

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Structuration of power and symbolic violence in a short story *The Poor Relations' Story* by Charles Dickens through Bourdieu's thought

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the structuration of power and symbolic violence in Charles Dickens' short story *The Poor Relation's Story* through Bourdieu's thought. The research focuses on how power structures within the family shape the protagonist, Michael, and the forms of symbolic violence he experiences. Through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic), and field, this research analyzes how social structures influence character interactions and maintain social hierarchy. The findings reveal that Michael's marginalization is reinforced by the family's economic and social power, leading to his internalization of inferiority. This research contributes to literary analysis by demonstrating how power dynamics and symbolic violence are embedded within literary narratives, reflecting broader social realities.

KEYWORDS

Structuration of power; symbolic violence; Pierre Bourdieu; *The Poor Relation's Story*; Charles Dickens

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1. Introduction

Literary works serve as a reflection of human life and societal structures, allowing readers to explore social realities through artistic expression. Literature, particularly realist fiction, often functions as a medium for social critique, shedding light on issues such as class struggles, social inequality, and the mechanisms of power within society. According to Kepakisan & Aji (2023), literary works can reveal and even shape social reality by depicting themes of inequality and power dynamics. Charles Dickens, one of the most prominent writers of the 19th century, utilized his

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literary works to depict the injustices faced by marginalized individuals. His short story *The Poor Relation's Story* illustrates these themes, portraying the power dynamics within a family that contribute to the symbolic violence experienced by the protagonist, Michael. Understanding how power operates in literature requires a theoretical framework that accounts for the interaction between social structures and individual agency. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts, including habitus, capital, field, and symbolic violence, offer valuable insights into how power is structured and perpetuated within both literature and society (Karim, 2022).

In *The Poor Relation's Story*, Dickens presents Michael as a character who suffers from symbolic violence within his own family. He is subjected to verbal humiliation, social exclusion, and economic marginalization, reinforcing his position as a subordinate figure. Despite his aspirations and internal dignity, Michael's status in the family remains determined by the social structures that dictate power relations. His uncle, Uncle Chill, represents authority and economic dominance, using his wealth to control and suppress Michael. Through this power imbalance, the story demonstrates how social hierarchies are maintained and how individuals internalize their subordinate roles due to continuous exposure to symbolic violence. This aligns with Bourdieu's assertion that symbolic violence occurs when the dominated party unconsciously accepts their position as natural (Kepakisan & Aji, 2023).

Bourdieu's theory provides a framework to analyze the mechanisms that sustain power relations in literature. His concept of habitus refers to the ingrained dispositions that shape an individual's perceptions and actions, which are formed by past experiences and social conditioning (MUSDAWATI, 2018). Capital—whether economic, cultural, social, or symbolic—determines an individual's position within a field, or social space, where struggles for dominance occur. In *The Poor Relation's Story*, these elements converge to show how Michael's lack of capital prevents him from challenging his family's authority. Furthermore, the concept of symbolic violence highlights how oppression can be subtle and internalized, leading individuals to accept their marginalized status as natural and unchangeable (Parayungan, 2023). This is evident in Michael's passive acceptance of his family's treatment, reflecting his internalized habitus and lack of resources to resist oppression.

Previous studies on Dickens' works have explored themes of social inequality and class struggle, particularly in *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* (Wahidah,

2022; Rosyid, 2021; Istibsyaroh, 2008). Research such as Rosyid's (2021) research on *Oliver Twist* using Marxist social conflict theory highlights the impact of class differences in Victorian society. Additionally, Istibsyaroh's (2008) research on *Oliver Twist* discusses poverty and social stratification, showing how economic hardship shapes individual destinies. However, research focusing specifically on *The Poor Relation's Story* through Bourdieu's theoretical lens remains limited. By applying Bourdieu's concepts, this research aims to fill that gap and offer a deeper understanding of how power structures and symbolic violence operate within the narrative. This research contributes to both literary studies and sociological analysis by demonstrating how fiction can reflect and critique real-world power dynamics. The findings will not only enhance the interpretation of Dickens' work but also provide insights into broader social structures that perpetuate inequality.

2. Literature review

2.1. Bourdieu's theoretical framework

2.1.1. *Bourdieu's thought*

Pierre Bourdieu's theory is a bridge between structuralism and constructivism, which attempts to explain how social structures influence individual actions while still allowing for agency. His ideas are rooted in his personal experiences and observations of social hierarchies, particularly from his upbringing in a rural village, his education in Paris, and his time in Algeria. His theoretical contributions focus on understanding power relations in society, particularly how dominant groups maintain their position through cultural and symbolic means. His key concepts include habitus, capital, and field, which together explain the mechanisms of social reproduction and hierarchy (Karim, 2022).

Bourdieu criticizes structuralist theories that only focus on objective structures, ignoring individual agency, as well as existentialist theories that emphasize personal freedom without considering social constraints. His approach, called "constructive structuralism" or "theory of practice," acknowledges that while social structures shape human behavior, individuals also have the power to navigate, adapt to, and even challenge these structures. This dynamic interaction between social norms and individual actions is crucial to understanding power relations in various fields, including literature (Siregar, 2016).

By applying Bourdieu's theories to literary studies, researchers can analyze how social structures, power, and symbolic violence manifest within narratives. Literary characters, much like real individuals, operate within social constraints that define their opportunities and limitations. This study applies Bourdieu's thought to Charles Dickens' *The Poor Relation's Story* to explore how social structures shape characters' behaviors and reinforce power dynamics within families (Karim, 2022).

2.1.2. *Habitus*

Habitus is a central concept in Bourdieu's framework, referring to the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their social experiences. It is both structured by past experiences and structuring in that it influences future actions. Habitus is developed over time, shaped by cultural background, education, family upbringing, and social class, leading individuals to internalize certain ways of thinking and behaving that align with their social environment (Musdawati, 2018).

For example, in *The Poor Relation's Story*, Michael's habitus is shaped by his experiences of marginalization within his family. His self-perception as a failure and his submissive attitude stem from a long history of being treated as inferior. His habitus reinforces his inability to resist his family's dominance, leading him to accept his subordinate position without protest. This illustrates how habitus maintains social hierarchies by shaping individuals' perceptions of their place in the world (Bourdieu, 1977).

Habitus is also crucial in understanding how power relations are internalized and perpetuated. The dominant class instills a habitus that legitimizes their authority, making it appear natural and unchallengeable. In literature, characters' habitus reflects their social conditioning, providing insight into the societal norms and structures they navigate. By analyzing habitus in Dickens' work, this research uncovers the subtle mechanisms that sustain power and oppression in family dynamics (Grenfell, 2014).

2.1.3. *Capital*

Bourdieu identifies four types of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. These forms of capital determine individuals' positions within social fields and their ability to exert power and influence. Economic capital refers to financial assets and

material wealth, cultural capital includes education and intellectual achievements, social capital involves networks and relationships, and symbolic capital encompasses prestige and recognition (Kepakisan & Aji, 2023).

In *The Poor Relation's Story*, Michael lacks economic capital, which places him in a vulnerable position within his family. His reliance on a modest allowance underscores his financial dependence, limiting his ability to assert independence. His lack of cultural capital, in the form of formal education or recognized skills, further diminishes his social standing. Meanwhile, his uncle Chill, possessing significant economic and symbolic capital, wields authority over the family, dictating social interactions and reinforcing Michael's subordination (Karim, 2022).

Symbolic capital is particularly significant in the story, as it determines how characters are perceived and treated. Michael's lack of symbolic capital means that his aspirations and personal worth are constantly undermined by his relatives. His inability to alter his social position demonstrates how different forms of capital interact within a field to sustain power hierarchies. This analysis highlights the role of capital in shaping individual destinies and perpetuating social inequality (Grenfell, 2014).

2.1.4. Field

The concept of the field refers to a structured social space where individuals compete for different forms of capital. Each field operates under specific rules, determining what is valued and who holds power. The field of family, as depicted in *The Poor Relation's Story*, is governed by economic and social capital, where wealth and status dictate relationships and individual worth (Musdawati, 2018).

Within this field, Michael occupies a subordinate position due to his lack of capital, while his uncle Chill dominates through his wealth and control over resources. The family field reinforces existing power structures by ensuring that those with capital maintain their influence, while those without remain marginalized. The struggle for dominance within the family mirrors broader societal power struggles, where economic and social capital dictate individuals' opportunities and limitations (Karnanta, 2013).

Bourdieu's concept of the field also emphasizes the importance of strategies used by individuals to navigate social spaces. While Michael attempts to assert his worth through personal integrity and emotional connections, his lack of capital

makes these efforts futile. This study examines how Dickens portrays the family as a microcosm of broader social hierarchies, illustrating the pervasive influence of power structures on individuals' lives (Grenfell, 2014).

2.1.5. Symbolic violence

Symbolic violence is the subtle, often unnoticed imposition of power that leads individuals to accept their own subordination as natural. Unlike physical violence, symbolic violence operates through language, norms, and social expectations, making it a powerful tool for maintaining dominance without resistance. It occurs when the dominated internalize the values of the dominant class, believing in their own inferiority (Musrrofa, 2019).

In *The Poor Relation's Story*, symbolic violence is evident in how Michael is treated by his family. Verbal insults, dismissive attitudes, and social exclusion reinforce his marginalization, shaping his self-perception and limiting his ability to resist. His acceptance of his inferiority exemplifies how symbolic violence operates by making oppression appear normal and justified (Karim, 2022).

Bourdieu argues that symbolic violence is effective because it does not rely on coercion but on social conditioning. Those subjected to symbolic violence often do not recognize it as oppression, instead perceiving it as the natural order of things. This analysis of symbolic violence in Dickens' story reveals how power is maintained through subtle social mechanisms, shedding light on the psychological effects of long-term oppression (Grenfell, 2014).

3. Methods

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method, as explained by Moleong, cited by Kepakisan & Aji (2023), which produces descriptive data in the form of written words. This method is suitable for analyzing *The Poor Relation's Story* by Charles Dickens through Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus, capital, field, and symbolic violence. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth interpretation of language, character interactions, and narrative structures that reflect complex social themes. The descriptive aspect ensures that the analysis remains focused on detailed, context-rich examination without altering the text. By applying Bourdieu's concepts, the study investigates how social class shapes

individual identity and relationships within the narrative, providing a deeper understanding of Dickens' critique of social structures.

The data for this research consists of textual evidence from *The Poor Relation's Story*, using a literature research method with a read-and-note technique. The data collection process involves reading the text thoroughly, identifying key excerpts that illustrate power structures and symbolic violence, and grouping the data based on Bourdieu's theoretical categories. The primary data source is the e-short story version of *The Poor Relation's Story* by José Menéndez, while secondary data is drawn from Bourdieu's works. The analysis categorizes the text according to Bourdieu's key concepts—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital—showing how power relations influence Michael's marginalization. The study also examines the role of habitus in shaping the protagonist's behavior, reinforcing his subordination. Through systematic descriptive analysis, the research highlights how Michael's experiences in the story reflect broader societal inequalities, reinforcing the significance of Dickens' social critique.

4. Results

4.1. Representation of characters based on Bourdieu's concepts

4.1.1. Michael's social position

Michael's position in the family is shaped by his lack of economic, social, and symbolic capital, which places him in a subordinate role. His habitus is a result of repeated marginalization, leading him to internalize a sense of inferiority. This is evident in his statement, *"I have got into a habit of speaking low, and being rather silent..."* (Dickens, 2017:5).

According to Bourdieu, habitus is a system of internalized dispositions formed by past experiences. Michael's habit of speaking softly and remaining silent suggests that he has adapted to his powerless position, accepting his inferiority as something natural. His low spirits reflect a resigned habitus, meaning he no longer resists his subordinate role in the family.

Michael's belief that he is destined for failure further reinforces his internalized subordination. His statement, *"That I never met with any particular success in anything"* (Dickens, 2017:3).

Aligns with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, where the dominated internalize their inferiority as a natural condition. Symbolic violence operates by

making social hierarchies appear legitimate, causing Michael to perceive his failures as personal shortcomings rather than structural oppression. His lack of economic capital also plays a key role in his subjugation.

He lives on a quarterly allowance, as seen in *"Living on a limited income in the form of a quarterly allowance"* (Dickens, 2017:4).

Which reflects his economic dependence on Uncle Chill. Since economic capital determines power within the family field, Michael's inability to generate his own wealth leaves him with little agency.

4.1.2. *Uncle Chill's dominance*

Uncle Chill is the dominant figure in the family, holding economic, social, and symbolic capital, which allows him to control and impose his will on others. His wealth *not* only grants him financial power but also converts into *symbolic* authority, where his opinions and decisions shape family dynamics. His miserly habitus is highlighted in the statement,

"Avarice was, unhappily, my uncle Chill's master-vice. Though he was rich, he pinched, and scraped, and clutched, and lived miserably (Dickens, 2017:7)."

This reflects Bourdieu's idea that economic capital is often accompanied by a specific habitus—in this case, one that prioritizes accumulation over generosity. Uncle Chill's reluctance to share his wealth reinforces his position of control within the family. Uncle Chill also exercises symbolic violence through verbal attacks that reinforce the family's hierarchical structure. His insult,

"This is the gentleman who is going to marry a wife without a penny." (Dickens, 2017:9), ridicules Michael's financial situation and devalues him in the family field. According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence operates through language, where the dominant group imposes its values and standards on the dominated. Uncle Chill's comment enforces the belief that economic success is the primary measure of a man's worth, further marginalizing Michael. His control is not just economic but ideological, ensuring that even those who are dependent on him accept his authority as legitimate.

4.1.3. *Christiana's position*

Unlike Michael, who has internalized his inferiority, Christiana challenges the family's materialistic values. She resists her mother's expectation that she marries a

wealthy man, prioritizing love and personal commitment over financial security. Her defiance is clear in her plea to Michael

"Michael! Let us keep apart no longer... Let us strive together" (Dickens, 2017:11). This statement represents a counter-habitus, where Christiana attempts to redefine success in terms of emotional support rather than economic wealth. Bourdieu explains that while habitus tends to reproduce existing social structures, individuals can still contest dominant norms when alternative values emerge.

However, Christiana's resistance is not without obstacles. Her mother enforces materialist values through symbolic capital, ensuring that wealth remains the defining factor in social status. Christiana acknowledges this pressure in,

"My mother... sets her heart on riches, and urges another suit upon me, to my misery" (Dickens, 2017:11). This reflects how field structures dictate individual actions even though Christiana prefers love over wealth, the family field demands economic stability in marriage. Her struggle is an example of social capital operating as a constraint, where the expectations of her family limit her personal agency.

4.1.4. Structuration of power and symbolic violence in the family field

The family field in *The Poor Relation's Story* operates as a structured space where power is concentrated in the hands of those with capital. Uncle Chill, as the dominant figure, controls the rules of the field, reinforcing economic success as the standard of legitimacy. This leaves Michael with little opportunity to challenge his position. His expectation of an inheritance is dismissed through symbolic violence, as shown in *"You didn't expect! When did you ever calculate, or look forward, you contemptible dog?"* (Dickens, 2017:10). This insult serves to humiliate Michael and strip him of hope, ensuring that he remains dependent and powerless.

Bourdieu's concept of field dynamics explains why Michael's lack of capital makes him an easy target for symbolic violence. In a field where wealth equals authority, Michael is excluded from decision-making processes and subjected to the dominant habitus of economic rationality. His failure to accumulate capital means he cannot participate in the exchange of power, leaving him in a perpetual state of subordination.

5. Discussion

This research demonstrates that Dickens' *The Poor Relation's Story* serves as a reflection of real-world social structures, particularly in its depiction of power hierarchies within families. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field reveal how power is sustained and how marginalized individuals, like Michael, internalize their subordination (see Figure 1). As observed in similar studies on social inequality in literature (Wahidah, 2022; Rosyid, 2021), Dickens' work highlights how economic dependence and social expectations reinforce systemic oppression.

Furthermore, the use of symbolic violence in the story aligns with Bourdieu's assertion that dominance is often maintained through subtle mechanisms rather than direct coercion (Bourdieu, 2002). This analysis underscores the importance of literary texts as tools for examining societal power structures, supporting previous literary studies that employ sociological approaches (Grenfell, 2014; Karim, 2022).

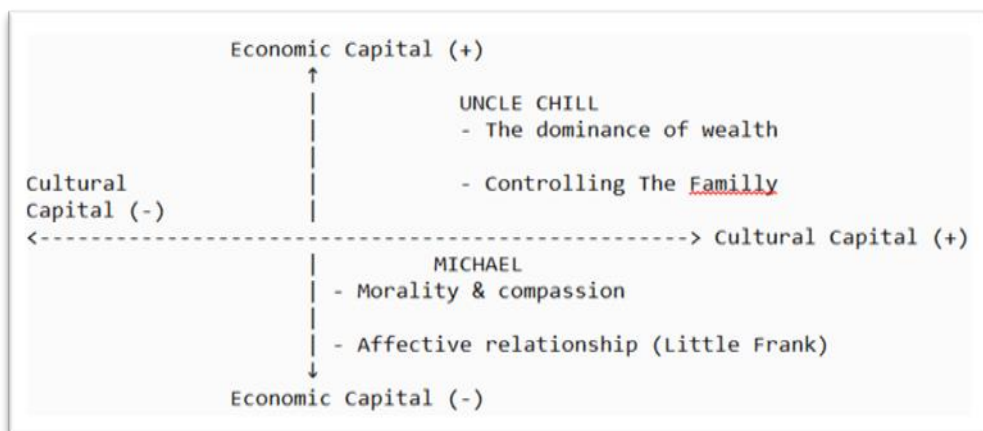


Figure 1. Visualization of Michael's field in his family

Future research could expand this discussion by comparing *The Poor Relation's Story* with other Dickensian works to explore recurring themes of class struggle and symbolic violence.

6. Conclusion

This research reveals that Michael's marginalization is maintained through structured power relations and symbolic violence. Dickens' narrative illustrates how economic capital translates into symbolic domination, shaping individual agency

and reinforcing social hierarchies. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of power mechanisms within literary texts and their reflection on social realities. Through Bourdieu's thought, *The Poor Relation's Story* illustrates how power structures operate within families. Michael's subordination is reinforced by economic dependence and symbolic violence, which prevent him from asserting himself. Uncle Chill's dominance is maintained through economic capital, which he converts into symbolic authority, allowing him to control others without physical force. Christiana's resistance offers a counter-narrative, but she remains constrained by the family's materialistic habitus.

The story serves as a critique of how power is structured in society, showing that economic and symbolic capital determine social status and individual worth. By examining Michael's struggles, Dickens exposes the injustices of a social system that prioritizes wealth over personal value. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field help us understand how social inequalities are reproduced within families, making it difficult for individuals like Michael to escape their predetermined roles.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

Conflict of interest

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