl Marx which is related to the main characters' classism and how it affects their behavior toward people.
5. The last step is the conclusion of the study. Finally, the writer is making the conclusion.

H. Definition of Key Terms

Bourgeoisie : Bourgeoisie is the dominant class that controls the economic base and establishes all the elements that comprise the superstructure (Bressler 198).

Class structure : Class structure is a set of class positions that exist independently of the specific people who occupy them but that nevertheless determine the class interests of the occupants (Mayer 132).

Classism : Classism is an ideology that equates one's value as a human being with the social class to which one belongs (Tyson 59).

Marxist Criticism : Marxism is a theory of materialist philosophy: that is, it tries to explain things without assuming the existence of a world or of forces beyond the natural world around us, and the society we live in (Barry 156).

Marxism is a movement of everyone, especially the secondary group of society to struggle their class by advancing their economic power (Tyson 53).