

CLASS STRUGGLE REPRESENTATION BY PHINEAS TAYLOR BARNUM IN THE GREATEST SHOWMAN MOVIE

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the class struggle in the movie “The Greatest Showman” (2017), which depicts the life and work of Phineas Taylor Barnum, a famous American showman and businessman. The analysis uses French and Raven’s (1959) five bases of power theoretical framework, including legitimate, reward, coercive, referent, and expert power. Through a close reading of the film, this research explores how Barnum’s characters navigate social hierarchies and class boundaries in 19th-century America. It investigates how he uses various forms of power to challenge the established social order and create opportunities for himself and his unconventional cast. The findings reveal that Barnum’s characters use a complex interplay of power bases to disrupt the class system, including using legitimate power to gain social acceptance, reward power to incentivize his performers, and referent power to inspire loyalty and admiration. The film also depicts Barnum’s struggle against the coercive power held by elites and his reliance on expert power to establish himself as a popular impresario.

Keywords: *Class Struggle; the Greatest Showman; Phineas Taylor Barnum; French and Raven’s theory of power*

INTRODUCTION

Class struggle refers to the conflicts and tensions that occur between social groups that have different interests and access to resources in a society. The issue of class struggle has long been a focus in social science studies, where dominant classes seek to maintain the status quo while oppressed classes struggle for equality and justice (Morris, 2023). The representation of class struggle in works of art, such as film, is important because it can tell the experiences and aspirations of marginalized groups that are often overlooked in official narratives (Noviana et.al 2022, Ally et.al, 2021).

The impact of class struggle in society can be significant, socially, economically and politically (Ostrowsky, 2021). The representation of class struggle in *The Greatest Showman* can lead to reflections on the implications of inequality and marginalization on people’s lives (Nurahma et.al, 2022). Through the analysis of the main character who tries to break through

the boundaries of social class, the film can show how the main character's struggle to achieve equality and recognition can lead to fundamental changes in the structure of society. Thus, the study of the representation of class struggle in *The Greatest Showman* has a broad impact, not only on academia but also on public discourse on justice and social change.

The Greatest Showman is a biographical musical released in 2017, directed by Michael Gracey. The movie stars Hugh Jackman as P.T. Barnum, a businessman of working-class origin, as well as Zac Efron, Michelle Williams, Rebecca Ferguson, and Zendaya in other notable roles. The screenplay was written by Jenny Bicks and Bill Condon. *The Greatest Showman* tells the story of Barnum's journey to realize his dream of establishing the Barnum & Bailey Circus, a large circus featuring people with physical uniqueness and extraordinary talents. Through a storyline steeped in musicals and drama, the film explores themes such as class struggle, the search for identity, and the desire for success and recognition in a society dominated by elites. By telling Barnum's inspiring story, *The Greatest Showman* conveys a message of diversity, acceptance, and the power of dreams to change lives.

In *The Greatest Showman*, P.T. Barnum's class struggle as the main character can be seen from three main aspects economic, social, and political. Economically, Barnum came from a working-class background and had to struggle hard to build his business, Barnum & Bailey Circus, from scratch and prove himself amidst the dominance of the financially established elite. Through his creativity and courage, he succeeded in creating unique and desirable entertainment for the public, thus achieving wealth and higher social status. Socially, Barnum fought for acceptance and recognition for people with physical differences and abilities considered "abnormal" by elite society, by giving them a stage in his circus as a form of appreciation for human diversity. Politically, Barnum had to deal with the influence and political power of elite groups who tried to block his ambitions, but with his ingenuity and courage, he was able to navigate these obstacles and prove that even someone from the working class can achieve success and recognition.

The class struggle of the main character P.T. Barnum in *The Greatest Showman* is of interest to the researcher because it reveals relevant and inspiring messages to the audience. Through Barnum's conflicts in facing the dominance of the elite class, be it economic, social or political, the film conveys key themes such as the struggle to realize dreams, the importance of diversity and acceptance, and the ability of individuals from humble backgrounds to achieve success and recognition. Barnum's struggles illustrate how one can overcome the obstacles and limitations imposed by established social structures, and prove that everyone has the potential to transform their lives through hard work, creativity and

courage. Thus, an analysis of Barnum's class struggle not only enriches our understanding of the movie, but also conveys messages that can inspire viewers to pursue their dreams and fight for equality despite the challenges they face.

RESEARCH METHOD

Researchers used a qualitative descriptive method in this study. This research requires data in the form of words, sentences, or scenes from the movie. Researchers watch the movie first to get a deep understanding of the story. Then the researcher record and observe all information related to the problem formulation. This descriptive qualitative research emphasize more on understanding and interpreting social phenomena in depth, and focus more on pictures and words as data, have unique data analysis procedures, and combine various research designs. The selection of the right research method is very important to do, so that this research can be carried out systematically, objectively, and produce valid findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, researchers explain the answers to the research questions. Namely, researchers analyze the forms of power used by Phineas Taylor Barnum as a struggle depicted in the film *The Greatest Showman*.

Five forms of Power by Phineas Taylor Barnum as a struggle in *The Greatest Showman* Movie

1. Legitimate Power

Data: "Oh, Mr. Bennett. That word you used to describe my show, has a nice ring to it. P.T. Barnum's Circus. This way."

In this scene, Barnum demonstrates his power and influence as the circus's founder. By declaring the name of his circus, he asserts his right to the work and creation that he has built. This reflects his official position and legitimacy as a leader. This quote reflects Barnum's attempt to define the identity and vision of his circus. He struggled to gain recognition in a society that looked down on its performers. By putting his name out front, he sought to change public perception and show that his circus was worthy of respect and recognition.

2. Coercive Power

Data: "New York society will never accept us. If they did, they'd have to stop judging... and actually do something with their lives."

In this scene, Barnum reflects an awareness of the judgment and discrimination faced by his performers from elite society. He challenges social norms by stating that their acceptance would require changing how society views people who are considered different. This

demonstrates a defiant stance that could be considered coercive power, where he seeks to counter negative judgments. This quote reflects Barnum's struggle to overcome the stigma encountered by his community. He strives to change society's views and fight discrimination, showing that society must do better than just judge. It was part of his mission to give a voice to his performers and fight for their right to be accepted.

3. Referent Power

Data: "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. I recently had the privilege of hearing the most divine voice..."

In this scene, Barnum speaks to the audience in a tone full of respect and recognition. He builds an emotional connection with his audience and performers. He uses his influence to create memorable moments and generate curiosity and support from the audience.

This quote reflects Barnum's efforts to elevate the status of marginalized artists. By showing appreciation for their talent, he fought against social stigma and gave them a space to be recognized. This was part of his mission to change society's view of people who were considered different and to fight for their right to be valued and accepted.

4. Expert Power

Data: "People come to my show for the pleasure of being hoodwinked. Just once, I would love to give them something real."

In this scene, Barnum shows a deep understanding of what audiences are looking for in his shows. He realized that people came for entertainment that amused and outwitted them, but he also longed for the opportunity to provide something more authentic. This reflects his skill and vision as an entertainer.

This quote also reflects Barnum's internal conflict between commercialism and the desire to provide deeper meaning to the audience. He struggled to overcome the stigma attached to his shows and wanted to show that his circus could be more than just superficial entertainment. This was part of Barnum's attempt to change society's perception of his performers and give them a chance to show their true selves.

5. Reward Power

Data: "I will make you the most famous singer not in Europe but in the entire world."

In this scene, Barnum promises fame and recognition to his performers by offering rewards to Jenny Lind, a professional Swedish opera singer, to help her contribute to his circus business and make money for his circus. Jenny Lind, played by Rebecca Ferguson, creates hope and a desire to achieve something greater.

This quote reflects Barnum's struggle to empower the performers. He tried to fight the stigma and discrimination they faced by showing that they had the potential to achieve great things. These efforts were part of his mission to change society's view of people who were different, giving them a space to shine and be accepted.

As the data of the research unfold how class struggles are portrayed in the movie "The Greatest Showman", the description cannot stand without the idea that the class struggle itself is understood by many as the putting the poor against the rich, or the humble against the powerful. As explained in the above findings that it is so much more than just those debate and therefore serve much more complexities. As a form of social complexity, the gap between the poor and the rich can be manifested in different kinds of things such as how rain is viewed as blessing for the upper class, but as disaster for the poor. So does how in some areas, body odor can be a determiner of class struggle as well (Noviana et.al 2022, Ally et.al, 2021). Meanwhile, in other areas, as Morris (2023) revealed that even within the same industry, social struggles can occur such as the difference between countryside and town. Therefore, this study represent social struggle and power and how one have the desire to take oneself out of his class and move up to belong to a higher society.

CONCLUSION

In The Greatest Showman, Phineas Taylor Barnum is not only portrayed as an entertainer, but also as a symbol of complex class struggle. Through the various forms of power he wields including Legitimate Power, Referent Power, Expert Power, Coercive Power, and Reward Power Barnum seeks to elevate the status and recognition of marginalized people in society. The legitimizing power he had as the circus founder gave him the position to challenge social norms. Meanwhile, the referent power and rewards he offers to his performers create a sense of solidarity and hope, helping them to believe in themselves. On the other hand, the expert power Barnum demonstrated in creating exciting shows confirmed that he understood the needs of the audience, as well as the desire to provide something more tangible.

Barnum also faced challenges from a skeptical elite society, which demonstrated the use of coercive power in his struggle for recognition. Through this narrative, the movie illustrates how Barnum not only strives for personal success, but also to change society's view of the perceived lower social classes. As such, The Greatest Showman serves as a reflection on class struggle, inviting viewers to reflect on the values of acceptance and inclusion in a society that is often divided by stigma and discrimination. Barnum, as the

central character, creates a space for marginalized people to shine, making his story relevant in the context of today's social struggles.

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