

**Decoding Marxist Themes in A Bug's Life:  
A Study of Power, Exploitation, and Class Struggle**

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*"Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter."*

**Ecclesiastes 4:1 (NIV)**

**ABSTRACT**

This research aims to deep dive into the issues of class struggle, exploitation, and power, shown in the 1998 Pixar movie, "A Bug's Life", through the lens of Marxism theory. This analysis was conducted using the Marxist perspective from the book *Das Capital, Volume I (1990)* by Karl Marx. By using a qualitative close reading method, the data were collected through the deep observation of the cinematography and themes present, repeated viewing of scenes and narratives, plot and storyline reading based on the Marxism concepts to strengthen the arguments. Hence the findings show: **1) Symbolic Representation of Classes:** The grasshoppers symbolize the bourgeoisie, or ruling class, which exploits the ants, representing the proletariat or working class, by taking their production without contributing to it, mirroring Marx's concept of workers being bound by "invisible threads" and working out of necessity for survival. This exploitation is maintained through psychological control and fear, rather than overt physical force. **2) Initial Acceptance of Oppression:** The ants initially accept and believe that their oppression is the "natural order" of things before their class consciousness emerges, leading them to unite. This reflects the Marxist idea that those in power make workers believe the exploitative system is normal and necessary. The ants' fear and perceived powerlessness keep them obedient, despite their numerical superiority. **3) Empowerment through Collective Action:** Once united and realizing they have nothing to lose, their group solidarity empowers them to overthrow the unnatural and exploitative system, aligning with Marx's view that the proletariat gains power through collective strength. The film highlights how fear sustains power and a rigid social hierarchy. However, achieving class consciousness enables collective action to dismantle this oppression. The main objective of this research is to uncover the themes in the story whilst making them understandable, and for readers to comprehend and to be aware of the importance of knowing social issues in movies.

**Keywords:** *class struggles, exploitation, power, labor, marxism*

**INTRODUCTION**

Literature helps the audience understand the world around them through morals and imagination. Through literature, a story is presented as an example of the problem, allowing the audience to be able to know the issue and the moral implication followed by it. These writings make the readers imagine being in the writer's position and help us remember and know that

humans are not alone, and other people face the same reality as the others do. Literature is always seen in daily lives, through books, movies, films, and more. It teaches us what is right or wrong and helps the audience know the world beyond our knowledge. Most of the time, stories have hidden meanings that are not immediately clear to the audience. Finding those meanings helps to get to know the world and its people better; it helps the audience think deeper and see the messages behind those hidden meanings. Reading stories this way also helps better at reading and writing, which helps us in expressing ourselves.

An article titled “*The Gig Trap: Algorithmic, Wage and Labor Exploitation in Platform Work in the US*” was published in May 2025 in “*Human Rights Watch (HRW)*”. According to their studies, platform workers in the United States found that the median income, after deducting expenses related to work, is as low as \$5.12 per hour, far below the federal minimum wage, thereby illustrating the exploitation of value through subpar wages and expenses transfer to the worker. Based on this article, it is known that many platform workers do not have the same freedoms that independent contractors are to have, such as the freedom to negotiate basic aspects of their work, including their compensation. Compare it to Karl Marxist theory, the *Bourgeoisie* (the capitalists) are the ones who dominate, or the owners of a facility, and resources that produce goods, while the *proletariat* (the working class) are those who help work for the bourgeoisie to be able to survive, and make a living.

A movie published by Pixar Animated Studios for Walt Disney, released on December 18, 1998, *A Bug's Life* (designed in all lowercase). An animated fable movie that combines adventure, action, and comedy into one, is the movie: *A Bug's Life*. The fable is described as a “*concise storytelling about moral values*” characterized by non-human actors who provide the audience with “*human essential life lessons*” (Abrar, 2016, p. 23). With a touch of violence, parents and children stated that this movie is rated for ages 7 and up (Common sense media). This movie alone was nominated in over 15 awards and won 11 awards: BlockBuster Entertainment Awards for Favorite Animated Family Movie, Golden Screen Award, Grammy Awards: Best Instrumental Composition Written for a Motion Picture, Television or Other Visual Media, Satellite Awards: Best Motion Picture, Animated or Mixed Media, and many more.

“*A Bug's Life*” tells the story of an inventive ant living amongst the ant colony: Flik. He enjoys inventing things to help speed up the process of collecting food that the ant colony does. But a mishap happens as he accidentally destroys the food stores that are going to be used to pay off the grasshoppers. The grasshoppers are far larger than the ants and they demand food stock from them every season. Because of the mishap Flik did, the grasshoppers demand the ants gather double the food or face their deaths. After the grasshoppers left, Flik told the Queen and Princess to fight back. But because they are terrified of the grasshoppers, they refuse Flik's suggestion.

Even though the ant colony can fight back the grasshoppers, seeing they are larger in amount compared to the grasshoppers. They are bound by an invisible thread to continue working for them, similar to a slave. To try and fix things, Filk decided to go out of the colony and search for strong-brave warriors to fight the grasshoppers back. In his search, he found "warriors" that turned out to be a bunch of circus bugs.

From the storyline, the ants represent workers or the working class. Whilst the grasshoppers represent the ruling class. Though the slight difference is how the ants get no visible or physical pay. Only a "guarantee" that the grasshoppers will not annihilate them. Therefore, this research will discuss the unfair relationship between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. And how the workers are bound to the ruling class by invisible threads, to merely make a living or to survive.

In recent research, "Bourdieu's Strategy in the Movie 'A Bug's Life'" was published in ELITE: Journal of English Language and Literature. Based on their research, their study specifically discussed the main issues of the movie, such as the problem of oppression and its struggle for power. This article discusses the analysis of the film regarding inequality between both working classes, In comparison, the current research on A Bug's Life primarily focuses on the struggle of the working class, while utilizing Marx's theory to analyze both the main issue of the film, and the perspectives of both the ruling class and the working class.

Marxist theory has been used multiple times to examine the social class and the unequal distribution of power or authority. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1992), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels tell us how social life is divided into two groups: the bourgeoisie, who are able to abuse their power in exploiting the proletariat, which are the people that labor and only probably get a daily bread that is just enough for them to continue being exploited. This imbalance created a system in which the upper/ruling class gained more wealth, while the workers just get a fraction of their wealth. Marx also argued the idea of alienation, where workers forgot their labor and sense of purpose to the point of becoming dehumanized due to the effects of capitalism.

In the present a lot of scholars have expanded Marx ideas beyond economics to include culture and ideology. Louis Althusser (1971) introduced the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses, institutions like school, and the media that help preserve the power of the ruling class. Antonio Gramsci (1971) created the idea of cultural hegemony, defining how those in power maintain their control and make inequality look natural. In literature, critics such as Georg Lukács and Terry Eagleton argue on how cultural works both reflect and shape the material conditions of their time, while often revealing the struggle that appears between the two classes. As Eagleton (1976) states, "Literature is ideologically insignificant, not because it transcends ideology, but because it is saturated by it," understanding and interpreting how cultural texts are

deeply connected to social and political power. Taken together, this perspective shows that Marxist is not only about Economics but also with multiple ideas that sustain systems of power. This makes it a lens where narratives can expose or challenge the inequalities that are in the society.

Therefore from the issue above, this research dives into the class struggles between the working class (the ants) and the ruling class (the grasshoppers) and how the film represents exploitation in Marxist theory. From this analysis, we can find out the role of workers and rulers, and how inequality that is non consensually forced on affects the workers mind (their behavior, mindset, way of thinking). It is expected that this study will analyze symbols and the theme of this movie. Other than that, the purpose of this research is to analyze “a bug’s life” through its plot, visual graphics, and flow of the story through the windows of inequality in the working environment and the issue that lies in Marxism. The key binary oppositions described below aims to compare the various concepts contained in this story in order to help us understand this issue thoroughly:

The Proletariat	The Bourgeoisie
<p>The lower class or the workers are forced to work for the capitalists, bound by invisible chains that restrain them from “<i>Freeing</i>” themselves from their job. The ants have a choice to free themselves from their job or fight back. But invisible chains of fear and lack of knowing what to do are holding them back from doing so. Workers are bound to their work to merely survive, and even so, inequality and lack of control still exists in their work environment set by the capitalists.</p> <p><i>"The Roman slave was held by chains; the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads."</i> (Marx, 1990b, P.719)</p>	<p>Capitalists, playing the role of the “superior” or higher class, are depicted to be dominant rulers that feed off their workers. The grasshopper leader; Hopper, feeds off the earnings of the ants (workers) but does not give them a fair pay. While the workers are finding ways to survive from minimal resources, the capitalists drown and waste the resources. This dynamic difference illustrates what Marx analyzed in Capital I: <i>"Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole."</i> (Marx, 1990, P.709) The capitalists get richer from the produce of the worker’s labor, whilst the workers stay financially incapable. They drown themselves in earnings that are results of exploitation.</p>

## METHOD

This analysis of a bug’s life used a qualitative close reading method, to analyze the capitalism issue: inequality between the working and ruling class. Marxist criticism is a theory of literary criticism based on historical materials developed by Karl Marx. Close reading analysis was done through the glasses of Marxist criticism and Karl Marxist theory from Capital, Volume I (1990). Studying the issue not through data and numerical analysis, but through multiple

viewpoints, human experiences and occurring themes. Close reading was used to analyze the dialogue, theme, scenes (cinematography), and character behaviour in detail to understand the relationship between (the proletariat) the ants and (the bourgeoisie) grasshoppers.

Each scene was examined in detail by selecting scenes that showed the conflict between the working (ants) and ruling class (grasshoppers). Such as the scene where the Queen ant attempted to negotiate with the grasshopper leader. Focusing on dialogue, symbolism, scene, and settings, a thorough study to interpret deeper meanings about class struggle, power, and oppression was able to be conducted. This class theory expresses the position of a person in society and the class hierarchy is determined by their role in the production process. Using close reading allowed the study to uncover layers of meanings within the film. Displaying how its narration and visual elements represented Marxist concepts such as the class conflict between the working and ruling classes, and inequality at work place.

## DISCUSSION

In *A Bug's Life*, the relationship between the ants and the grasshoppers mirrors a concept of Marx about class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The ants, representing the working class, laboring endlessly to collect food not for themselves but for the ruling class who demand satisfaction from the working class, represented by the grasshoppers. This system of dependency reflects Marx's idea that workers are bound by "*invisible threads*," working not out of choice but necessity for survival (Marx, 1990). The ants' fear of punishment from the grasshoppers keeps them obedient, showing how power can be maintained not through physical force but psychological control.

At the beginning of the movie, the ants work tirelessly under the sun, collecting different varieties of food into the offering stone for the grasshoppers while the grasshoppers relax and waste the food they take. The princess of the ant colony, Princess Atta, takes charge of them



while they collect and gather the food for the grasshoppers. Princesses Atta panics when things do not come her way before the queen, her mother, reassures her, While the ants collect each grain of food for the grasshoppers, "*Oh, it'll be fine. It's the same every year. They come, they eat, they leave. That's our lot in life. It's not a lot, but it's our life.*".

The words of the Queen hold a foreshadowing meaning. She tells her daughter that serving the grasshoppers is their life, that providing for them is their life now. Her words connect with a quote by Marx. He quoted,

*"In the same way, therefore, as the worker is depressed, intellectually and physically, to the level of a machine, and from being a man becomes an abstract activity and a stomach, so he also becomes more and dependent on every fluctuation in the market price, in the investment of capital, and in the whims of the wealthy." (Marx, 2007, P.24).*

Marx argues that workers must work non-stop as they are not treated like a person anymore, and they must abstract their work to survive. Because of the capitalist system, workers are now made to work like machines, forcing them to work tirelessly while slowly losing their intelligence and creativity.

The film uses low-angled shots that look up from the ground to make the ants look smaller compared to the grass and grain, showing their hard work as they carry out food. The lighting showcases bright and warm color contrasts that show how uncomfortable the situation is while the ants carry the grains of food. The background is often blurred to make the audience focus more on the character and what is going on around them.

Later in a scene, when the audience is introduced by the main character, Flik. Flik tries to help the princess with his inventions, but he is later stopped and forced to work like the other ants. Just like in Marx's quote, the ants have no creativity to work faster. The ants are forced to scavenge food for the grasshoppers and for themselves.



A siren suddenly alerted the ants, warning everyone that the grasshoppers would be arriving soon. Princess Atta tells every ant to place the food onto the offering stone and hurry back to the ant hill. Everyone places the food into the offering stone and makes their way towards the ant hill to hide, but as everyone was already hiding, Flik was left behind. He hurries himself to place the food he had collected, and places them onto the offering stone, but as he turns to leave for the ant hill, he accidentally drops the food offering down a hill. As he enters the ant hill to warn Princess Atta about the food offering, the Grasshoppers have already found out that the food offering is missing.



Later, Hopper and the rest of the grasshoppers barge into the ant hill, demanding for the food they want. After Flik fights back at him, he forces a false "natural order" to the ants to keep them obedient and exploited: *"Now let me tell you how things are supposed to work. The sun grows the food, the ants pick the food, the grasshoppers eat the food.."* Hinting and shoving the mindset of how the ants

are “*naturally*” meant to serve the grasshoppers. Hopper is describing a class hierarchy: the ants work, the grasshoppers take the produce/rewards. Marx quoted, “*The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,*” (Marx & Engels, 1992a, P.14). Explaining how human history was shaped by conflict between the exploited and the exploiters. Where the powerful maintain control by shaping the minds of how others view their place in society. Hopper thrives off the ant's fear by convincing them that this unfair system is how things are supposed to be.

Hopper is seen dominantly towering over the ant Princess: Princess Atta, which makes her look scared, weak, and powerless. This shows how Hopper is showing intimidation and control over the ant Princess and other ants, by his body language (towering over Princess Atta). Which is a classic cinematography for showing a bully vs victim scene. The harsh spotlight on Hopper and the ants are in shadow, showing how it focuses on Hopper as the source of chaos and danger. Shadows are used to showcase the fear and tension amongst the ants towards the grasshopper leader, how they huddle together in fear and simply stare at the scene ahead of them. The scene uses a depth of field and composition where we can see Hopper in sharp, highlighted detail, a group of terrified ants behind him, and the ant Princess below him, tiny but visible.

The next scene highlights how Hopper keeps control without using violence is when he says “*Listen, if you don't keep your end of the bargain, then I can't guarantee your safety. And there are insects out there that will take advantage of you.*” Here, Hopper tries to act like he is defending the ants, but he is really using fear to keep them obedient. He makes the ants think



they need the grasshoppers to stay safe, although it is the grasshoppers who are ruling over the ants. This connects to Marxist theory in *The Capital, Volume 1*, where he explains that people in power make workers believe that the unfair system they live in is normal and necessary. Just like



the capitalists Marx describes, Hopper stows away his control behind the illusion of help. The ants do not realize they are being tricked into serving the grasshoppers, showing how fear and false safety can be used to keep others under control. The moment also reflects Max Weber's idea of domination, when authority lasts because people accept it, even when it

works against them. The ants respect not because Hopper forces them every time, but because they have learned to believe his warnings and see him as the one that is really the “best” for them.

A key moment illustrating that power can be maintained using psychological force occurs when Hopper tells his fellow grasshoppers, *"You let one ant stand up to us, then they all might stand up! Those puny little ants outnumber us a hundred to one. And if they ever figure that out, there goes our way of life!"* This line emphasizes the fear of the ruling class of unity among workers. Hopper's words show his awareness of the fact that their control depends on keeping the ants submissive and divided. Meaning that the ants can easily overthrow them if one of them simply starts. *"Domination is the probability that commands will be obeyed."* (Weber, 1978, P.212). Even though the ants can resist, they choose to obey Hopper. As domination is the likelihood that people will follow the existing commands. As it involves a minimum **VOLUNTARY** obedience. The ants are in the state of mind where they think that all what Hopper is doing is the *"true nature"*, something untouchable. The cinematography in this scene also highlights Hopper, who looks even more powerful. The camera zoomed to his face making him look intimidating and overwhelming, just like how the ants feel when he confronts them. The dark background also feels like they're in a dark place and conditions. All these visual choices show that his power comes from fear and intimidation, not real strength.

Using a quote from Karl Marx, *"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas."* (Marx & Engels, 1976, P.64), which in simpler words say that *"The ideas of the ruling class in every era are dominant ideas"*. Those in power control how others think: they shape their ideas, beliefs, and actions, they are dominant. So the working class just accepts the system they are put in. Hopper does not just use physical force and fear, he also uses psychological force to keep the ants submissive: by making the ants believe they are powerless, even if they are not.

The low angle-shot in this specific scene makes Hopper look both intimidating and powerful, while the others seem small and fearful of him. Oftentimes, warm yellow-ish lighting is used to interpret heat, anger, and tense scenes. Whilst white or bright lighting is used to create a joyful, optimistic mood for the scene. Hence, the lighting choice for this particular scene: warm lighting; the lighting highlights the dominance and aggression Hopper has. Hopper's position is above others, standing on food, symbolizes control built on fear and exploitation. It shows that Hopper's authority depends on keeping others in control and unaware of their strength.

As the movie nearly comes to an end, this particular scene highlights the starting point of the climax. *"It's not about food. It's about keeping those ants in line! That's why we're going back!"*. One of the grasshoppers suggested that they stay in and should not return to the ant hill for more food, since they have



plenty for the winter. Hearing this, Hopper goes mad and seemingly injures or kills the grasshopper that suggested so. It is never just about food, it is about keeping the ants in line. This scene holds a deep symbolism, it reveals Hopper's true intentions: control, not survival. A quote that matches what Hopper is doing is a quote from Foucault: *"The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome."* (Foucault, 1982). What this quote is basically saying: the use of power consists of directing behavior and regulating possible outcomes. Hopper wants to direct the possible behavior and outcomes of the ants. He is not there for a *"survival of the fittest"*, he is there to control others.

One of the most dramatic turning points in the movie *A Bug's life* comes when the ants or Flik specifically, steps forward and declares *"Ants are not meant to serve grasshoppers. I've seen these ants do great things, and year after year they somehow manage to pick food for themselves and*



*you."* In this scene reflects exactly what Karl Marx described as the awakening of class consciousness (Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1992). *The Communist Manifesto*). In Marx's view, the lower class often remains obedient not because they truly are powerless, but they have been affected to believe in their own weakness. The grasshoppers maintain control just as the ruling class does in Marx writings *"not through strength, but through fear, dependence, and the illusion that domination is natural"* (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 35)

The cinematography from this scene also highlights the shift in power. When Flik speaks, the camera is slightly focused closely on him, making him look braver and more confident. The lightning in this scene becomes brighter around him, on the other hand the grasshoppers stay in darker shadows. The camera angle also slightly lifts when showing the ants, making them look stronger, while the grasshoppers look smaller. In this scene change shows that the ants are finally realizing their power.

In the end, the moment when Flik stood up it mirrors exactly what Karl Marx describes as the awakening of the oppressed. When Flik breaks the illusion that the ants were weak, the colony finally sees the truth that they are the ones who produce everything, while the grasshoppers give nothing in return. This realization turns fear into unity, just when Marx argues that the "proletariat" gains power when it becomes aware of its collective strength, once the ants recognize what they are truly capable of, the grasshopper's authority begins to crumble. Flik's speech marks the point where exploitation is exposed, and the balance of power shifts. Showing how unity can repeal an entire system of control.

## CONCLUSION

The movie *A Bug's Life* explains the kind of class struggle Marx describes, with the ants positioned as the working class who labor endlessly while the grasshoppers who feel superior and stand in as the ruling class who benefit without contributing. The movie identifies the theme of exploitation and oppression through scenes where the grasshoppers use fear, threats, and the illusion of natural hierarchy to keep the ants obedient, demonstrating Marx's ideas about how those in power maintain control. The research also reveals how class consciousness slowly grows within the colony: Flik's denial to accept the "natural order" sparks awareness among the ants, and their eventual unity mirrors Marx's belief that collective resistance is possible once the oppressed recognize their true strength. Basically, this research shows how an animated film can simplify and expose real social issues, making them understandable for wider audiences. Future studies could compare this film with other animated works that explore labor, hierarchy, or resistance, or apply different critical theories to see how power operates across children's media.

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