

## Individuals Greed and Capitalism in Film Killers of the Flower Moon (2023)

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### Abstract

This research investigates the themes of individual greed and capitalism as portrayed in Martin Scorsese's film *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023). The film chronicles the exploitation of the Osage people in the 1920s, following the discovery of oil on their land. The study aims to explore how greed reflects and perpetuates the capitalist system. Specifically, it analyzes the representation of capitalism in the film through both narrative and cinematic devices. To achieve this objective, a qualitative descriptive method was employed. The analysis included repeated viewings of the film, documentation through screenshots, and an extensive review of relevant literature. This approach was grounded in Marxist theory and the literary framework established by Wellek and Warren. The findings highlight illustration of the interconnection between individual greed and capitalist structures. These findings suggest that the film portrays capitalism not merely as an economic system but also as a mechanism of social exploitation. Within this context, the accumulation of wealth is depicted as being achieved through manipulation, violence, and systemic injustice against marginalized communities. The significance of this study lies in its contributions to the fields of literary and film studies. It illustrates how cinema can reflect and critique the workings of capitalism while offering valuable insights into issues of social inequality. This research serves as a critical reference point for future inquiries in Marxist literary criticism and cultural analysis, informing subsequent critical readings of films that tackle similar themes.

Keywords: Capitalism, Greed, Exploitation, Killers of the Flower Moon

## **Introduction**

Literature is a powerful way for humans to express their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. It captures and reflects life, making it relatable and engaging (Eagleton, 1983). More than just an art form, literature uses language to explore human conditions across various historical and cultural settings. It helps us navigate our emotions, relationships, and social issues, ultimately enhancing our understanding of ourselves and the world. One of literature's key roles is to reveal aspects of the human experience that might go unnoticed. Through stories, we can connect with universal human struggles while also recognizing the specific contexts that shape these experiences. Additionally, literature often serves as social commentary, shedding light on issues like power dynamics, morality, and inequality.

In today's society, film has become a prominent form of literature that blends storytelling with visual artistry. Beyond entertainment, films function as educational and reflective media, encouraging audiences to engage with social, political, and cultural issues. As cultural texts, films communicate ideas, ideologies, and critiques of society, often shaping public perception and exposing social injustices. Film also serves as instruments of cultural production that can reinforce or challenge dominant social structures. The increasing accessibility of films through various digital platforms has further expanded their reach and influence as powerful tools of mass communication. They are capable of sparking dialogue, shaping critical thinking, and offering narratives that either align with or resist prevailing ideologies. One example is Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), adapted from David Grann's nonfiction book. The film recounts the story of the Osage Nation in the 1920s, whose newfound oil wealth attracted greed, manipulation, and systemic violence. Through the relationship between Mollie Burkhart, an Osage woman, and Ernest Burkhart, manipulated by his uncle William Hale, the narrative exposes how capitalism operates through personal ties, institutional corruption, and racialized violence. As Arundhati Roy (2014) observes, capitalism often conceals its exploitative nature by presenting inequality as a natural feature of society. The film exemplifies this argument, revealing how greed and capitalist logic intertwine to normalize exploitation. Thus, the empirical and theoretical problem addressed in this study is the way capitalism manifests not only through economic systems but also through cultural narratives that legitimize exploitation.

Studies exploring capitalism in film have offered valuable insights into how movies represent issues of inequality and power. Ponto (2023), analyzed *Blood Diamond* through Marxist theory and *mise-en-scène*, demonstrating how the

distribution of resources and state policies perpetuate inequality and exacerbate urban poverty. Similarly, Gofiqi (2018) examined *The Little Prince* using a Marxist framework, revealing how capitalist ideology curtails freedom by privileging order, discipline, and profit, even within the intimate sphere of family. Meanwhile, Fabriane, Sucahyo, and Wardani (2022) analyzed Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, highlighting the sharp division between proletariat and bourgeois families, where jealousy, ambition, and violence emerge as consequences of structural inequality. These studies share a common concern with how films dramatize the dynamics of capitalism, social stratification, and oppression, demonstrating cinema's role as a vehicle for social critique. By using narrative and cinematic techniques, films are able to present complex issues such as class struggle, alienation, and the unequal distribution of wealth in ways that resonate deeply with audiences.

Despite their contributions, previous studies also exhibit limitations. Much of the existing scholarship has tended to focus either on structural inequality or on personal oppression, without fully considering the dialectical relationship between the two. For instance, studies on *Parasite* largely emphasized the visible class conflict between rich and poor but paid less attention to how personal greed and desire are shaped by larger capitalist systems. Similarly, analyses of *Blood Diamond* and *The Little Prince* have illuminated issues of exploitation and ideological control, but they did not adequately address how capitalism conceals exploitation through institutions such as law, family, or culture. Furthermore, little attention has been given to films rooted in historical contexts where capitalism and greed intersect with systemic violence against indigenous communities. This leaves a critical gap in the literature: the need to explore how cinema can simultaneously represent individual desires and structural mechanisms of capitalism, particularly in contexts of historical injustice and racialized exploitation

The present study seeks to address this gap by analyzing *Killers of the Flower Moon* through the lens of Marxist theory alongside the intrinsic approach proposed by Wellek and Warren. This combined framework allows for a nuanced analysis that examines both the ideological underpinnings of capitalism and the film's internal structures, such as plot, characterization, dialogue, and symbolism. By situating the story of the Osage murders within Marxist analysis, this research shows how individual greed cannot be separated from systemic capitalist forces. The film not only emphasize acts of violence and manipulation but also reveals how these acts are normalized by social and cultural institutions that legitimize exploitation. This theoretical approach also draws on Marx's concepts of class struggle, primitive accumulation, and alienation, which are central to understanding the systemic violence depicted in the film. The application of both Marxist theory and literary

intrinsic analysis enables this study to explore how the film functions as both a historical narrative and a cultural critique of capitalism.

Based on the statements, the problems and objectives of research can be concluded as: (1) What is the relationship between individual greed and the capitalist system in the context of exploitation as depicted in the film *Killers of the Flower Moon*? (2) How does *Killers of the Flower Moon* represent capitalism? The objectives of this study are to identify the relationship between greed and capitalism and to analyze the film's representation of capitalism through its narrative. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to literary and film studies, particularly in demonstrating how film can reflect and critique systemic inequality and social injustice. Practically, the study provides a resource for scholars and readers seeking to develop critical approaches to film analysis. The novelty of this research rests in its focus on the intersection between individual greed and systemic capitalism in a historical narrative of indigenous exploitation. By addressing this issue, the study expands the scope of Marxist film criticism and contributes to broader conversations on culture, power, and ideology.

### **Methodology**

In this study, the writer employs a descriptive qualitative method. Qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2018). To analyze the representation of greed and capitalism in the film *Killers of the Flower Moon*, this study focuses on the relationship between words, sentences, and the meanings they produce to uncover the social realities under investigation, with the aim of providing explanations of the findings. This method enables the writer to obtain answers regarding facts and realities encountered, the problems arising from certain phenomena, as well as to provide new insights into these issues after analyzing the available data (Semiawan, 2010). The writer watched the film, which runs for 3 hours and 26 minutes, five times via Apple TV, collected data through relevant scenes with the aid of screenshots and time markers, examined the social events and the depiction of capitalism through the main characters in the film, and explained these data using Marxist theory. For the second research question, the writer analyzed the scenes that represent capitalism using an intrinsic approach to film analysis based on Wellek and Warren's theory and filmic elements.

## Findings

### 1. The Relationship Between Individual Greed and the Capitalist System in the Context of Exploitation as Depicted in the Film *Killers of the Flower Moon*

#### a. Primitive Accumulation



Picture 1. Bind the family (00.20.30 – 00.20.46)

*William Hale: Well, we mix these families together and that estate money the right direction, it'll come to us. That's a full blood estate. And she gets that money from Lizzie. Now, that's good business there, and legal, not againts the law.*

The scene illustrates how greed and capitalism operate together in the form of primitive accumulation, not through productive labor, but through systematic expropriation and manipulation of social relations. In this context, marriage and family ties are exploited as legal instruments to seize the wealth of the Osage tribe, particularly regarding the rights to oil, structural violence is concealed within legal mechanisms that appear legitimate.



Picture 2. Hiding wolf (00:22:18 - 00:23:11)

Ernest: *"I am an Osage brave. A long time ago, we Osage took our name from Missouri and Osage Rivers". "Ni-U-Kon-Ska, Children of the Middle Waters. 'Move, 'said the Great White Father, from Missouri, from Arkansas, from Kansas. Finally, another strange land, Oklahoma, where famine walked by day and hungry wolves by night. Can you find the wolves in this picture? "Osage weren't ever part of the Five Civilized Tribes."*

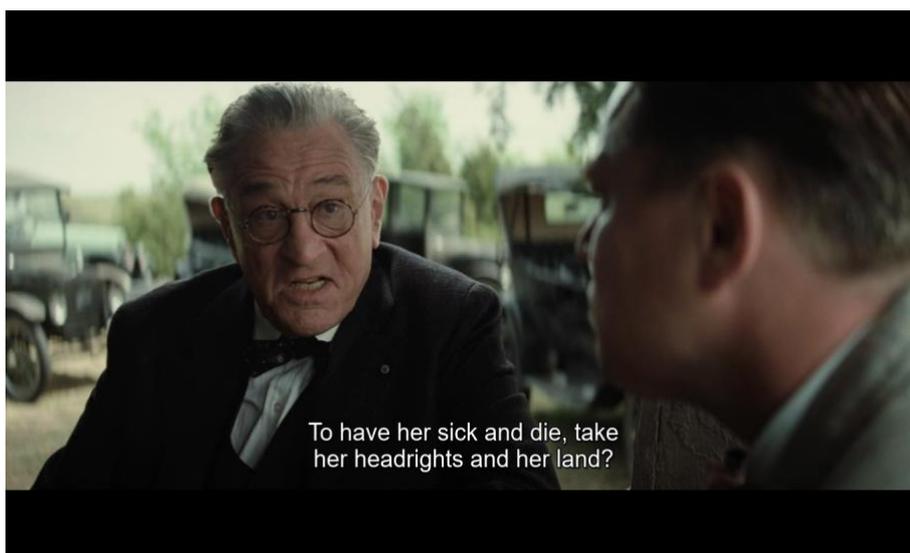
The scene in which Ernest reads a book about the Osage tribe represents the long history of displacement and oppression experienced by the Osage, who were forced to relocate due to external forces seeking to exploit them. Marx explained that capitalism was not born from just hard work, but from violence, plunder, and deception that deprived ordinary people of their land and means of production. The question "Can you find the wolves in this picture?" is a satire that the "wolves" (the greedy people who want to seize the Osage's wealth) hide behind friendly faces, but are actually a threat. This scene demonstrates that the Osage's wealth was taken by greedy people through cunning means.



Picture 3. Stole (00.23.43 – 00.23.45)

Ernest: Got us some rich Indians, boys! (We have found some wealthy Native Americans)

The scene in which Ernest exclaims, “Got us some rich Indians, boys!” illustrates the practice of organized theft carried out by Ernest and his accomplices against the wealth of the Osage tribe, a form of greed manifested through the plunder of resources in line with the capitalist concept of primitive accumulation.



Picture 4. Robbery plan (00.41.16 – 00.41.30)

*William Hale: To have her sick and die, take her headrights and her land? That oil, which should go to her sisters, your wife, well, he's taking money that, by rights should go to Mollie.*

The scene and dialogue illustrate how William Hale and his nephew, Ernest, discuss and secure agreement to plan the death of Mollie's family in order to transfer ownership rights to themselves. This not only highlights individual greed but also demonstrates how the capitalist system legitimizes and provides space for exploitation through the manipulation of family relations. Thus, personal greed and the logic of capitalism mutually reinforce one another in creating systematic oppression of the Osage people.



Picture 5. Plan for Osage woman (00.41.45 – 00.41.42)

*William Hale: Most Osage don't live past 50. With these women dying. with now osage with now Osage suffer from illness, you have to make it the headrights come to you. you see*

In this scene, William Hale is discussing his cunning scheme with Ernest. William explains that the deaths of Osage women due to illness can be exploited to ensure that Mollie's family's oil headrights will eventually fall into Ernest's hands. This scene illustrates how capitalism, through the process of primitive accumulation, operates to systematically exploit and dispossess the Osage people.

Picture 6. Murder (01.05.57 – 01.06.33)



*Ernest: You want something to pay big, Blackie, hmm? You cant't be working with them. You cant't be working with them. You gotta use your head. You gotta think, Blackie. Hale he's been talking about us partnering up. Hmm you know Bill Smith? He's... He's been going around town talking a lot, now, if someone were to knock off Bill Smith and...and Reta too, right? If she was gone, all the estate money would go to my mother in law, Lizzie Q., and she wills it to my children. Now, that's a good deal, that. Its a real good deal.*

*Blackie: For you, it is.*

The scene depicts Ernest planning the murder of Bill Smith and Reta, instructing Blackie to carry out the killing. This illustrates how the capitalist system enables greedy individuals to pursue wealth, even at the cost of human lives, portraying material possessions as more valuable than human existence. In capitalism, wealth is considered more valuable than people. This system allows personal greed and capitalist rules to work together to continue oppressing others.



Picture 7. Caring for headrights (01.26.49 – 01.27.14)

*William Hale: I take care of that man because he's my neighbor and he's my best friend that's \$25,500 laying there. I got an insurance policy on him. It's against what he owes me. So, if he succeeds in demising himself before the end of the year, I forfeit So, he needs to stay alive at least a few more months I might even get a chance at his headrights.*

This scene clearly illustrates the connection between individual greed and the capitalist system in producing exploitation. William Hale explains that he “cares for” someone not out of humanity, but because of his own economic interests.



Picture 8. Plan to get rid of the Indians (01.35.38 – 01.35.48)

*Ernest: King Bill Hale wants to know if you'd like a job getting someone done.*

*John Ramsey: Oh, I can't do that. I didn't sign on for that kind of work.*

*Ernest: Well, it's an indian*

The scene shows how greed drives Ernest and Hale to use violence and dispossession to seize wealth, particularly from the indigenous Osage people. This reflects what occurred in the early stages of capitalism, where land was taken and people were killed.



Picture 9. Pressure and usurpation of rights (02.09.27 – 02.09.38)

*William Hale: Now, I want my Roan money, please. Write that note.*

*J.T. Jones: Mr Hale, I'm sorry, but until I hear from Denver, I can't...*

*William Hale: Do you know who i am?*

*J.T. Jones: Yes, Sir.*

*William Hale: You're not gonna honor this? You're not gonna give me that money?*

*J.T. Jones: No, Sir.*

In this scene, William Hale forces J.T. Jones to hand over Henry's money. Although the attempt fails because J.T. Jones refuses, William Hale still illustrates the use of his position of power to pressure the system into submission to his will. This reflects the early emergence of capitalism through the seizure of people's land and property, supported by the authority of the state and the law.

## b. Commodity Fetishism



Picture 10. Money becomes the goal (00.09.05 – 00.09.13)

*William Hale: Money flows freely here, now.*

*Ernest: Well, I do... I do love that money sir*

In that scene, Ernest, who has just arrived in Oklahoma, is at his uncle William Hale's house, and the two of them discuss the plans they will carry out against the Native Americans. The discussion clearly shows their deep love for money, which is closely tied to the concept of commodity fetishism in capitalism. Marx explains how human social relations become obscured within the relationship between commodities and money, a condition that enables exploitation. To love money, in this context, signifies the internalization of the capitalist logic in which a person's social value and even the meaning of life itself is measured by the accumulation of wealth



Picture 11. Investment (01.26.49 – 01.27.14)

*William Hale: I take care of that man because he's my neighbor and he's my best friend that's \$25,500 laying there. I got an insurance policy on him. It's against what he owes me. So, if he succeeds in demising himself before the end of the year, I forfeit So, he needs to stay alive at least a few more months I might even get a chance at his headrights.*

In that scene, William Hale says “that’s \$25,500 laying there”, which depicts his greed and desire to seize and exploit Henry Roan’s wealth. This aligns with Marx’s critique of the capitalist system, which distorts social relations into relations between objects and undermines human values for personal gain.

### **c. Relations and power**



Picture 12. Abuse of power (02.09.27 – 02.09.38)

*William Hale: Now, I want my Roan money, please. Write that note.*

*J.T. Jones: Mr Hale, I'm sorry, but until I hear from Denver, I can't...*

*William Hale: Do you know who i am?*

*J.T. Jones: Yes, Sir.*

*William Hale: You're not gonna honor this? You're not gonna give me that money?*

*J.T. Jones: No, Sir.*

In that scene, J.T. Jones’s submissive response to William Hale illustrates how class power operates through social pressure, legitimizing the domination of one class over another. J.T. Jones’s submissive response reveals how class power works subtly through social pressure, legitimizing the dominance of one class over another. William uses his privileged social position to manipulate the system and make it bend to his will. This shows that in a capitalist society, the relationship between the upper and lower classes is inherently hierarchical and oppressive the capitalist class holds the power to control and dominate, while the working class remains subservient, even as they carry out their labor.



Picture 13. Adoption (02.25.27 - 02.25.57)

*Kelsie: So my dead wife has 2 kids, and they have my name. So if I adopted them proper and if two kids were to die, would I inherit their estates? They're Osage. Well, one of them's half Osage, but they have headrights.*

*Kelsie's Lawyer: Kelsie you realize that this indicates to me that you're planning on adopting and killing these children?*

*Kelsie: No, not if it's not legal and I don't get the money.*

The conversation scene between Kelsie and her lawyer depicts Kelsie's greed as she tries to exploit the legal system through adoption. Greed becomes the main driving force that pushes Kelsie to exploit the adoption and inheritance system for personal gain. The dominance of the ruling class is shown not only through control over production, but also through the ability to manipulate legally sanctioned social structures that are, in essence, driven by exploitative intentions. Kelsie's greed is not just a personal trait, but an expression of the capitalist system that enables and even encourages the domination over the lives, rights, and wealth of others to expand capital. This serves as a concrete example of how class relations, power, and greed are deeply intertwined within the structure of capitalist exploitation. order to obtain headrights (land inheritance) and wealth by immoral means.

d. Surplus Value



Picture 14. plan to take away Mollie's family's rights (00.41.45 – 00.41.42)

*William Hale:* Most Osage dont live past 50. With these women dying. with now osage with now osage suffer from illness, you have to make it the headrights come to you. you see

*Ernest:* Yeah.

This scene shows that the oil wealth, which should rightfully belong to the Osage people, is instead systematically targeted and exploited by the greedy William Hale and Ernest through death and inheritance manipulation. Although it does not occur within a work process like in a factory, this extraction of wealth is still carried out for the purpose of self-enrichment. This is a form of surplus value that doesn't come from direct production, but from the exploitation of oppressed living and dead groups, which remains in line with the capitalist system.

e. Alienation



Picture 15. Controlled and alienated (01.58.25 – 01.58.25)

*Dr. Shoun: Keep giving your wife her insulin... And, uh, add this. That's this whole vial. Now, make sure get the balance right, Ernest. Now, you keep the shots regular.*

*William Hale: It's just to slow her down.*

*Dr. Shoun: That's all it's gonna do. Slow her down. Mm-hmm. That's all it'll do. Same time every day, 30 minutes before a meal. The whole vial.*

In that scene, Mollie completely loses control over her body and her life when the medicine that is supposed to heal her is instead used to gradually weaken her health. In line with Karl Marx's concept of alienation, this condition illustrates how Mollie's body, health, and very life is under the control of others for the purpose of seizing wealth. In Mollie's case, her body, her health, and even her life was at the mercy of those who sought to take her property. Consequently, Mollie not only lost her property, but also lost the right to control her own body and life.



Picture 16. The Osage children are alienated (02.25.27 – 02.25.57)

*Kelsie: So my dead wife has 2 kids, and they have my name. So if I adopted them proper and if two kids were to die, would I inherit their estates? They're Osage. Well, one of them's half Osage, but they have headrights*

*Kelsie's Lawyer: Kelsie you realize that this indicates to me that you're planning on adopting and killing these children?*

*Kelsie: No, not if it's not legal and I don't get the money*

The conversation scene between Kelsie and her lawyer represents an act of alienation aimed at separating Osage children from their rights to oil and land ownership. Kelsie's plan to exploit the legal system through adoption and inheritance not only reflects primitive accumulation but also reveals a process of alienation, in which the Osage children lose control over their means of production and become estranged from their own rights. Social relations that should be grounded in human values are reduced to mere relations of ownership and capitalist transactions, deepening their alienation from the means of production, their community, and their human dignity.

f. Class Struggle.



Picture 17. The proletarian struggle (01.57.25 - 01.57.38)

*Mollie Burkhart: Mr. President, Mollie Burkhart. Please send help. There's murder in Osage, and the police do nothing. I lost my mother and my sisters. So many Osage are killed for the oil money. Please.*

This scene shows Mollie Burkhart pleading with the president to stop the murders and the seizure of wealth in Osage land, portraying class struggle within Marxist theory, in which the bourgeoisie exploit political and legal power to conceal the structural exploitation of the proletariat. When Mollie has to seek help all the way to Washington, D.C., it shows that local legal and government institutions side with the bourgeoisie and allow violence to occur. This scene demonstrates that class struggle is not just about economic inequality, but also about control and domination of power, where the oppressed class must fight against the capitalist structure and ideology that perpetuates exploitation for the benefit of a few.

## 2. Representation Capitalism in Film Killers of the Flower Moon

### a. Visual symbols and themes



Picture 18. The Osage oil (00.09.05 – 00.09.13)



Picture 19. abundant oil (00.09.05 – 00.09.13)

The opening scene, which shows oil gushing and soaking the bodies of the Osage people through a high-angle shot, serves as an ironic symbol that the natural wealth, which appears to be a blessing, instead triggers oppression, exploitation,

and capitalism. This camera angle not only shows the dramatic burst of oil but also highlights how vast the Osage land is and how rich it is in natural resources. The view from above gives a clear picture of how wide and abundant their land is something that later becomes the source of struggle and suffering. The oil doesn't just represent natural wealth; it also symbolizes something that seems like a blessing but actually brings tragedy. Based on Wellek and Warren's intrinsic approach, this kind of symbol helps express the film's main theme the oppression and exploitation of the Osage people. The happiness shown by the Osage in this scene is filled with irony because it marks the beginning of conflict, betrayal, and murder. The symbols and themes in this scene work together to deliver a deep social message through the story of the film.

### **b. Character Portrayal**



Picture 20. Greedy personality (00.10.09 - 00.10.11)

*Ernest: Don't matter to me. I'm greedy. Mmm.*

In that scene, through the use of a close-up shot, Ernest and his uncle are discussing women. Although the context of the conversation revolves around women, the statement is not merely a personal confession but also reflects Ernest's greedy and capitalist character seeing social relationships, including marriage, as a means of exploitation and a way to acquire wealth. The close up shot in this scene, when Ernest says "I'm greedy," highlights his emotional expression and strengthens his characterization as a symbol of greed and capitalism. Meanwhile,

the over the shoulder shot emphasizes the relationship between the two characters, making their conversation feel more engaging and meaningful.



Picture 21. Devious (01.26.49 – 01.27.14)

*William Hale: I take care of that man because he's my neighbor and he's my best friend that's \$25,500 laying there. I got an insurance policy on him. It's against what he owes me. So, if he succeeds in demising himself before the end of the year, I forfeit So, he needs to stay alive at least a few more months I might even get a chance at his headrights.*

That scene uses close-up camera work with dim lighting to emphasize William Hale's serious expression as he says, "I take care of that man because he's my neighbor and he's my best friend... I might even get a chance at his headrights." This explicitly shows that, for him, social relationships are merely tools to gain economic profit. The character of William Hale represents the values of capitalism, where wealth and power are placed above humanity.

c. Dialogue



Picture 22. Money becomes the goal (00.09.05 – 00.09.13)



Picture 23. love of money (00.09.10 - 00.57.38)

*William Hale: Money flows freely here, now.*

*Ernest: Well, I do... I do love that money sir*

That scene presents the dialogue “Money flows freely here, now” and “Well, I do... I do love that money, sir”, which shows that William Hale and Ernest

are bound to money and make it their main goal. In addition, the cinematographic support through the use of shot reverse shot and medium close-up techniques further emphasizes the power dynamics between Hale and Ernest. Through this dialogue, the film illustrates how the capitalist system influences the way the characters think and act.

## **Discussion**

### **1. The Relationship Between Individual Greed and the Capitalist System in the Context of Exploitation as Depicted in the Film *Killers of the Flower Moon***

The findings reveal that *Killers of the Flower Moon* portrays individual greed not as a personal moral flaw, but as a manifestation of capitalist logic embedded within social, familial, and institutional structures. The film visualizes Karl Marx's (1867) concept of primitive accumulation, where wealth is generated through dispossession rather than production. William Hale's manipulation of marriage, inheritance, and kinship reflects how capitalism legitimizes exploitation under the guise of legality and morality. This depiction aligns with Ponto's (2023) analysis of *Blood Diamond*, which emphasizes that capitalist systems justify economic inequality through lawful mechanisms that disguise exploitation.

The narrative also exemplifies Marx's idea of commodity fetishism, seen in Ernest's and Hale's obsession with money and property. Human relationships become subordinate to material gain, turning affection, kinship, and morality into commodities. This supports Gofiqi's (2018) argument that capitalism transforms ethical and emotional values into economic tools that sustain domination. Similarly, Hale's dialogue referring to a man's life as "\$25,500 laying there" demonstrates how capitalism reduces people to financial assets. This mirrors Buana's (2024) study on *Kara, Anak Sebatang Pohon*, which found that capitalist culture devalues empathy by privileging profit over humanity.

The scenes depicting relations and power reveal how capitalist hierarchies are reinforced through intimidation and institutional complicity. William Hale's authority over others, combined with the submissiveness of lower-class characters like J.T. Jones, illustrates what Rehbein (2020) describes as capitalism's reliance on social inequality to maintain order. Furthermore, Kelsie's attempt to manipulate adoption laws to gain Osage headrights exemplifies how legal systems can serve as instruments of exploitation. This echoes Fabrianne, Suchayo, and Wardani's (2022) findings in *Parasite*, where class power penetrates domestic and moral spheres.

The concept of surplus value appears when Hale and Ernest exploit Osage inheritance for profit. Although there is no factory setting, wealth is still extracted

from others' suffering, illustrating Marx's assertion that capitalism thrives on unpaid or unjustly appropriated value. Dewa and Rohman (2024) analysis of *The Wolf of Wall Street* similarly reveals how capitalist greed transforms deceit and manipulation into normalized economic behavior.

The film also depicts alienation through Mollie's loss of control over her body and the Osage children's separation from their rights. These scenes reflect Marx's view that capitalism alienates humans from their essence by turning life, health, and identity into commodities. Roy (2014) argues that such alienation is not accidental but systemic capitalism depends on detachment from empathy to sustain exploitation.

The portrayal of class struggle through Mollie Burkhart's plea to the U.S. president embodies resistance against systemic oppression. Her act reflects the conflict between the oppressed and the ruling class, reinforcing Eagleton (2002) assertion that literature and film expose ideological contradictions in capitalist societies. However, unlike previous studies that focus solely on class conflict, this film situates the struggle within a colonial and racial framework, emphasizing that capitalist exploitation is inseparable from historical injustice.

*Killers of the Flower Moon* offers a comprehensive representation of how greed and capitalism intersect to create systemic exploitation. The film expands Marxist criticism by connecting personal ambition to broader social mechanisms law, family, and race that legitimize inequality. The results affirm that greed is not merely an individual vice but a structural necessity of capitalism, which operates by transforming moral relations into economic exchanges.

Despite these insights, this research remains limited to textual and visual analysis without audience or production perspectives. Future studies could incorporate postcolonial or eco-Marxist approaches to further explore how capitalism interacts with race, gender, and environment. Comparative research involving other films that critique economic exploitation such as *There Will Be Blood* or *Sorry to Bother You* would also deepen the understanding of capitalism's representations in cinema.

## **2. Representation Capitalism in Film *Killers of the Flower Moon***

*Killers of the Flower Moon* represents the theme of capitalism through its narrative structure, characterization, dialogue, and visual symbolism, revealing how greed and moral decay function as intrinsic elements of the story. Rather than being discussed as an abstract economic system, capitalism in the film is understood as a thematic force that shapes character motivation, conflict, and the moral atmosphere of the narrative. Using Wellek and Warren's intrinsic approach, which emphasizes the unity of a literary or cinematic work through the interaction of its

internal elements, such as theme, character, plot, setting, and tone. This analysis explores how Scorsese constructs the representation of greed and capitalism within the film's artistic form.

The film's central theme revolves around greed as both a personal flaw and a social condition. Through the actions of William Hale and Ernest Burkhart, the story dramatizes how the desire for wealth corrupts human values and relationships. This theme is not merely conveyed through dialogue but also through the film's emotional tone and moral conflict. The recurring pursuit of the Osage oil wealth gives the story coherence, linking every plot development to the destructive influence of material ambition. In Wellek and Warren's terms, the theme unifies the narrative and reveals its total meaning; a vision of humanity trapped between moral conscience and the lure of material gain.

From the perspective of characterization, William Hale and Ernest embody contrasting yet complementary aspects of greed. Hale, with his calm demeanor and persuasive authority, personifies the rational face of capitalism controlled, strategic, and manipulative. Ernest, on the other hand, represents its emotional side greed mixed with guilt, love, and dependence. Their interactions illustrate what Wellek and Warren describe as the psychological depth that gives literary characters their lifelike quality. Both characters evolve not through external ideology but through internal conflict, torn between affection and avarice. Mollie Burkhart's quiet suffering adds moral gravity to the story, making her a symbolic counterpoint to the corrupted world around her.

The plot structure reinforces this moral contrast. The narrative unfolds as a gradual revelation of betrayal, where familial love becomes entangled with deception and death. The sequence of events; marriage, inheritance, murder, and investigation creates a rhythm of rising tension that mirrors the accumulation of moral guilt. Each turning point in the plot corresponds to an ethical decline, emphasizing how personal choices shape social tragedy. In Wellek and Warren's framework, plot is not simply a chain of actions but a moral pattern that exposes the relationship between human will and consequence. Scorsese's storytelling reflects this principle, as every act of greed deepens the characters' entrapment within their own moral failures.

The film's dialogue also serves as a key element in representing capitalism. Lines such as Ernest's "I do love that money" and Hale's cold calculation about insurance policies function as verbal symbols of desire and moral numbness. Wellek and Warren note that language in literature often carries both literal and symbolic weight; here, the characters' words reveal not only their intentions but also the film's underlying ethical message. Through tone and repetition, dialogue becomes a

mirror of obsession, exposing how speech itself can be corrupted by material motives.

Cinematography and visual imagery further contribute to the film's thematic unity. The recurring images of oil gushing from the ground and staining the characters serve as visual metaphors for greed and moral contamination. The dark lighting and subdued color palette evoke an atmosphere of decay and spiritual emptiness, reinforcing the film's tragic tone. These artistic choices align with Wellek and Warren's view that the aesthetic structure of a work, its imagery, tone, and form cannot be separated from its meaning. The contrast between the natural beauty of Osage land and the violence committed upon it deepens the sense of irony: the very resource that brings prosperity also brings destruction.

The setting of 1920s Oklahoma plays an essential role in shaping the moral environment of the story. The historical backdrop of oil discovery provides both the social context and symbolic stage for human greed. As Wellek and Warren emphasize, setting is not merely decorative but functional, it defines the conditions under which moral and emotional conflicts unfold. The rural landscape, once sacred to the Osage, becomes a site of exploitation, mirroring the characters' inner desolation.

Finally, the tone and moral vision of the film encapsulate its artistic unity. Scorsese's restrained storytelling avoiding melodrama in favor of quiet horror creates a reflective tone that invites viewers to judge the events not through ideology but through empathy. In Wellek and Warren's conception, tone expresses the author's attitude toward the subject matter; here, the tone is one of tragic contemplation, revealing the emptiness that lies behind material success.

The representation of capitalism in *Killers of the Flower Moon* emerges through the interaction of intrinsic elements: the theme of greed, the moral conflict within characters, the progressive revelation of betrayal in the plot, the symbolic function of dialogue and imagery, and the somber tone that unifies the work. By focusing on these internal structures, Wellek and Warren's framework allows us to see capitalism not merely as a socio-economic system but as an artistic and moral problem, a force that erodes humanity from within the fabric of the narrative itself.

## **Conclusion**

This study reveals that *Killers of the Flower Moon* powerfully portrays the interconnection between individual greed and the capitalist system through the exploitation of the Osage people. Using Karl Marx's theory of capitalism and Wellek and Warren's intrinsic approach to literary analysis, the research finds that greed in the film is not merely a personal moral failure but a structural consequence of capitalism, which privileges wealth and property over humanity. Through characters such as William Hale and Ernest, the film demonstrates how legal, familial, and social institutions can be manipulated to legitimize exploitation and violence.

Theoretically, this research contributes to Marxist literary criticism by showing how cinematic narratives can visualize capitalist ideology through character behavior, dialogue, and imagery. Practically, the film encourages audiences to reflect on how systemic greed and injustice persist in contemporary society, revealing the moral implications of economic systems that prioritize profit over compassion and justice.

Future studies are encouraged to explore this film through other theoretical lenses; such as postcolonial, feminist, or cultural studies approaches to deepen the understanding of how capitalism intersects with race, power, and gender. Further research could also include audience reception or comparative analysis with other films depicting capitalist exploitation to offer broader perspectives.

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