

Original Article

# Social Mobility in Rian Johnson's Knives Out (2019) Film

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**ABSTRACT:** This research analyzes the representation of social mobility in Rian Johnson's *Knives Out* (2019). The study examines how the film portrays changes in class position by applying Max Weber's theory of social class, supported by a mimetic approach and characterization theory by Petrie and Boggs. Using qualitative analysis of selected scenes and dialogues that portray social class position and social mobility in *Knives Out*, the research focuses on how characters' wealth, power, and status are depicted and transformed. The findings show that Marta Cabrera is first represented as a working-class immigrant nurse, contrasted with the wealthy and entitled Thrombey family. Her sudden upward mobility occurs when Harlan Thrombey leaves his entire estate to her, allowing her to rise instantly to the top of the social hierarchy, which is known as the upper class. The study highlights that the film represents social mobility as an immediate restructuring of class hierarchy driven by wealth, which then produces power and status.

**KEYWORDS** Social Mobility; Social Class; Max Weber; Characterization; *Knives Out*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social class is a fundamental element of social life that can be observed in everyday interactions, behaviors, and institutions. The concept of social class has shaped much of sociological thought, with its theoretical roots grounded in the works of key thinkers such as Karl Marx and Max Weber, who both explored how economic structures and social hierarchies influence people's opportunities, relationships, and positions within society (Wright, 2005; Hafiez et al., 2021; Andriani et al., 2025). In other words, social class refers to a group of individuals who share similar living conditions, opportunities, and life chances based on common social and economic factors. According to Max Weber's theory, social class divisions are shaped by the economic interests of various social groups, with wealth, power, and prestige that determine an individual's position within society (Abdiraimova & Burkhanova, 2015; Matahati et al., 2025).

In a society, when individuals change positions within a social class, they experience social mobility. Social mobility is the process that shows how people's family background, education, or life conditions influence their chances to move between social classes either upward or downward, reflecting how fair and equal opportunities are within a society (Hout, 2015; Abdullah, 2025). According to Sorokin, social mobility is influenced by several factors, including economic prosperity, the structure of society, the level of aspiration and achievement, demographic structure, education, occupational prestige, administration, legal and political factors, and the intelligence factor (Nazimuddin, 2015; Rustanto & Budi, 2025). However, even though society believes that social mobility is the solution to class inequality, it is not and cannot be the solution to inequality (Lawler & Payne, 2017, as cited in Ingram & Gamsu, 2022). Nevertheless, social mobility continues to provide individuals with the chance to pursue upward mobility, allowing them to improve their life circumstances by accessing better opportunities, resources, and social positions.

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Rian Johnson's *Knives Out* (2019) explores themes of social class and social mobility through its mystery narrative. The film, which achieved both critical and commercial success, centers on the aftermath of wealthy novelist Harlan Thrombey's death. Midway through the story, it is revealed that Harlan's nurse, Marta, inherits his entire fortune, while his family is disinherited. The shocking reversal exposes the family's dependence on inherited privilege and their resistance to losing it. As Marta accepts the inheritance, a dramatic shift in socio-economic power occurs as social mobility happens in the film.

In a society, when individuals change positions within a social class, they experience social mobility. A previous study by Ramadhan and Zakky (2024), titled *Tennis as Social Mobilization to Achieve the American Dream in the Film King Richard* (2021), employs a similar approach to this research and highlights Richard Williams' real-life journey of achieving upward social mobility through tennis, demonstrating that representations of social mobility in film reflect realities in society. This research, on the other hand, aims to describe how social mobility is represented in *Knives Out* film according to Max Weber's theory of social class, supported by a mimetic approach and characterization theory by Petrie and Boggs. With this aim achieved, this research contributes both theoretically and practically by providing insights for future studies on *Knives Out* film and serving as a learning material for Film Studies and Literary Criticism.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Films as Work of Literature

Films have long been recognized as an effective medium for exploring complex human emotions and historical events, while also providing the audience with entertainment, emotional experiences, and an escape from reality (Lu, 2023; Haykal et al., 2025). Films are the combination of pictures or act sound and any additional things which have some goals, either for educational, political, social, or entertainment (Anggraeni et al., 2019; Salmawati, 2022). Films are considered beneficial as media that can easily help people to access social issues, problems, information, and knowledge through entertainment.

A film, also referred to as cinema, is a form of art that involves creating a definable rhythm with pauses and tempo in motion, where every aspect of the continuous image is interconnected with the whole (Petrie & Boggs, 2017). Films are considered as literary works since they can be analyzed and interpreted the same as written works of literature (Chairani et al., 2025). In other words, films can be understood as a form of art, serving not only as entertainment but also as a medium that can easily convey social issues, knowledge, and information, and can therefore be analyzed and interpreted in the same way as written literary works.

### 2.2. Character and Characterization in Film

Characters' believability is closely aligned with the overall credibility of the story, as they reflect external truths about human nature or are convincingly portrayed by actors, enabling the audience to understand the entire narrative through the process of characterization by interpreting each character's traits and development (Petrie & Boggs, 2017).

Based on the book *The Art of Watching Films* by Petrie and Boggs (2017), film characterization can be analyzed through three main pairings, namely stock characters and stereotypes, static versus dynamic characters, and flat versus round characters, as well as eight types of characterization, namely characterization through appearance, dialogue, external action, internal action, reactions of other characters, contrast or dramatic foils, caricature and leitmotif, and choice of name: characterization through appearance shows characters through their physical look and clothing; characterization through dialogue reveals their thoughts and background through what they say; characterization through external action shows personality through behavior; characterization through internal action presents inner thoughts and feelings; characterization through reactions of other characters shows how others perceive them; characterization through contrast or dramatic foils highlights differences between characters; characterization through caricature and leitmotif emphasizes traits through exaggeration and repetition; and characterization through choice of name conveys meaning through names.

### 2.3. Social Classes Theory According to Max Weber

Max Weber defines wealth as economic assets that create unequal power and shape individuals' life chances and class position, while power is the ability of political groups to influence the distribution of resources within society, and status is the level of social honor or prestige individuals receive based on their lifestyle and social evaluation, independent of their economic wealth (Xie, 2023). In Max Weber's social class, the labeling within social class emerges readily due to differences in wealth, power, and status among social groups (Panjaitan et al., 2024). In other words, based on Max Weber's view that wealth, power, and status shape individuals' life chances and determine their class positions, it can be seen that labeling within social class easily emerges from differences in these aspects, as wealth, power, and status naturally lead society to classify and distinguish individuals into different social groups.

In Max Weber's view, social inequality arises from the complex interaction of class, status, and power, where class inequality is rooted in economic factors that determine individuals' positions in the distribution of wealth and resources, status difference is reflected in the level of social prestige and recognition individuals receive based on cultural values and societal judgments, and power inequality involves the unequal distribution of influence and authority in decision-making processes and the control of resources within social and political systems, all of which together shape an individual's overall position within the social hierarchy (Weber, 1978 as cited in Avatara et al., 2024).

The social classes of Max Weber consists of four main groups: the upper class, which occupies the highest position due to its strong economic power, high social status, and significant political influence; the upper middle class, who hold a high position in the labor market, possess some forms of property such as stocks and shares, and maintain relatively high status with moderate political influence; the lower middle class, characterized by more limited property ownership, lower social status, and less political influence; and the lower class or working class, which is positioned at the bottom due to minimal property ownership, a lower position in the labor market, low social status, and low to no political influence (Abdiraimova & Burkhanova, 2015; Andriani et al., 2025; Matahati et al., 2025). Therefore, even when there is no official label to an individual's place in society, social classes will always emerge among people, and there will always be barriers between them that shape their social status based on their economic circumstances and other factors.

## 2.4. Social Mobility

Sorokin (1959) describes social mobility as the movement of individuals or social groups from one social position to another due to human actions, and explains that it can be classified into vertical and horizontal mobility, with vertical mobility referring to movement upward or downward within the social hierarchy (as cited in Abdullah, 2025). Social mobility refers to the process by which individuals or groups move between social classes, particularly advancing to a higher level within society, driven by the recognition of their achievements and hard work, and aimed at improving their financial condition, security, and overall quality of life (Tischler, 2010; Ramadhan & Zakky, 2024).

There are factors in life that affect an individual's social mobility. According to Sorokin, there are nine main factors affecting social mobility: economic prosperity, the structure of society, the level of aspiration and achievement, demographic structure, education, occupational prestige, administration, legal and political factors, and the intelligence factor (Nazimuddin, 2015; Rustanto & Budi, 2025). Social mobility can be both vertical, involving movement up or down the social hierarchy due to factors of social mobility, and horizontal, where individuals shift across sectors while maintaining their social level (Ramadhan & Zakky, 2024). Therefore, social mobility plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's opportunities, as the factors influencing upward mobility determine their ability to improve their life and their family's quality of life, while downward mobility can lead to reduced opportunities in their overall quality of life.

## 3. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative method. Qualitative methodology can provide knowledge that targets societal issues, questions, or problems and serves humankind (Tracy, 2019). The researcher used a mimetic approach to analyze the data. The use of a mimetic approach is important to help the researcher explain the social mobility and social classes in *Knives Out* film since a mimetic approach is a critique that analyzes literary work by relating it with reality in society. Mimetic approach views literary works as imitation and reality (Abrams, 1981, as cited in Nabila, 2022). Data in this research is taken from the dialogs and scenes that portray social class position and social mobility in *Knives Out* (2019). These data include words, sentences, and visual scenes, all of which were described and interpreted narratively. The instrument of the research is the researcher herself since the activity of collecting data cannot be done by other intermediaries, along with the data from scenes, dialogues, and characters in the film. In this research, the researcher collected data in several steps. First, the researcher watched the film several times. Second, the researcher captured the relevant scenes of the film into pictures. Third, the researcher took notes of the relevant dialogues. Fourth, the researcher sorted the data related to the research problem to be investigated.

## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In line with Petrie and Boggs' (2017) concept of characterization, the findings demonstrate how film techniques can reflect issues of social class and social mobility. By linking the evidence from the film with the supporting literature, the findings provide a clearer understanding of how Marta Cabrera's character illustrates the shifts in class dynamics.

#### 4.1 Social Classes

At the beginning of *Knives Out*, Marta Cabrera's social class is established as working class through multiple methods of characterization, as outlined by Petrie and Boggs (2017), which include characterization through dialogue, reactions of other characters, contrast, and appearance while the Thrombeys belong to the upper class because they possess the three key elements Weber identifies, which are wealth, status, and power from Harlan Thrombey's wealth. Harlan's powerful economic resources are earned through his success as a best-selling author, placing him in an upper-class position with access to opportunities unavailable to others. His reputation as a famous writer grants him high social prestige, aligning him with a respected status group. Additionally, he holds considerable power, both within his family and his business, as his children depend on his financial support and his authority shapes their lives. These factors establish Harlan as an upper-class within Weber's social class.

In this scene, Marta Cabrera is visually framed as a working-class individual using characterization through appearance by Petrie and Boggs (2017). Marta's modest home, shared with her mother and sister, aligns with Weber's concept of wealth because it reflects her limited access to economic resources and assets, as it is mentioned that the lower class is so situated because of their relative lack of property ownership and lower position in the labor market, their low social status, and their lack of political influence.

The Cop : (to Marta) "Hey! Excuse me, ma'am. You with the help?"  
Meg : "Hey! Her name is Marta, she was granddad's nurse, she's with us. "The help?""  
Marta : (to the cop) "It's ok. I'm sorry."

(*Knives Out*, 00:04:02-00:04:15)

This scene is identified using characterization through reactions of other characters, characterization through appearance, characterization through dialogue, and characterization through contrast, as the officer's assumption that Marta is "the help" highlights how her working-class status is immediately recognized and misinterpreted based on her appearance despite being Harlan's nurse, her humble clothing and quiet presence lead to this classification, emphasizing the difference in social position between Marta and the Thrombey family and showing how outsiders rely on visual cues and stereotypes to judge class. This moment reflects Max Weber's principles of wealth, power, and prestige, as Marta lacks wealth, has little power within the household, and holds low social prestige due to others' perceptions, demonstrating that her class position is shaped not only by her occupation but also by how she is viewed, while characterization through contrast is further shown through the difference between the Thrombey mansion and Marta's car, where the mansion's elegance contrasts with her modest vehicle, reinforcing her working-class status.

Richard : "Harlan started with a rusty Smith-Corona and built himself into one of the best-selling mystery writers of all time."  
Lieutenant Elliott : "Seems like all his kids are self-made overachievers."  
Richard : "Sure."

(*Knives Out*, 00:07:48-00:08:03)

This dialogue reveals that the Thrombeys' upper-class standing is not earned but inherited, as their social position depends on access to Harlan's money, exposing the fragility of their status and their reliance on privilege. Harlan's economic resources, gained from his success as a best-selling author, place him in an upper-class position with high social prestige and considerable power within his family and business, as his financial support and authority shape the lives of others, establishing him as part of the upper class in Max Weber's social class which later transfer to Marta when she experiences social mobility.

#### 4.2 Social Mobility

After the will reading of Harlan Thrombey's inheritance in *Knives Out*, Marta Cabrera experiences social mobility from the working class to the upper class. There are three factors affecting Marta's social mobility: the first one is legal and political factors, the second one is economic prosperity, and the third one is the intelligence factor. In this research, the scenes are established through multiple methods of characterization as outlined by Petrie and Boggs (2017), which include characterization through dialogue, external action, reactions of other characters, contrast, and appearance.

Alan : "Um, he did write up a statement when he made the recent changes, he wanted it read first, so... 'Some of you may be surprised by the choice I've made here. No pleasure was taken in the

exclusion, and its purpose was not to sow greater discord in the family, quite the opposite. Please accept it with grace and without bitterness. But do accept it. It's for the best."

Alan : "Ok. So... oh wow, yeah, not complex at all. This'll be quick. 'I, Harlan Thrombey, being of sound mind and body, yada yada, my assets both liquid and otherwise, I leave in their entirety to Marta Cabrera. My entire ownership of Blood Like Wine publishing I leave in its entirety to Marta Cabrera. The copyright of its catalog likewise I leave in its entirety to Marta Cabrera."

*The whole family responds with disbelief and outrage. Then the attorney continues reading the will regarding the house.*

Alan : "Sorry, there's, uh. 'Likewise the house at 2 Deerborn Drive and all belongings therein I leave to Marta Cabrera."

(*Knives Out*, 01:08:18-01:11:09)

This scene is identified using characterization through dialogue, characterization through reactions of other characters, and characterization through external action by Petrie and Boggs (2017). This moment marks the turning point of the film and the beginning of Marta's unexpected upward mobility. Through the legal mechanism of inheritance, a political and institutional factor of social mobility, Marta's class position shifts dramatically. What had been impossible through her own labor becomes reality in an instant through law. This sudden upward mobility of Marta aligns with the legal and political factors in social mobility. These changes have allowed for social mobility from lower to higher groups. Not only that, but also the economic prosperity factor since Marta becomes wealthy from this inheritance. By getting Harlan's inheritance legally, Marta becomes wealthy on her own, and this makes her experience social mobility through economic prosperity as well. These factors are based on Sorokin's factors of social mobility. This scene shows that Marta experiences vertical mobility, as it is stated that social mobility can be both vertical, involving movement up or down the social hierarchy due to factors like education or economic changes, and horizontal, where individuals shift across sectors while maintaining their social level, so in this case, Marta experiences vertical upward mobility due to the economic changes in her life after the inheritance.

After Harlan's will is read, Marta's sudden upward mobility leads the Thrombey family to manipulate her out of fear of losing their own wealth, power, and status. Their behavior shifts quickly, revealing how deeply their identities depend on the privileges they have always taken for granted. Instead of accepting Harlan's decision, they attempt to pressure, persuade, and control Marta in order to protect what they believe is rightfully theirs. Instead of allowing their fear of losing wealth, power, and status to shape her actions, Marta begins to navigate her new role with steady resolve. She now possesses the resources they once used to maintain their power, and this change allows her to stand firm even as the family tries to pull her back into a position of dependence.

Walt : "Marta, if your mom came here illegally, criminally, and if you come into this inheritance with the scrutiny that entails I'd be afraid that could come to light. That's what we want to avoid here. We can protect you from that happening, or if it happens."

Marta : "So, you're saying that even if it came to light, with your family's resources you could help me fix it?"

Walt : "Yeah. Yeah, with the right lawyers, you know? Not these local guys but New York lawyers, DC lawyers, with enough resources put towards it, yes. But there's no need it should ever even come up. But yes."

Marta : "Okay, good."

Walt : "Okay?"

Marta : "Because Harlan gave me all your resources. So that means with my resources I'll be able to fix it. So I guess I will find the right lawyers."

*Then Marta backs off and leaves Walt by slamming the door in front of his face.*

(*Knives Out*, 01:26:25-01:28:15)

This moment emphasizes a crucial change after Marta's upward mobility. Wealth has not only elevated her class position but also empowered her to resist manipulation and dismantle the Thrombeys' former dominance. This scene aligns with Max Weber's ideas of wealth and power because Marta's new economic resources give her the ability to resist Walt's threats and act independently. Walt assumes the Thrombeys still hold the power, but Marta's inheritance means she now controls the wealth, and therefore the authority Weber associates with the upper class. Her refusal to be manipulated shows how gaining wealth directly increases her power in the social hierarchy.

This growing confidence becomes clear, where Marta's choices reflect her ability to manage her new position in the social class without losing her integrity, and show how Marta's intelligence outsmarts the family's manipulation, as Harlan knew she would before he decided to choose Marta as his heir before his death. This confirms that Marta's rise in class is not solely due to inheritance but is driven by her moral clarity, quick thinking, and intelligence, highlighting the intelligence factor as a key element in her social mobility.

The contrast between Marta and the Thrombeys in the final balcony scene

(*Knives Out*, 02:04:57-02:05:04)

The film's final scene shows a representation of Marta's upward mobility in the social hierarchy. This scene is identified using characterization through reactions of other characters, characterization through contrast, and characterization through appearance by Petrie and Boggs (2017). Framed above the Thrombey family on the balcony, Marta holds Harlan's mug that states "My House, My Rules, My Coffee." It is a prop that symbolizes her legitimate ownership of the estate and her acceptance of the authority that comes with it. This visual contrast between Marta elevated above and the Thrombeys looking up at her captures the full reversal of their former class positions. Also, through the lens of Max Weber, this scene underscores how Marta's inheritance grants her wealth, which in turn produces power, which is the ability to make independent decisions, and also status, reflected in the newfound respect and recognition that the family is forced to give her as they look up at her with that realization. Once a working-class immigrant nurse, Marta now has the highest position within the household, both legally and socially. The scene also symbolizes how she no longer serves the family but stands above them, representing the wealth, power, and status that Weber associates with the upper-class position.

Taken together, the findings show how Marta Cabrera's social mobility changes her character from the beginning of the film toward the end. This shows that Marta's character in *Knives Out* (2019) is considered a dynamic character, as Petrie and Boggs (2017) state that dynamic characters are profoundly impacted by the plot's actions and experience a substantial, enduring change in their personality, attitude, or perspective on life. Marta's change of personality happens because of the social mobility that occurs in the film. From being seen as the help at the beginning of the film to becoming the owner of the Thrombeys' resources as she gains full control of the wealth, power, and prestige as an upper-class individual.

## 5. DISCUSSION

*Knives Out* (2019) explores class inequality, the fragility of inherited privilege, and the transformative potential of social mobility by contrasting the entitled Thrombey family with Marta Cabrera, a hardworking immigrant nurse, to show how economic shifts reshape power and social recognition. Marta's rise from the working class to the owner of the Thrombeys' fortune represents social mobility as a sudden, vertically upward shift driven by legal and political factors, economic prosperity, and the intelligence factor, based on Sorokin's factors of social mobility. The legal and political factors appear when the lawyer confirms Marta as the rightful heir, granting formal authority and leading directly to economic prosperity through inheritance, while her intelligence is shown in her ability to resist manipulation and outsmart the family during the inheritance conflict. Before the social mobility in the will reading scene, the film constructs Marta as working class through characterization by Petrie and Boggs, highlighting her lack of Weber's wealth, power, and prestige, while the Thrombeys are represented as the upper class in the beginning, but their status is revealed to be unstable because it relies entirely on Harlan's wealth. When the will is revealed, Marta becomes the sole inheritor of the mansion, property, and business, which triggers her immediate upward mobility. Marta's growth throughout the film also confirms that she is considered a dynamic character. The film's final balcony scene serves as the strongest symbol of her achieved wealth, power, and status, visually framing her above the Thrombey family while she holds Harlan's mug, representing her complete transition into the upper class, as it aligns with Weber's upper class that now Marta is at the top of the hierarchy because of her economic power, social status, and political influence.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The research began from the problem that social class and mobility are central social concerns reflected in film, and that *Knives Out* stages a sharp contrast between inherited privilege and the working class. In order to interrogate that contrast, the research adopted Max Weber's theory of social class to explain how wealth, power, and status operate, and used Petrie and Boggs' framework of film characterization to identify the cinematic devices that make social class visible. This research also employs a mimetic approach, which considers literature and film as reflections of real social conditions, allowing the researcher to interpret the characters' behaviors, class positions, and mobility as representations of the social structures that exist outside the narrative world. The findings show that Marta, initially a modest working-class nurse, contrasts with the wealthy Thrombeys and rises

to the top of the social hierarchy when Harlan leaves her his inheritance. This research shows that *Knives Out* represents social mobility as an immediate and structural change driven by the transfer of wealth, and that wealth becomes the central force that reshapes power and status within the social class system in society. With this aim achieved, this research contributes both theoretically and practically by providing insights for future studies on *Knives Out* film and serving as a learning material for Film Studies and Literary Criticism.

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