

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Social class and power are foundational concepts in social theory and cultural studies that explain how societies organize hierarchy, inequality, and access to material and symbolic resources. Social class is a complex structure influenced by economic capital, cultural practices, social relationships, and symbolic recognition rather than only an economic classification based on occupation or income (O'Neill & Wayne, 2018). Classical approaches to social class usually depend on objective indicators like education, occupation, and material circumstances. However, modern scholars contend that these metrics are insufficient to fully capture the ways in which class is experienced, felt, and reproduced through ideology, representation, and daily life. As Hill highlights, social class functions as a deeply established social structure rather than a neutral label, influencing life trajectories, cultural expectations, goals, and perceptions of self-worth across family systems (Hill, 2018).

Rather than concentrating on representation as a separate theoretical framework, this study mainly looks at how these cinematic aspects reflect social hierarchy and power relations, even if films generate meaning through visual and narrative elements. Additionally, Neary and Ringrow contend that media texts create social meaning through language choices, visual framing, narrative frameworks, and symbolic imagery, which

affects how viewers internalize categories like gender, class, and race (Neary & Ringrow, 2018).

Researchers have observed that class has grown more and more obscure in modern culture and media study, despite social class's relevance to social order. This tendency, which Artz and Kamalipour refer to as "class obscurity," occurs when euphemistic phrases like "elite," "ordinary people," "marginalized," or "minority" take the place of explicit discussions of class, allowing class inequalities to continue to be accepted and uncontested (Artz & Kamalipour, 2003). By disguising fundamental injustices and portraying social hierarchy as common sense, this obscurity benefits hegemonic goals and is not accidental. According to Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), dominant groups sustain their power through the cultural normalization of values and worldviews that seem rational and universal rather than through coercion. Inequality is presented as normal, justified, or unavoidable through hegemonic processes.

As an important cultural medium, film plays an important role in the creation and circulation of hegemonic meanings. In addition to conversation and plot, cinematic texts also use visual composition, camera angles, spatial structure, and narrative focus to create social order. Because they create fantastical worlds with clear hierarchies, fantasy movies in particular offer a rich environment for examining representation. Scholars contend that fantasy worlds often reflect real world social systems, such as colonial history, economic stratification, and ideological power relations, despite the fact that fantasy is commonly seen as an escape (O'Neill & Wayne, 2018). Fantasy stories rarely include arbitrary hierarchies. Instead, they conceal common societal divisions under an appearance of race, species, or legendary order.

This dynamic is best illustrated by Peter Jackson's 2001 film *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. The world of Middle-earth is designed to be hierarchical, based on symbolic authority, power, and race. Hobbits are portrayed as rural civilians who are small, apolitical, and cut off from centers of power. Elves are associated with cultural refinement and immortality, Wizards serve as intellectual and moral authorities, Men are associated with political power and historical agency, and Dwarves are associated with labor-oriented clans. Real-world class divisions are reflected in this hierarchical arrangement, where rural and working class communities are frequently portrayed as unimportant or empty of political agency.

Hobbits hold the lowest symbolic place in Middle-earth's social order within this framework. According to Rosyid's research, *Deciphering the Hobbits*, Hobbits are portrayed as "strange, weak, and unique" creatures with little power within the established hierarchy (Rosyid, 2015). The following cinematic devices are used in Peter Jackson's film to support this portrayal: Hobbits are often positioned at the margins of political debates, placed among expansive rural views, and physically degraded by camera angles that highlight their small stature. They are portrayed as leading a pastoral and domestic existence, which emphasizes their disconnection from power, conflict, and government.

Previous studies on *The Lord of the Rings* have evolved through several major research directions. Early research mostly examined the bravery, morality, and selflessness of specific characters, especially Frodo Baggins. For example, Utami et al. (2024) describe Frodo as a model of character education, emphasizing perseverance, responsibility, and selflessness, while Zuhail (2019) interprets Frodo's heroism through his courage, sacrifice, and moral duty. In the same way, Chen and Qiu (2022) investigate Frodo's psychological fortitude and development into a hero. These studies help us

comprehend Frodo's personal growth, although they mostly take a moral and individualistic approach to the character.

More recent research has looked at The Lord of the Rings' wider symbolic connotations in addition to character development. For example, Omar (2025) sees the One Ring as a metaphor for temptation, corruption, and the quest for total control. The Hobbits have also been represented by other academics as representations of innocence, rural simplicity, and peaceful community existence. These viewpoints enhance the film's philosophical and symbolic interpretation, but they nevertheless place more emphasis on moral symbolism than the social systems that govern interactions between Middle-earth's many races.

Despite these advancements, the representation of power and social class as interrelated social systems has received comparatively little attention in studies of The Lord of the Rings. Few studies have looked at how the movie uses speech, narrative structure, and visual devices to create hierarchical connections between Hobbits, Elves, Men, Dwarves, and Wizards. As a result, rather than being presented as a marginalized social group whose status is determined by unequal power relations, the Hobbits are more frequently presented as heroic people or moral symbols.

Therefore, by moving the analytical focus from individual bravery and symbolic interpretation to the portrayal of social class and power, this study expands on earlier research. This study investigates how the Hobbits' place in Middle-earth's hierarchical society is essentially constructed by verbal and visual aspects through the integration of Marxist Social Class Theory, Gramsci's idea of hegemony, narrative analysis, and film analysis. By doing this, this study advances both the study of The Lord of the Rings and

more general conversations on how power and authority are represented in fantasy movies.

Even with the vast amount of research on *The Lord of the Rings*, it is still crucial to reconsider the movie from the perspective of power and social class. *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the most significant fantasy movies in popular culture worldwide, continues to influence audience perceptions of authority, hierarchy, leadership, and disenfranchised people in fictional cultures. The ideological implications ingrained in the movie's representation of social hierarchy continue to shape modern understandings of power since it is still often watched, taught, and discussed. Consequently, analyzing the construction of these meanings advances both the study of *The Lord of the Rings* and more general conversations about ideology and social hierarchy in fantasy film.

An examination of previous studies reveals that study on *The Lord of the Rings* has primarily focused on heroism, morality, psychological growth, and symbolic interpretations of power. As a result, the representation of social class and power as interconnected social systems is largely unexplored, particularly in terms of the Hobbits' place within Middle-earth's hierarchical society. This limitation shows a significant study gap in understanding how cinematic and narrative materials collectively establish the Hobbits as a marginalized social group while also growing their symbolic significance throughout the story.

In order to close this gap, this study looks at how Hobbits' placement within Middle-earth's hierarchical society serves as a representation of social class and authority in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). In addition to building on earlier research on *The Lord of the Rings*, this study shows how narrative and cinematic

representation in fantasy film can replicate, normalize, and negotiate ideological understandings of hierarchy and power. This study provides a comprehensive interpretation of how verbal and visual modes construct meanings of hierarchy, authority, marginalization, and symbolic power in fantasy cinema by integrating Marxist social class theory, Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Stuart Hall's theory of representation, narrative analysis, and film studies. As a result, this study contributes to the ongoing issue of social class representation in fantasy films by investigating not just what the Hobbits symbolize, but also how those representations are systematically generated using cinematic language.

1.2 Research question

1. How are social class and power represented through the positioning of Hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001)?

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to look at how the placing of Hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) reflects social class and power relations. Specifically, the study aims to determine the Hobbits' social status within Middle-earth's hierarchical structure, as well as to examine how narrative elements, dialogue, characterization, and cinematic techniques generate meanings relating to social class and power. Furthermore, this study examines how these representations both reinforce and challenge existing hierarchical systems by presenting the Hobbits as a marginalized social group that eventually gains symbolic authority throughout the story.

1.4 Scope of the study

The primary corpus of this study is the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). The characterization of the Hobbits which is Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin as a disadvantaged social group in Middle-earth's hierarchical society is the sole subject of this study. Only specific situations, conversations, and visual compositions that address themes of power and social class are included in the examination. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy's original books, extended editions, and later movies are not examined in this study.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study is relevant to students, academics, educators, and film analysts who are interested in representation and fantasy tales. This study offers insights for future academics who want to investigate class based representation in different cinema genres or literary adaptations. Furthermore, this study helps readers comprehend how symbolic power works through characters that lack conventional authority but have moral or narrative significance, for example, Hobbits, who serve as moral agents despite their low social standing in Middle-earth.

1.6 Limitations of the study

This study is limited to an analysis of the individual film *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). This study does not include the subsequent films in *The Hobbit* trilogy or *The Lord of the Rings* series. Therefore, these findings are limited to the representations constructed in this film alone and may not fully reflect broader developments regarding social class and power across the entire Middle-earth realm.

Furthermore, while this study examines the representation of social class and power in the film, the analysis is primarily conducted using the Hobbits as the main analytical lens. This means that while other racial groups (such as Men, Elves, Dwarves, and Wizards) are acknowledged within this hierarchical structure, they are not analyzed in as much depth as the Hobbits.

1.7 State of the Art

Previous study on Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) has mostly focused on psychological change, individual bravery, and character morality. The main focus of studies like Zuhail (2019), Chen and Qiu (2022), and Utami et al. (2024) is Frodo Baggins as an example of moral responsibility, selflessness, and inner strength. While acknowledging Hobbits' distinct physical and social status, some study, like Rosyid (2015), primarily sees them through the prism of rural simplicity, innocence, or ethical symbolism. Furthermore, rather than seeing power as a visible social hierarchy, works on power dynamics in the trilogy, such as Omer (2025), tend to regard power as an abstract philosophical term associated with temptation and corruption.

Although these current viewpoints offer insightful analyses of character development and thematic symbolism, they often separate characters from the larger institutional and socioeconomic systems that govern Middle-earth. As a result, there is still a significant study vacuum about how social class and power operate as interrelated systems of dominance and subordination inside the narrative and visual construction of the movie. By changing the analytical focus from individual bravery to structural marginalization, our study fills this gap. This study shows how the Hobbits are

methodically created as a marginalized social class while concurrently negotiating symbolic agency and moral responsibility within Middle-earth's political hierarchy by combining Marxist Social Class Theory (Marx & Engels, 1848), Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Stuart Hall's representation theory, Todorov's narrative structure, and Boggs and Petrie's film analysis.

