

Marriage and Class Struggle Reflected in “Tulip Fever” (2017) Film by Justin Chadwick

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze: (1) the representation of social class reflected in Tulip Fever (2017), and (2) the marriage of Sophia in Tulip Fever (2017) portrayed as a reflection of class struggle. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the film Tulip Fever, directed by Justin Chadwick, as the object of research. The data collection technique includes watching, transcribing, identifying, classifying, and selecting scenes and dialogues related to social class and marriage. The data analysis involves displaying, interpreting, and relating findings to Marxist literary criticism. The theory is used to understand how power, ideology, and class structure influence character interactions. The result of the study show that: (1) social class is clearly represented through characters, spaces, and power dynamics, such as the contrast between the bourgeoisie (Cornelis) and working-class characters (Maria, Willem); and (2) Sophia's marriage is portrayed not as an emotional choice but as an economic strategy shaped by class oppression. Her failed attempt to rebel reflects the limited autonomy of lower-class women under a capitalist structure.

Keywords: *Marriage, Class Struggle, Marxist Criticism, Tulip Fever, Social Class.*

Introduction

Literature and film are media that not only reflect but also critique social realities. They often serve as mirrors of the struggles, ideologies, and hierarchies present in a society. One such intersection of literature and society is the relationship between marriage and class. According to Engels (1884), a wedding in historical works was an economic institution to strengthen control over wealth and property. The structure of marriage in class-based societies often mirrors property relations. This reflects how class interest can influence love and how marriage can be a means for the lower classes to escape poverty or for the upper classes to maintain power.

Tulip Fever (2017), directed by Justin Chadwick, is a historical drama set in 17th-century Amsterdam during the Dutch Tulip Mania. The film tells the story of Sophia, an orphaned woman who marries a wealthy merchant, Cornelis, for security. Her experience reflects the use of marriage as a survival tool rather than a romantic choice. The analysis of this film provides insight into how marriage is commodified and how class limits personal agency (Goldgar, 2007:19-24).

This article aims to examine how class structures are represented and how marriage reflects class struggle in the film. To achieve this, the research applies Marxist literary criticism, which focuses on power structures, class conflict, and ideology. Marx and Engels (1848) in *The Communist Manifesto* highlight how economic power in the capitalist society often dominates personal relations so that marriage is no longer completely based on love but is an institution of economics.

Literary Review

Sociology of Literature

The sociology of literature is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between literary works and the social contexts in which they are produced. Literature is not only a form of artistic expression but also a reflection of the historical, cultural, and social circumstances of its time. This approach views literature as a social fact and involves two major analyses: how social realities are depicted in literature and how literature functions as a social phenomenon shaped by institutions, authors, readers, and critics (Stanford University Press, n.d.). It highlights the way literature both reflects and shapes society by mirroring cultural values, social structures, and class dynamics.

According to Schram and Steen (2001), further explain that literature can serve as a lens through which we understand interactions between individuals and larger social systems, and advocate for a multidisciplinary analysis that includes psychology and sociology. In this way, the sociology of literature offers a

valuable framework for exploring how literature reflects social realities and engages with contemporary issues.

The Indications of Class Conflict Related to Marxist's Theory of Conflict

Class conflict, as described by Karl Marx, emerges from the opposition between social classes defined by their relationship to the means of production. Marx and Engels divide society into two main opposing classes in a capitalist system (Marx & Engels, 1848:14):

1. The Bourgeoisie (Capitalist Class)

- Owns the means of production (factories, land, and businesses).
- Controls wealth and power in society.
- Accumulates profit by exploiting the working class.

2. The Proletariat (Working Class)

- Does not own the means of production.
- Sells labor to the bourgeoisie in exchange for wages.
- Experiences alienation and oppression under capitalism.

Marx and Engels articulated that history is essentially a history of class struggles, with modern capitalist societies introducing new mechanisms of domination and alienation (Marx & Engels, 1848:14). They argued that only the proletariat, as the revolutionary class, has the potential to challenge and dismantle the capitalist system.

Marx also argued that history is marked by a constant struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed over surplus value, which can lead to social revolution or mutual destruction. Marx and Engels analyze the stages of social history in *The German Ideology* (1945), presenting history as a succession of exploited generations split who owned the means of production. Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1970).

Class Conflict in the Amsterdam during 17th Century

During the 17th century, Amsterdam experienced rapid economic growth as part of the Dutch Golden Age. The city became a hub for trade, finance, and global commerce. However, beneath this prosperity lay a growing disparity between the social classes. According to Israel (1995:437), during this time, workers faced low wages, rising rents, and were treated unfairly by merchants. These economic problems caused tension between the rich and the working class. While the upper class enjoyed luxury and power, many ordinary people struggled just to get by. This gap created social unrest and became one of the main causes of class conflict in cities like Amsterdam.

Marriage as a Reflection of Class Struggle

In Marxist theory, marriage is viewed not merely as a private or romantic bond, but as a social institution deeply embedded in the structure of class relations. Marriage functions as a mechanism that reinforces the economic and ideological framework of capitalism by perpetuating existing class divisions and protecting private property (Marx & Engels, 1848).

Goldgar (2007) described that in the period of Tulip Mania in the 17th century, marriage was often viewed as an economic transaction used to build social alliances and recover the financial condition of individuals, especially those from the lower or working class. It became one of the few available paths for social mobility. This shows how marriage functioned not merely as a personal choice, but also as a reflection of economic survival and class struggle.

Research Method

This study is used a descriptive qualitative study, focusing on the textual analysis of *Tulip Fever*. A qualitative descriptive study aims to characterize and examine phenomena related to events. Through this method, the researcher seeks to interpret the film's portrayal of class conflict and marriage using Marxist theory. The object of this research is the film "*Tulip Fever*" (2017) directed by Justin Chadwick in 2014 but released in 2017 and adapted from Moggach's 1999 novel

of the same name. The primary data source includes conversations and scenes from the film that reflect class struggle and an economically driven relationship. The method of collecting data involves several steps: watching the film multiple times, reading the script, identifying relevant dialogues or scenes, classifying data based on thematic relevance, and selecting significant examples that support the research objectives. After the data are collected, the next step is analyzing the data by following: displaying the data, explaining the data, and interpreting the data.

Finding and Discussion

The Representation of Social Class Reflected in *Tulip Fever* (2017) Representation of the Bourgeois Class

This idea is depicted in the following scene of the movie *Tulip Fever* (2017):

Cornelis : A man likes to leave something of himself behind. A son to inherit my name and fortune.
(*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:04:20-00:04:30)

One night, in their bedroom as they were preparing to sleep, Cornelis said to Sophia, “A man likes to leave something of himself behind. A son to inherit my name and fortune.” This statement shows how deeply rooted his motivations are in keeping wealth and social standing. In his world, marriage is a transaction that guarantees the continued existence of his name and wealth rather than a union of two individuals. From a Marxist perspective, this supports the idea that institutions like family and marriage serve to uphold class structures. In this dynamic, Sophia is not seen as an equal partner, but as a necessary component in maintaining the continuity of the bourgeois class. Even something as personal as parenthood becomes tied to economic survival and class dominance.

Depiction of the Lower Class Struggle

This idea is depicted in the following scene of the movie *Tulip Fever* (2017):

Maria (as narrator) : Willem charged headlong into something he knew only by rumor: the tulip market. It happened in the

back rooms of taverns where huge sums of money were made and lost as people gambled on the color of the blooms. He was risking everything for us.

(*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:18:10-00:18:35)

This narration is delivered by Maria while Willem is at the tulip market, trying his luck in the tulip trade. Willem, a simple fish seller who dreams of a better life with Maria, presents yet another illustration of the lower class struggle in *Tulip Fever*. Maria's narration shows how Willem, like many people from the working class, has decided to take huge risks because he believes it might change his life. He invests all of his savings because he wants to create a future with the woman he loves, even if he doesn't completely understand how the tulip market operates. The tulip market, held secretly in the back rooms of taverns, reflects how the lower class often gets involved in unstable and risky systems that promise wealth but can just as easily bring disaster.

From a Marxist point of view, Willem's actions show how capitalism plays with the hopes of poor people, offering dreams of success, while actually keeping them in a weak position. Despite his honesty and full of love, he is not protected by the system he is in. In the end, Willem's story reminds us of how lower-class people often have no choice but to take chances, even in the hopes of a better life.

Social Spaces that Highlight Class Divides

a. Cornelis's House: A Symbol of Wealth and Power

The visual depiction of Cornelis's house reflects his status as a wealthy merchant. The large dining room, tall windows, expensive furniture, tulip flowers, seen in the scene where Jan is painting *Sophia and Cornelis* (*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:15:30-00:17:40) and presence of a servant, Maria, seen in the scene when they in dining room (*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:06:45-00:07:15) illustrate how physical spaces are used to reinforce class distinctions. Sophia's transition from an orphanage to this lavish home also signifies her entry into the upper class, not through merit, but through a transactional marriage.

The house becomes a physical space where class is both visible and enforced. From a Marxist point of view, this serves to uphold the bourgeois household's structure, in which workers are necessary but never treated equally, and labor exists but must be hidden.

b. The Convent: Shelter, Control, and Isolation

Scene that highlight the convent:

Sophia : He would find us. He would not stop looking for me unless I was dead. I heard those bells every day. That's where I grew up when the plague left me an orphan.

Jan : My poor Sophia.

Sophia : No. It was my good fortune. The sisters were kind, and we lived amongst beauty. They had a tulip garden in the courtyard.

Jan : A tulip garden? Is it still there?

(*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:57:45-00:58:32)

The convent represents both refuge and restriction. While Sophia acknowledges the kindness of the sisters and the beauty of the place, her memories of hearing the bells daily reflect the institution's rigid structure and control. It was a space that offered safety, but also limited her freedom—preparing her not for independence, but for submission to another form of authority: marriage.

c. The Tulip Market: Chaos, Desperation, Illusion

Scene that highlight the tulip market:

Maria (as narrator) : Willem charged headlong into something he knew only by rumor: the tulip market. It happened in the back rooms of taverns where huge sums of money were made and lost as people gambled on the color of the blooms. He was risking everything for us.

(*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:18:10-00:18:35)

This dialogue reveals that Willem, a working-class fishmonger, entered the tulip market not out of expertise, but out of desperation. The phrase “charged headlong into something he knew only by rumor” illustrates how inaccessible and speculative the world of tulip trading was for lower-class individuals. It was a

space dominated by quick money and high risk, often manipulated by those in power or with greater resources.

d. Taverns and Streets: Spaces of the Working Class

Scene that highlight the taverns:

Whore : (STEALING FROM WILLEM’S POCKET AND RAN AWAY)

Willem : (REALIZED HE HAD LOST HIS PURSE)
No! Where’s that filthy little whore?! Where’s that little bitch just stole my purse?! I want it back. Where is she?

Whore’s brother : Oi! That’s my little sister you’re calling a whore!
(WILLEM AND WHORE’S BROTHER FIGHT)

Whore’s brother : Lands! Here’s one for you! Let the Navy have him!

Lands : Get him up. Come on. Welcome to the Navy, sailor. It’ll take you a year to get back.

Willem : No, no. No. No! No!

Lands : Hey, that’s enough.

(*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:44:00-00:45:58)

The tavern scene in *Tulip Fever* (00:44:00–00:45:58) presents a vivid portrayal of how public social spaces like taverns function for the lower class not only as places of leisure or trade, but also of danger and vulnerability. In this chaotic scene, Willem is robbed by a sex worker in a tavern, which escalates into a public brawl that ultimately ends with him being forcefully conscripted into the Navy. This moment highlights how taverns, far from being safe or controlled environments, expose working-class individuals to violence, exploitation, and unpredictable social risks. Willem’s sudden fall from an aspiring husband to a man dragged into military service emphasizes how people from lower classes are especially susceptible to systemic abuse and misfortune in unregulated spaces. The street and tavern, here, are not just settings, but symbols of social instability and the absence of protection for those without power or wealth.

Marriage as an Economic Strategy

This idea is depicted in the following scenes of the movie *Tulip Fever* (2017):

Maria (as a narrator) : But that was all to come when Sophia exchanged her life at St. Ursula's for marriage to Cornelis Sandvoort.

The abbess : Marriage is a safe harbor. And you will have a fine house, a servant, and you will have children. Give him an heir, and everything will be fine. So, love, honor, and obey. It's for the best.

Maria (as a narrator) : In return for Sophia's sacrifice, her siblings received safe passage to New Amsterdam in the Americas to stay with their only living relative, an aunt. And so Sophia arrived at the orphanage barefoot but left in a carriage.

(*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:02:13-00:03:25)

One of the clearest examples of marriage as an economic strategy appears at the beginning of the film, when Maria narrates and the abbess lines that Sophia is married off to Cornelis. Those lines frame marriage as a sacrifice made for the survival of the family rather than as a romantic choice. The narrative "Sophia arrived at the orphanage barefoot but left in a carriage" is a visual metaphor of social mobility that can only be obtained through marriage, not through effort or education.

According to Marxists, this illustrates how women, especially those from the lower class, are used as tools in a larger economic system. Sophia is exchanged for safety and security, and her personal desires are secondary to her role as a wife and potential mother. This scene shows how deeply marriage is tied to class, property, and patriarchal control in a capitalist society.

a. Sophia's Marriage as a Reflection of Class Struggle

Marriage as a Transaction

This idea is depicted in the following scenes of the movie *Tulip Fever* (2017):

Cornelis's friend : Cornelis. Meet my son and heir.

Cronelis : Congratulations. So you and your wife didn't waste much time.

Cornelis's friend : I hear your wife's been wasting yours.
 Cornelis : Well, not for lack of trying.
 Cornelis's friend : That orphan girl, send her back then. You've tried enough.
 Cornelis : I'll give her six months. It's best if I give her up after that.
 Cornelis's friend : Which reminds me, that woman in Utrecht, she keeps asking about you.
 Cornelis : Sh-She does? What does she say?
 Cornelis's friend : Ha. She wants to know when you'll be back.
 (*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:04:50-00:05:25)

Cornelis meets a friend at work who is holding his son, and their conversation quickly turns into a casual talk about marriage and heirs, which leads to the dialogue above. Cornelis's attitude toward his wife is further revealed in a conversation with a friend. Those conversation above illustrates that Sophia is viewed more as a contract that must be completed than as a person. Her ability to produce an heir is closely related to her value in the marriage.

This reflects how marriage works like a transaction in a capitalist class society: if the "product" is unsuccessful, it is thrown away, according to Marxist theory. The way Cornelis discusses his wife, timelines, outcomes, alternatives, and parallels how commodities are evaluated in economic terms. In addition, the casual mention of another woman in Utrecht suggests that women like Sophia are bound to specific duties characterized by duty and expectation, but men of higher class are free to seek fulfillment or pleasure elsewhere.

b. Sophia's Lack of Autonomy

This idea is depicted in the following scene of the movie *Tulip Fever* (2017):

Jan : And when the baby's born, what then?
 Sophia : I don't know. Perhaps the world will come to an end before then.
 Jan : If I were rich, I could take you away.
 Sophia : He would find us. He would not stop looking for me unless I was dead. I heard those bells every day. That's where I grew up when the plague left me an orphan.
 Jan : My poor Sophia.

Sophia : No. It was my good fortune. The sisters were kind, and we lived amongst beauty. They had a tulip garden in the courtyard.

Jan : A tulip garden? Is it still there?
(*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:57:45-00:58:32)

On the beach, when Sophia and Jan are sitting and talking together, they have a dialogue above. Sophia's affair with Jan is an attempt to reclaim her agency, yet their relationship remains bound by the very class structures they hope to escape. Jan adds, "If I were rich, I could take you away," in a vulnerable moment. Sophia replies, "He would find us. He would not stop looking for me unless I was dead." The powerlessness of love in a society ruled by wealth and reputation is captured in these lines. Sophia is haunted by the reality that Cornelis, who has power and economic means, can still control her fate, even though she dreams of freedom.

The conversation, viewed through a Marxist lens, shows that love cannot exist freely under capitalism unless it is supported by material means. Sophia's affair, though passionate, is ultimately a futile rebellion against a system designed to preserve ownership, not emotional fulfillment.

c. Sophia's Affair with Jan as a Rebellion Against Class Structure

This idea is depicted in the following scene of the movie *Tulip Fever* (2017):

Jan : I love you.

Sophia : I love you. When I left here, I thought, "Once is everything. I can deny myself now." But then I saw you again, and I thought, "No, twice. Please, God, please twice." Let me look at you.

Jan : Don't move.

Sophia : No, Jan.

Jan : It will comfort me when you've gone.

(JAN PAINTS SOPHIA)

Jan : You've stolen my heart.

Sophia : And you've stolen mine.

Jan : Tell me about your family.

Sophia : No one's ever asked me that before.

(*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 00:42:56-00:43:55)

The dialogue above takes place when Sophia and Jan are lying together in Jan's room, engaging in a private moment of intimacy. Sophia's emotional confession to Jan reveals the deep emotional stakes of her rebellion. Her desire for Jan is not merely physical or impulsive, but driven by an unmet need for emotional connection and freedom. She has been so invisible in her marriage that Jan is the first to ask her about her family. Their affair disrupts the social codes that determine who is allowed to love whom, especially within the rigid class system of 17th-century Dutch society.

Jan's declaration of love to Sophia is not merely a personal or romantic confession, it is a deeply subversive act. As a working-class man, he dares to love the wife of a wealthy merchant, crossing boundaries enforced by class and tradition. In line with the Marxist perspective, this moment represents a quiet rebellion, a refusal to let economic and social roles define human connection.

d. The Collapse of Sophia's Strategy

This idea is depicted in the following scene of the movie *Tulip Fever* (2017):

(SOPHIA CAME HOME AND SAW CORNELIS HOLDING A BABY FROM THE WINDOW)

Maria as narrator : So Sophia realized there was no going back, and no way forward. She saw too late it was a trap she had laid for herself, and she had been better dead.

(*Tulip Fever*, 2017, 01:23:10-01:25:05)

In this scene, which takes place at Cornelis's house, Sophia having fled from Mattheis's house, secretly observes Cornelis through the window. She sees him smiling gently while holding a baby in his arms. This scene This moment encapsulates the ultimate tragedy of Sophia's rebellion. She has been trapped in guilt, invisibility, and despair as a result of her organized strategy, which was meant to free her from a loveless marriage and a strict class system.

From a Marxist perspective, her failure reveals how individuals, especially women from the lower class, are alienated not only from the system but from themselves. In a society that refuses autonomy without status, her desire, decision, and sacrifices are all for nothing. the class structure does not forgive rebellion, it

absorbs it, silences it, and leaves no place for redemption. Sophia's final disappearance is a symbol of many women whose resistance is erased not by defeat in battle, but by erasure from the narrative itself.

Conclusion

The film *Tulip Fever* portrays marriage not as a romantic ideal but as a social mechanism influenced by class and economic necessity. Through the lens of Marxist theory, Sophia's story becomes a reflection of how women and lower-class individuals are constrained by the capitalist structure. The narrative shows that even attempts to rebel or escape the system are often absorbed back into the structures of control.

Marriage in this film serves as both a survival strategy and a symbol of oppression. The characters' experiences illustrate the harsh realities of class struggle, where love and freedom are sacrificed for economic security and social conformity. This study contributes to understanding how historical narratives in film can reveal enduring social issues in marriage and class conflict.

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