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Parasite: The Crushing Weight of Hope

By Shelby Crispin

In a society based around consumption, it can be difficult to discern who feeds from who. In Bong Joon-Ho's "Parasite", the unspoken classism intends to show how the rich feed off the poor. The film was made after Joon-Ho's observance of wealth disparity and intends to showcase this to all who think classism as a thing of the past. While the film takes place in Seoul, it has a narrative that can comfortably fit in the shoes of any working-class person who sees it – a universal message of how classism is not just an issue on a larger scale, but how it can affect individuals as well. "Parasite" entrenches the audience in its message masterfully using its set design, symbolism, and use of dialogue.

The set design in "Parasite" is a major part of the narrative, so much so that it may as well be a character itself. In the first scene, the audience is introduced to the first of two families– the Kims, who are poor and live in lower–class apartments. This scene shows us a large window in the back, the view of which is almost completely covered by the street above. It appears the Kims live below ground, which is juxtaposed in a later scene when the audience meets the extremely wealthy Park family, who have a large window in the back of their home that shows a large, pristine yard overlooking the rest of the city. These examples both visually show the dichotomy of wealth between the two families, and garners empathy from the audience. Another genius example of set design is the massive staircase along the summit connecting the upper and lower-class sections of the city. The Kim family must climb an inconceivable height every day just to experience a glimpse of what the Park family has at their feet. This is a relatable aspect to those in the audience who have also had to deal with climbing out of poverty. While the

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unique architecture helps the film display these ideals, so does its use of symbolism and dark humor.

Joon-Ho uses symbolism to simplify these themes of wealth disparity for the audience. One of the first stand-out elements of the story is the scholar's rock – given to the son of the Kim family by his upper-class friend who is leaving for college. The son greatly admires and envies his wealthier friend, and soon the rock becomes a symbol for the son's aspirations to climb the social ladder. The rock is the one thing the son takes with him when his family apartment floods- displaying his desperate cling to this ideal. It is also the very thing that nearly kills him towards the film's climax, when a man quite literally beats him over the head with it. This is a blunt analogy and does well to invoke sympathy. Another symbol in the same vein are the light switches in the Park household. It is later revealed that they are controlled by a man in their basement- who they were unaware even existed- flicking the switches to turn on the lights for them. The man is a symbol of the efforts of the working class being invisible to the rich, while the working-class people look up and idolize them, seeing them as inherently more deserving of their status. Sharp members of the audience might notice the parallels with the treatment of billionaires today. This overarching theme can also be shown in the way other characters speak about each other and the situation they find themselves in.

The use of dialogue in "Parasite" is a detailed look into the characters' worldviews and how they exemplify the real-world struggles portrayed in the film. For instance, near the climax of the story it begins to rain heavily. This has little effect on the Parks, who live on the summit, but has a disastrous effect on the Kims, who live below ground level. Their apartment is flooded with sewer water and becomes uninhabitable. When the father of the Kim family is driving the mother of the Park family, she happily proclaims that she was grateful for the rain and that she found it refreshing, all the while the father of the Kim family has to remain silent as to not

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endanger his employment. This is something that almost everyone in the audience can relate to, as most would have been in similar situations in their time. Another example would be the constant theme of smell. Each member of the Park family explains that the Kims have an odd “smell” to them, but they struggle to describe it outside of “worn rags”, and “people on the subway”. This is an analogy to how hygiene is treated between the two classes, with poorer people being seen as inherently gross, or dirty. This inspires anger at the Park family from the audience’s perspective.

Parasite is a phenomenal display of its themes with its use of architecture, its understanding of symbolism, and its character dialogue. It’s a dark comedy that speaks directly to the working class and understands their struggles. The film is a must-watch for not only future filmmakers, but those who are interested in the viewpoints of class struggles. For, the film argues, those who continue to look away are only continuing the parasitic cycle.

Works Cited

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Joon-Ho, Bong, director. *Parasite*. CJ Entertainment, 2019.