

SOCIAL CLASS PORTRAYAL IN *WONKA*: A MARXIST CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study, titled Social Class Portrayal in *Wonka*: A Marxist Critical Analysis, examines the problem of social class and the struggle of the proletariat. To analyze this issue, the study applies Karl Marx's theory of class conflict. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method. The finding shows there are 40 data, 26 on social class, which is divided into 18 for the bourgeoisie and 8 for the proletariat, meanwhile 14 data for the struggle of the proletariat. In conclusion, the findings show that *Wonka* portrays two main social classes: the bourgeoisie, represented by characters such as Slugworth, Fickelgruber, Prodnose, and Mrs. Scrubbit, who control production and exploit others, and the proletariat, represented by Willy Wonka, Noodle, and the laundry workers, who depend on wages and face poverty. The proletariat's struggle is depicted through solidarity, rebellion, and direct conflict, with collective resistance becoming the key to challenging capitalist domination. Overall, the film reflects Marx's idea that class struggle is central to social change, illustrating how awareness and unity can confront inequality and move toward a more just society.

Keywords: Social Class, Bourgeoisie, Proletariat, Class Struggle, *Wonka*

INTRODUCTION

Literature is more than artistic expression; it is a cultural medium that reflects human experiences, emotions, and social realities. Literature not only reproduces ideas and emotions but also interacts with readers and contexts, offering space for interpretation and critique. It can both uphold and challenge ideologies, making it a powerful tool for analyzing social problems and cultural change. Thus, literature becomes a mirror of history, culture, and the human condition, serving as a valuable resource for understanding how individuals and societies navigate struggles, values, and transformations across time (Bressler, 2003).

The connection between literature and society has long been recognized by critics and theorists. Williams (1983) emphasized that literature functions as a cultural document, providing insights into values, conflicts, and aspirations across history. This perspective places literature not as an isolated creation of individual genius but as a product shaped by the economic, social, and political forces of its time. With the rise of Marxist theory, literary studies increasingly focused on social class, treating texts as ideological products embedded in material conditions and class struggle. In this way, literature becomes an active participant in cultural dynamics,

simultaneously reflecting and contesting dominant ideologies while shaping the consciousness of its readers..

Marxist theory, introduced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, identifies society as divided into two primary classes: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who must sell their labor. This antagonistic relationship fosters inequality and exploitation, ultimately giving rise to class struggle and revolutionary potential (Marx & Engels, 2005). Marxism not only provides a critique of capitalist society but also envisions the possibility of transformation toward a classless and equitable system. Later thinkers, such as Antonio Gramsci, quoted in Merrington (1968), expanded this framework by explaining how ruling classes maintain power not merely through economic control or force but also through cultural hegemony (Merrington, 1968). Meanwhile, the working class, through the development of counter-hegemony and class consciousness, retains the potential to resist oppression and challenge existing social orders.

In contemporary society, class inequality remains pervasive despite modernization and globalization. Issues such as economic disparity, worker exploitation, and capitalist monopolies continue to define the structure of social life. Literature and film, as cultural texts, capture these ongoing realities, embedding them in narratives that both entertain and critique. *Wonka*, released in (King, 2023), is directed by Paul King, provides a rich example of this dynamic. While the film is framed within fantasy, it reflects struggles rooted in capitalist society, portraying Willy Wonka's journey against a monopolistic chocolate industry controlled by the bourgeoisie. Through its depiction of exploitation, oppression, and solidarity, *Wonka* positions itself as a cultural commentary on contemporary forms of inequality.

Within the narrative, the bourgeoisie characters are shown manipulating legal, social, and economic systems for profit, reinforcing their dominance through greed and coercion. In contrast, Willy and his companions embody the proletariat, relying on creativity, hard work, and collective action to survive and resist exploitation. This dichotomy illustrates the tension between oppressors and the oppressed, making the film a useful case study for exploring Marxist themes such as revolution, solidarity, and the emergence of class consciousness. Although the setting is fantastical, the struggles echo real-world conditions, showing how capitalist power operates not only through material means but also through the shaping of dreams, opportunities, and desires.

By analyzing *Wonka* through a Marxist lens, this study aims to highlight how cultural texts reveal and critique class dynamics in modern society. The film symbolizes proletarian resistance against capitalist domination, with Willy representing the possibility of social transformation through courage and solidarity. His struggle mirrors Marx's vision of the proletariat as both an oppressed class and a potential revolutionary force capable of reshaping society. Ultimately, this study underscores that literature and film are not passive forms of entertainment; rather, they are active spaces of ideology and resistance, offering readers and audiences opportunities to reflect critically on ongoing struggles against inequality in the contemporary world.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Social Class

According to Karl Marx, social class refers to the hierarchical divisions in society rooted in economic relations, particularly ownership of the means of production. In the 19th century, the term "social class" began to replace older concepts of "rank and order" as distinctions were

increasingly shaped by wage dependency and capital ownership (Marx, 2005). Unlike status groups, which rely on cultural prestige, kinship, or ancestry, social class is primarily determined by one's economic position and relation to production. Marx emphasizes that all societies are "class societies", organized around the principle that one group possesses material resources and authority while another group lacks such control (Marx & Engels, 2005)..

Social class, therefore, is not merely an economic label but a comprehensive determinant of an individual's opportunities and limitations within society. Class position influences access to education, healthcare, housing, cultural capital, and even political participation. For Marx, this unequal access to resources shapes not only material well-being but also consciousness and worldview. As a result, social class becomes the fundamental axis around which social inequality, cultural values, and power relations revolve, making it the foundation for analyzing social conflicts and historical change.

1.2 Bourgeoisie

The bourgeoisie represents the capitalist class, those who own and control the means of production, such as factories, land, industries, and financial capital. Their dominance is expressed through two key mechanisms: domination and exploitation. Domination refers to their authority to supervise, hire, and command labor, while exploitation lies in their ability to extract surplus value, the difference between the value workers create and the wages they are paid. This process enables the bourgeoisie to accumulate immense wealth and concentrate economic power in their hands (Marx, 2005).

Marx & Engels (2005) also state that, beyond the economic sphere, the bourgeoisie also extends its power into politics, law, and culture. By shaping legal systems, controlling education, influencing cultural institutions, and directing state mechanisms, they preserve and justify their dominance. The bourgeoisie not only exploits labor but also normalizes inequality by presenting capitalist values such as competition, profit, and private ownership as natural and desirable. This ensures that their control over production and society is reproduced across generations, making them the central force in maintaining capitalist hegemony.

1.3 Proletariat

The proletariat refers to the working class, who lack ownership of productive assets and therefore must sell their labor power to survive. This dependence on wages makes them inherently vulnerable to capitalist exploitation, since the value they produce always exceeds the compensation they receive. Workers remain trapped in cycles of economic inequality and are denied the wealth that their own labor creates. Their limited bargaining power restricts their ability to demand better conditions, reinforcing their economic and social subordination (Marx & Engels, 2005).

In addition to material exploitation, the proletariat also suffers from ideological manipulation. Marx (1972) argues that the ruling class cultivates false consciousness by controlling ideology through education, religion, and media. This manipulation causes workers to misrecognize their exploitation, accept capitalist values, and even view the system as natural or unchangeable. In this way, the proletariat is oppressed both materially and mentally, with their potential for resistance suppressed until they acquire a new awareness of their shared position and power.

2. The Struggle of the Proletariat

For Marx, class struggle is the central driving force of history, rooted in the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. At first, this struggle appears in the form of localized economic disputes, such as wage demands, strikes, or protests against poor working conditions. These early struggles are often fragmented and limited to immediate material concerns. However, they reveal the fundamental contradiction between labor and capital, planting the seeds of wider resistance (Marx, 1972).

Over time, economic struggles evolve into broader political movements. Workers begin to recognize that their exploitation is systemic rather than individual, and this realization fosters solidarity across industries and national borders. The proletariat gradually understands that its collective interests are opposed to those of the bourgeoisie. As Marx notes, this growing awareness marks the shift from isolated struggles for survival to a unified political struggle against capitalist domination, transforming class conflict into the engine of social change (Marx, 2005)..

3. Revolution of the Proletariat

The culmination of the proletariat's struggle lies in the development of class consciousness, where workers transform from a "class in itself" a passive group defined by economic conditions into a "class for itself" an active, politically aware collective. Through strikes, mass protests, and solidarity movements, the proletariat becomes aware of its shared exploitation and collective strength. This transformation allows workers to challenge not only their immediate conditions but also the entire structure of capitalist society (Marx & Engels, 2005)..

The ultimate goal of this revolutionary struggle is the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and the establishment of collective ownership. Such a transformation would dismantle the foundation of exploitation and create a classless society based on equality, cooperation, and social justice. Marx emphasizes that this cannot be achieved through gradual reforms but requires a radical overthrow of capitalism. Only through revolution can communism be realized, bringing forth a system in which resources are distributed according to need rather than profit, ensuring true freedom and equality for all (Marx, 1972).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the depiction of social class and proletarian struggle in *Wonka*. As Cresswell (2013) explains, qualitative research emphasizes descriptive data and explores multiple perspectives shaped by social and historical contexts. The researcher collected, classified, and interpreted data to identify themes of class division. To strengthen this analysis, a Marxist critical approach was applied, viewing literature as a reflection of social institutions and focusing on class conflict, exploitation, economic power, and ideology. This framework allows the study to examine how the bourgeoisie and proletariat are represented in the film, and how their struggles illustrate broader structures of inequality. The primary data consist of the *Wonka* directed by (King, 2023) and its official transcript, while secondary data include journals, books, and previous studies related to the study. Data collection was carried out through repeated viewing of the film, close reading of the transcript, and documentation of dialogues, scenes, and actions that signify class structures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Social Class Depicted in *Wonka*

This study identifies two social class divisions in *Wonka*, namely the bourgeoisie (upper class) and the proletariat (lower class). The film highlights inequality between the wealthy, who hold power and control, and the poor, who experience subordination. From the analysis, seven data findings illustrate how class division is represented through the characters and narrative of the movie.

1.1 Bourgeoisie

The bourgeoisie, or upper class, refers to groups who own capital, land, factories, and other means of production. In *Wonka*, they are portrayed as dominating and controlling those beneath them. The analysis identifies ten instances that illustrate this bourgeoisie classification.

1.1.1 The Owner of Production

The bourgeoisie is the ownership of production, such as factories, land, machines, and other important resources for producing goods and services. One of the owners of production in *Wonka* is Mr. Slugworth, as seen below.



Fig. 1 Mr. Slugworth in his shop office
(*Wonka* 2023)
(00:13:24)

The portrayal of Mr. Slugworth in his lavish office visually emphasizes his position as part of the bourgeoisie. The elegant furnishings, refined décor, and luxurious atmosphere of the office symbolize wealth, privilege, and authority within the chocolate business. His tailored suit and composed demeanor further reflect confidence and control, marking him as a figure of power who oversees operations rather than participating in manual labor. This image stands in sharp contrast to characters like Willy, who must work in the streets selling chocolates. Such visual contrasts highlight the social gap between the ruling class and the working class, underscoring Slugworth's role as a capitalist who profits from production while remaining detached from the struggles of the laborers.

1.1.2 Economic Power

The data on economic power can be seen in the image below. Mr. Slugworth's luxury office reflects his status as part of the bourgeoisie, while his ability to dominate the market through

restrictive regulations demonstrates his economic power. He controls competition by enforcing rules that disadvantage small sellers, reinforcing his authority in the chocolate industry.



Fig. 2 Mr. Slugworth, in his luxury office, saw a small competitor
(*Wonka* 2023)
(00.13.22)

The data in Figure 12 shows Mr. Slugworth in his luxury office watching Willy, whom he considers a competitor, attracting many visitors in front of the chocolate shop. Feeling threatened, Slugworth orders his secretary to call the police:

SLUGWORTH. Miss Bon-bon?

MISS BON-BON. Yes, Mr. Slugworth?

SLUGWORTH. Call the police.

MISS BON-BON. Very good, sir. (Wonka, 2023, p.14)

This dialogue illustrates how Mr. Slugworth enforces his dominance by labeling Willy's sales as a "violation" of the market rules in Galleries Gourmet, which he claims as his territory. The police arrive, disperse the crowd, and confiscate Willy's earnings as a fine, reinforcing Slugworth's control. This scene reflects his bourgeois traits, showing how the upper class manipulates authority to suppress competition and protect their profits. As Harvey (2005) notes, economic elites often consolidate power by limiting labor freedom and monopolizing markets, a dynamic clearly portrayed through Slugworth's actions.

2. Proletariat

Proletariat is a term used for the lower classes who do not have their own means of production and must sell their labor power to survive. The proletariat tends to be exposed to exploitation where their pay does not correspond to the work they do. The following data is presented in descriptive form.

2.1 Dependency on Wages

The data on dependency on wages shows that Mrs. Scrubbit's laundry had four other workers there who also had the same fate as Willy. They depend on the salary to pay their bills to Mrs. Scrubbit and cannot leave the laundry because they are being manipulated and exploited by Mrs. Scrubbit. However, they are only getting paid 1 sovereign per day to pay off their debts from working at the laundry house. One of the workers' names is Abacus Crunch. It can be seen in the figures below.



Fig. 3 Abacus Crunch (*Wonka* 2023)
(00.20.22)

Figure 3 above portrays Abacus Crunch, a former accountant for Slugworth who is now forced to work in Mrs. Scrubbits' underground laundry. Trapped by debt, he endures harsh conditions with no real chance of escape. Despite his skills, Abacus is reduced to a powerless laborer, reflecting Marx's view of how workers are exploited and dehumanized under systems controlled by the owners of production.

2.2 Exploitation

Willy Wonka is portrayed as a member of the proletariat, struggling with poverty and lacking financial resources. After seven years at sea, he arrives in Scuttleburgh with only the hope of fulfilling his dream to open a chocolate shop. Despite his determination, he faces hardship, including homelessness and eventual exploitation when he is tricked into signing a false agreement paper that forces him to work in a laundry house.



Fig. 4 Agreement Paper
(*Wonka* 2023)
(00.17.28 – 00.17.40)

Figure 4 illustrates the exploitation of Willy by Mrs. Scrubbit through debt manipulation. What began as a modest lodging fee of one sovereign was inflated into a fabricated bill of 10,000 sovereigns, forcing Willy into 27 years of labor in Scrubbit's laundry. The dialogue reveals how Mrs. Scrubbit imposes false charges and, with Bleacher's coercion, traps Willy in debt bondage:

WILLY. I believe we said a sovereign?

MRS. SCRUBBIT. Add in your mattress hire, linen lease, pillow penalty... you're looking at ten thousand sovereigns.

WILLY. You gotta be kidding me!

MRS. SCRUBBIT. All in the small print, deary. (*Wonka*, 2023)

This scene exemplifies how the proletariat is exploited by the bourgeoisie, as Willy is stripped of choice and compelled into harsh labor. From a Marxist perspective, it underscores how economic systems use debt as a tool of domination, reducing workers to powerless subjects of exploitation.

3. The Struggle of the Proletariat

The proletariat's struggle remains a persistent social issue, appearing in different forms across the world. It stems from economic disparity, labor exploitation, and social injustice, which generate conflict between the working class and the upper class while fostering awareness of class opposition. This section presents several data findings that illustrate how such struggles are portrayed in *Wonka*.

3.1 Large-Scale Protests

Before examining the data, it is important to highlight how Willy Wonka's journey reflects the broader struggle of the proletariat. As a working-class figure, Willy constantly faces structural barriers created by those in power. Despite being trapped in exploitation and poverty, his determination to pursue his dream never fades. His resilience can be seen in the way he continues to find small opportunities to survive and resist oppression. One significant example of this struggle is when Willy secretly sells chocolate, an act that not only demonstrates his creativity and persistence but also reflects the proletariat's effort to fight back against economic constraints and social domination. It can be seen on the figure below.



Fig. 5 Willy will keep selling Chocolate in the City (*Wonka* 2023)

Figure 5 marks a pivotal moment in the proletarian struggle, as Willy, symbolizing the working class, refuses to yield to the control of capitalist figures like Slugworth and Mrs. Scrubbit. In spite of intimidation, manipulation, and force, he persists in selling chocolate in the city, turning his actions into a form of resistance against bourgeois authority. This defiance reflects Marxist ideas of revolution, where the oppressed confront their exploiters. Willy's determination signifies a shift from passive acceptance to reclaiming agency and dignity, embodying the rise of class consciousness that drives workers to challenge an unjust system.

3.2 Rebellion or solidarity action

In the film, Willy does not face his struggles alone. Together with his friends, who also suffer under exploitation, he begins to create a plan as an effort to fight back against the injustice

surrounding them. Their cooperation reflects the spirit of unity and shared resistance that gives them the strength to challenge the system. It can be seen in the figure below.



Fig. 6 Willy and Friends work together (*Wonka* 2023)
(00.51.58 – 00.53.42)

Figure 6 above depicts Willy and his friends forming a strategy that symbolizes solidarity action against the capitalist system. This moment reflects collective resistance to the monopolistic chocolate industry. The dialogue between Willy and Noodle captures this spirit of planning and defiance:

NOODLE. Well, yeah, but I don't know how we're going to sell any chocolate. Every time the police show up, you'd have to disappear...

WILLY. Like a magician?

NOODLE. Right!

WILLY. But it's one thing on stage. You've got ropes, pulleys, trapdoors... and there aren't any of those in the street. (*Wonka*, 2023)

Supported by friends who believe in his vision, Willy's determination illustrates how solidarity and courage enable the working class to oppose entrenched capitalist power.

3.3 Direct Conflict

The next several data illustrates direct conflict between Willy Wonka and the monopolistic rulers of the chocolate industry, who attempt to suppress his innovations. Despite these obstacles, Willy and his friends succeed in collecting enough money to rent a shop in the Gourmet Gallery, allowing them to sell chocolate legally and resist interference from the upper class. It can be seen in the figures below.

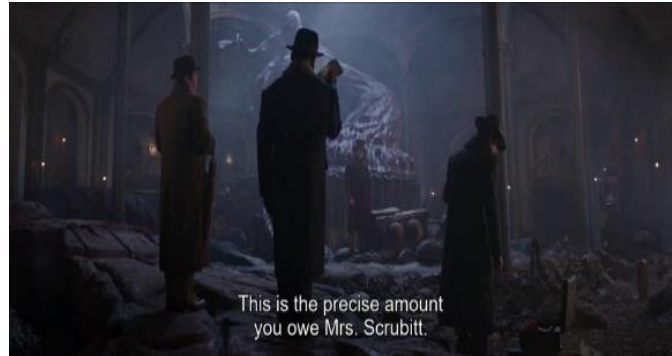


Fig. 8 Willy's Shop Destroyed (*Wonka* 2023) (01.10.11)

The figure above shows the class conflict, occurring right after Willy's chocolate shop is destroyed. This destruction is not accidental but the result of a planned sabotage by Mr. Slugworth, a member of the chocolate cartel, who uses Mrs. Scrubitt to poison Willy's products. The act sparks public outrage and leads to the closure of Willy's shop, symbolizing the loss of his dream and public support.



Fig. 9 Willy and his friend sneak into the factory underneath (*Wonka*) (01:30:00)

The figure above portrays a scene where Willy, Noodle, and their allies secretly enter the factory hidden beneath the cathedral, an underground space symbolizing the concealed power of the bourgeoisie. During the infiltration, Willy and Noodle are discovered by the ruling class and locked inside the chocolate storage room, where they are left to die. This act represents the bourgeoisie's attempt to silence opposition and prevent the exposure of their corruption.



Fig. 11 Willy succeeded in abolishing social class (*Wonka* 2023) (01.43.25)

This scene illustrates a pivotal moment when Willy Wonka succeeds in abolishing the social class system and restoring justice to the entire community. Previously, access to resources and economic opportunities had been controlled by a small group of upper-class individuals who manipulated the system for their own benefit, reflecting the exploitative nature of capitalism. Through collective resistance and determination, Willy and his fellow oppressed workers manage to overthrow this unjust structure. As a result, resources are no longer monopolized, and every member of society gains equal access and opportunity. This marks the end of the capitalist dominance in the film, symbolizing the creation of a more just, equal, and inclusive society, one that aligns with Marxist ideals of class abolition and shared ownership of production.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed two primary classes: the bourgeoisie, embodied by figures such as Slugworth, Fickelgruber, Prodnose, and Scrubbit, who dominate markets, labor, and legal systems; and the proletariat, represented by Willy Wonka, Noodle, and the laundrette workers, who endure exploitation and marginalization. The bourgeoisie's authority is maintained through domination, bribery, market manipulation, and suppression of competitors, reflecting capitalist control over both economy and society. The study further identified the forms of proletarian struggle portrayed in the film, beginning with awareness of systemic injustice and extending to acts of rebellion, solidarity, and confrontation. These forms of resistance collectively reveal the exploitation of the working class and expose the corruption of the chocolate cartel. Among them, solidarity emerges as the most significant, echoing Marx's notion of class consciousness, where collective unity rather than isolated defiance is the key to dismantling capitalist power. The resolution of the conflict in the film Willy's success in reclaiming his production and operating outside bourgeois control symbolizes the abolition of class and the possibility of a more just society. In this way, *Wonka* functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural critique of capitalism, reflecting struggles of inequality that remain relevant today. The study concludes with suggestions for future inquiry. *Wonka* offers rich potential for analysis through its intrinsic literary elements. The film may also be studied through the lens of consumption and commodification, particularly regarding Willy Wonka as a central figure.

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