

A Satire on Capitalism in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this final paper is to identify the issue of capitalism in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* through Marxism theory. The writer uses book reading method to understand the theory well, internet browsing and note-taking method were also used to collect further information regarding Marxism. From the intrinsic elements, only the characters, setting, and conflicts are analyzed. The extrinsic element will contain issues of capitalism. The writer focuses specifically only on three aspects from Marxism theory: false consciousness, alienation, and class-struggle. The writer also analyzes how the capitalism effects are being satirized to criticize capitalism itself. The result shows that capitalism issue within the novel has its effects implanted in the protagonist's life and the author succeeds in satirizing the story into a good irony compared to real life situation.

Keyword: capitalism, Marxism theory, characters, setting, conflicts, false consciousness, alienation, class-struggle, satire, irony.

1. Introduction

Capitalism has become a much bigger issue now in 21th century. Compared to the significance and the power of capitalism in earlier dawn of the industries and technology, today's society is prone to be exploited by the unseen force of capitalism. This is why the topic of capitalism to be important to be discussed. Capitalism treats everything as an object to invest on, to make profit from, and to exploit. People are no longer considering about feeling or any other trifling subjects that actually make

them as human being. This novel also shows how this capitalism almost dictated how a person may think and work. The capitalism is shown through the protagonist's life with he seems to be almost invisible with all of his wealth, but he does not realize that he had been controlled by the capitalism's effects within him.

Also, it is interesting how the novel's author, Don DeLillo, manages to create an irony from the real life's condition. He cleverly delivers the narration as a believable story while the story itself is interpretable as a complete reversal from what should have happened in real life. This is the reason why the writer chose in this final paper to analyze the capitalism along with the irony that the author generates throughout the story.

The writer limits this final paper's problem so the topic will not diverge from its main focus. Only capitalism effects experienced by the novel's protagonist as the story progresses are to be analyzed by the writer. The writer does not discuss how capitalism works in the society presented in the novel or how other people beside the protagonist react to it.

This paper analyzes capitalism that is heavily apparent within the novel and its effects according to Marxism theory from the protagonist's experiences throughout the story. The writer also explains how this novel can be categorized into a satire for capitalism and how it can be considered as an irony to a real life situation.

In gathering the data needed for this paper, the writer used books research, library research, internet browsing, and note-taking for contents related to the capitalism and satire.

2. Literary Review

There will be two elements explained in the literary review, which are intrinsic elements and extrinsic elements.

2.1. Intrinsic Elements

Intrinsic elements are the literary aspects found within the literary works and build the literature as a whole solid union. From the intrinsic, only the characters, setting, and conflicts are to be discussed in this final paper.

Robert states that characters are persons created by the writer to play and embody the ideas the author presented. Characters come alive through their attitudes and talks (2007: 1266). In the novel, the author creates the protagonist as the central character with conflicts revolved around him. He embodies the author's idea of a bourgeoisie that will be played with the author's rhythm as the story progresses. Other characters presented in the novel are to help create a fuller picture of the broken capitalism-influenced society. Both intrinsic and extrinsic elements will be discussed for the protagonist, but as Eric Packer is a representation of the bourgeois class, the writer will analyze him more in the extrinsic element than in the intrinsic.

In intrinsic elements, there is a crucial element called "setting". Setting can be defined as the imaginary world the author created for the story to take place. It is not rare that the author used a real life places as the setting for the story to become more realistic. Setting is also significant in absorbing the atmosphere in conflicts between the characters. "But setting is not just some inert 'background'... setting is ...the concepts of 'story space' and 'the focus of spatial attention'" (Amigoni, 2000:29).

The setting of the novel takes place in the protagonist's limousine within one day journey in New York City. The author places his story's background in a secluded place as the foreshadowing of the theme and atmosphere that will happen in the protagonist's journey.

There is also "conflict" within the intrinsic element. Conflict is a vital element within a story. It can be said that story is a compilation of conflicts woven according to its timings and the people affected by it. Without any conflict, the story will not have anything to deliver to its reader. "... a conflict is the result of opposing interests involving scarce resources, goal divergence and frustration" (Weissmann, 2005: 9). It takes at least two of opposing sides to create a conflict.

The author put Eric Packer, the protagonist, in many ordeals throughout the story. In this paper, only several major conflicts are to be discussed. One of the conflicts involves the opposition of Eric Packer to an inanimate object, while the rest are against people in his surroundings. Since the conflicts also contain many Marxist elements in it, so the discussion is further described more extensively in the extrinsic element.

2.2.Extrinsic Elements

In the extrinsic element, the issues found on the novel are to be discussed with Marxist theory. Marxism theory is mainly used to criticize capitalism.

In modern industry, there is one central factor that applied on the industry's process abnormally, called capitalism (Hobson, 1902: 19). The message or idea is repackaged into something undeniably good so that the positive vibe it has can be received well by the people at that time (Schumpeter, 2013: 9).

By analyzing the effects caused by it, capitalism can be identified as one of modern society's major threat. Ironically, not everyone knows about the existence of capitalism. By using Marxism, capitalism can be detected in general and can be analyzed deeply after the discovery of the issue. Marxism theory existence may prove to be a threat for capitalism because it can reveal about the negative and rotten side of capitalism. It is as if Marxism is born as a stand-alone counter attack to reveal this dirty practice.

The aspects from Marxist that are going to be discussed are false consciousness, alienation, and class struggle. According to Marx, in his book *Communist Manifesto* (1888: 17), a man's ideas, views, and conceptions, or in other word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the condition of his material existence, in his social relations, and in his social life.

It is possible that a man may generate a false idea, or commonly referred as false consciousness, of what he believes as his consciousness and results in being controlled by an invisible shackles of his own mind. It is often that false

consciousness is generated by the bourgeoisie to exploit the proletarians so that they will not revolt against their disadvantaged position.

Alienation, however, is the condition when people are no longer having the ability to blend with each other, both individually, or between groups in a working environment. Schumpeter states in his book, that each party or a social class has its own code in expressing something to its kind, whether it is about existence, location, or behavior. This expression will only appeal to the certain class (Schumpeter, 2013: 16).

According to Marxism, there are two most basic classes, which are the proletariat and the bourgeois, categorized to their logic, position, and independent willingness. Those two classes are to oppose each other by nature. Hence, the natural disposition of the relationship between capitalist and proletariat is a dispute or rather "the class-struggle" (Schumpeter, 2013: 24). This class struggle, or often called as class warfare or class conflict, in short is the tension of antagonism in a society due to different classes' ideals, financial desires and conditions.

More in extrinsic elements, the writer also discuss about satire. Satire is always used as a mockery against the ugly situation that happened in real life. It is a technique used by authors to expose and criticize people's stupidity or corruption within the society. Satire uses irony, humor, or exaggeration, rather than harsh words, to criticize about how broken this world have become, to become a critic for the guilty party, and to humor people who may have encountered such things. It is intended to make light of a certain incident or tendency of people's foolishness.

Satire can be considered as an art which content is about a gentle ridicule or a well-merited reproof. Satire's charm lies in the all true representation of ugly social aspects, which people are familiar with, that often happen in real life (Maurier, 1898: 20).

3. Discussion

3.1. Intrinsic Elements

3.1.1. Character

Eric Packer is a man with incredible wealth. He shows his extravagant money spending by personally buying elevators and making the elevator to play his favorite piece of music for him. “I have two private elevators now. One is programmed to play Satie’s piano pieces and to move at one-quarter normal speed” (DeLillo, 2004: 28). He can spend money on whatever he wants without other people’s consent. His attitude of never considering other people’s opinion or interest is almost inhuman.

Even with all of his arrogance, Packer possesses a great intelligence and brilliant mind. He works in perfect accuracy and preciseness in building his wealth from the stock market. “He understood how much it meant to him, the roll and flip of data on a screen. He studied the figural diagrams that brought organic patterns into play, birdwing, and chambered shell” (DeLillo, 2004: 24).

The next trait he shows is that he is extremely stubborn. His stubbornness is almost beyond control, to the point that he refuses to accept the fact that his request cannot be done at the moment. Once he wants to do something or request about anything, it has to be done immediately. He does not take a “no” as an answer, no matter how ridiculous his demand is or how difficult it is to carry out.

“I want a haircut”
“The president’s in town.”
“We don’t care. We need a haircut. We need to go
crosstown.
“You will hit traffic that speaks in quarter inches.”
“... Show me my car”(DeLillo, 2004: 11).

In the quotation, Packer stubbornly insists that he has to get a haircut on that day. Torval’s unwillingness to obey Packer’s command is apparent with the many reasons he provides. But Packer does not want to know about any hindrance. He even uses “we” instead of an “I” to make as if his opinion is formed from the public opinion and that everyone has agreed to him.

3.1.2. Setting

The story of *Cosmopolis* takes place in the New York City (NYC). The narration tells about the tall buildings, the dark alleys in between, and the streets packed with cars. The reason why NYC is chosen as the setting is perhaps because of the stereotype it has. A metropolis city filled with tall buildings, high criminality rate, and all kinds of people blended together, is truly the definition of a modern city in 21st century. “The view was across bridges, narrows and sounds and out past the boroughs and tooth paste suburbs into measures of landmass and sky that could only be called the deep distance” (DeLillo, 2004: 6). There is no better city as fitting as NYC to compare with if the main purpose of the setting is to show how capitalism has run thickly in people’s lives. It is also needed to set this story in NYC, which is part of the capitalist country U.S.A, so the tone of capitalism is drilled even deeper within the setting.

The social setting in the story’s fictional NYC is not far from the actual society in real world, where the streets are prowling with executives in their luxurious private cars and the thugs are slumping in between the dark alleys. As for the time setting, all of Packer’s journey happens only within a single day, from his early sleepless morning to the nighttime when everything has gone downhill. He wakes up as a rich businessman in the morning and ends his night kneeling in front of his murderer, waiting for the final deciding shot that will end his life

3.1.3. Conflict

Packer gains much wealth from the stock market back before the story even started. Little does Packer know that the source of his wealth also brings his doom near the end of the story. The conflict between Packer and the stock market is also a kind of class struggle. Packer is placed as the proletariat in this case, while the stock market is the capitalist. Packer, although is wealthy and can be counted as a bourgeoisie, gains nothing for all the works he had done for the stock market. It will be discussed further in the extrinsic elements.

In the fictional NYC, there is a person named Andre Petrescu who is famous for his continuous efforts of shaming wealthy figures. His modus operandi is by

slamming his works of pastries into these powerful men or women and calling up the reporters to get the shots for publicity. The class struggle is apparent in this conflict. The position of the bourgeoisie is held by Packer and the proletariat is held by Andre Petrescu. Andre Petrescu is struggling against the power of the bourgeois, represented by Packer, and is willing to do his silly act just to “sabotage” the power.

Torval is Packer’s bodyguard that accompanies him from the start of the journey. He is described as a “bald and no necked, a man whose head seemed removable for maintenance” (DeLillo, 2004: 11). Packer and Torval’s conflict starts as soon as the first dialogue, about Packer wanting to get a haircut, appears in the novel. Torval insists and advises Packer not to venture into downtown that day. Even though he complies and carries out his job to guard Packer, he gives many alternatives to prevent Packer to go to his regular barbershop and avoid unnecessary traffic jams and other troubles to Packer’s safety. Unfortunately, his words fell to the deaf ears.

Benno Levin is a man who got discharged from Eric Packer’s list of employees. He is described as a man who has unhealthy obsession for Packer, to the point of mimicking and memorizing Packer’s speeches even from back when Levin was still working under Packer. “I must be mouthing his words again. Because I’m sure he said it once...” (DeLillo, 2004: 55). He blackmails Packer’s firm with all the knowledge he got during his employment at the office. He is sending meaningless threats with a thin hope of getting a chance to get a glimpse of Eric Packer once again. He is beyond delighted when Packer does show up at his area and finally he can talk about his obsession, grudge, and finally kill Packer.

3.2.Extrinsic Elements

3.2.1. False Consciousness and the Satire

Packer is too obsessed in working and watching the stock market’s currency flow without thinking whether his work provides a true benefit for him or not. The way Packer manages his business has gone overboard with all the devotion he pours into it. All the hard-working he has done does not mean necessarily that he is a

workaholic but rather it is his obsession and false thinking that drive him to work continuously without having time to spend for himself as a human.

Packer's confidence in his abilities of analyzing the stock market is a form of false consciousness. This false consciousness clouds his mind so that he never doubts that his logic and intuition will always bring him the desired outcome. Hence, Packer is unconsciously making him fall deeper and deeper into the abyss called the stock market as he tries to maintain his comfort zone, the wealthy life.

Packer always longs for money, to pay all the necessities of his everyday life, to pay all of his subordinates, and to be able to keep betting at the stock market. However, Packer never realizes that the process of monitoring the sleepless stock market and amassing money there are the things that keep him sane. He is addicted to those regularities and is satisfied to be able to do these.

To put it simply, Eric Packer experiences false consciousness in many forms. First, he believes that he has a perfect world where everything goes as he desires and he is the only powerful being in that world. Second, Packer believes that stock market is his source of money and he will not fail to get money from there. Third, Packer really believes in his abilities, mind, and intuition to understand the stock market. Fourth, Packer is blinded by his money-oriented life and believes that money is the most important thing he needs in his life.

The satire lies on the events that befall Packer. He continuously pursues money for the number on the money itself. He does not use the monetary value that the money provides. He never uses the money to buy any other thing beside the digital-numbered funds on the stock market.

3.2.2. Alienation and the Satire

Eric Packer is alienating himself against many things and persons in the novel. He is alienating himself against the money, which he pursues so badly, because he unconsciously feels that money is a burden to him. Eric Packer also alienates himself against his surroundings so that he has this feeling of assurance and security where everything is okay. Packer alienates himself against his sub-ordinates,

his wife, and his bodyguard for the same reason. He does not want to have anyone near him to possess any significant power that may threaten his idea of having a single absolute command of everything in his private world.

The irony lies on Packer's attitude against money. He spends days and nights to watch over the stock market to gain money from it. He hungers for money but the money itself is actually the thing that is weighing him down. He is burdened by money but consciously keeps on pursuing the source of his unhappiness.

The irony also lies on Packer's paranoid behavior. He is so scared of other people to possess the same or maybe stronger power than him. He wants to be the only powerful figure and he is so afraid of him being dependent on other people. His strange fetish for power leads him to do unthinkable things that are almost illogical.

Elise Shifrin, his wife, tries to give him financial support so Packer will not be drowning in bankruptcy. Packer is afraid that by accepting this kind gesture, he will no longer possess the power which he used to have before the financial crisis. Packer does not want to be powerless and dependent, so he distributes his fortune carefully into the stock market and makes sure that the money is lost within it, ensuring his unavoidable bankruptcy.

Packer's paranoid behavior does not stop at making him bankrupt. Torval, Packer's bodyguard, once becomes close to him and Packer feels threatened by Torval's figure, who is capable in protecting Packer's life. Packer eliminates the threat by killing Torval. This absurd bold move makes Packer even more defenseless and vulnerable to any life-threatening threat.

3.2.3. Class Struggle and the Satire

Class struggle usually ends up with the proletariat being the loser and the bourgeois becomes the winner. In real life, the bourgeoisie always gets away from the conflict with the power they possessed and the proletarian gains nothing

Andre Petrescu is doing his silly act of hitting wealthy people with pastries to humiliate them, with his twisted belief that he is currently sabotaging the power and

wealth in the world. Benno Levin is making empty threats with a thin hope of luring Packer out to meet him due to his unhealthy obsession for Eric Packer.

The irony on the class struggle on the novel is that the bourgeoisie, Eric Packer, is totally defeated by the proletariats, Andre Petrescu and Benno Levin. The other irony also involves Packer's over-confidence self. Packer bravely goes to confront Benno Levin, after his act of killing his own bodyguard, Torval. Packer decides to eliminate the last remaining threat to him. The result cannot be way more off than Packer's expectation. Packer is powerless in front of Benno Levin and in the end he cannot do anything else apart of waiting pathetically for the sound of gunshot that will end his life, instead of Benno Levin as he firstly has planned.

Rather than subduing the proletarians, Andre Petrescu and Benno Levin, who starts the class conflict against Eric Packer, Packer is giving up his will to fight and accepting what they may do to him. Eric Packer does not have the power to show his superiority and falls as the loser instead. So the proletarians become the winner instead of the bourgeoisie, in contrary to what normally happens in real life.

4. Conclusion

Eric Packer, the protagonist, is shown as a cold and stubborn bourgeoisie. He does not think much to spend away his money. Although Eric Packer sounds quite powerful, he possesses a fatal weakness, which is strangled by the false consciousness over his way of life. He cannot let go of his obsession, or addiction, to the stock market while at the same time the money he gains is useless. He is burdened by the money, but is unable to stop pursuing it because of the false consciousness he has.

He also alienates other people on his surroundings, including his own wife and his most capable bodyguard. Packer's illogical fate is also shown from the incident when he loses to two persons who are the pastry assassin and his ex-employee. It is even more stunning that the both of them belong in the proletariat class. Packer's failure that night grows even worse with the fact that he cannot protect

his life when he is faced with his ex-employee, who is quite unstable and is determined to kill Packer.

The author cleverly creates Eric Packer as his main satirical protagonist against capitalism shown on the novel. Packer is satirized into a bourgeoisie but also experiences proletarian's struggles. He believes that he has own everything in life that the bourgeois class has to offer him. He does not realize that there is an even bigger faction within the bourgeois class, which is the stock market where he spends day and night to pour and gain money.

Don DeLillo manages to create a believable situation where the young bourgeois takes a great fall into his destruction within one day of this novel's journey. The character of Eric Packer is presented in details from his behavior and interaction against other people. The setting is well-created to support the idea of capitalism and to highlight Eric Packer's abnormality, while the conflicts presented by the novel provide the necessary information regarding the issues of capitalism, which are false consciousness, alienation, and class struggle, as well as the satire held within it.

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