

EXTENDED ESSAY

Title: The movie *The Lorax* and representation of capitalism in media

Research Question: To what extent does the movie *The Lorax* represent capitalism in 21st century U.S.A.?

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Introduction:

Widely considered one of the most eco-influential children's books in 20th century, *The Lorax* was written by Dr. Seuss at a time of increased ecological consciousness in the United States, with the 1960-70's marking the rise of several environmental movements. Dr. Seuss, whose real name is Theodor Seuss Geisel, was inspired to write *The Lorax* during his time battling with a suburban development project looking to deforest the Eucalyptus tree forest around his home in La Jolla, California.¹ Both a cautionary tale and a call to action against those who exploit resources for their own gain, *The Lorax* easily be called Seuss' most controversial book from the moment it was released in 1971 — it was banned in Californian schools in 1988 for its anti-business message and criminalization of the logging industry; portraying the business in an unfair and villainous light.²

This backlash towards *The Lorax* is part of a broader hostility towards narratives that questioned the environmental ethics of Corporate America, which had previously led to the restriction of books like "The Limits to Rome" in the 1970's, "Diet For a Small Planet" in 1970-80's³, and other literary works with similar messages that threatened to hold up a mirror at the heavily capitalistic attitudes of the industrial 20th century society.

The Lorax is a short-story children's book that follows a little kid named Ted as he seeks out the once business-man now-heretic The Once-ler with the goal of asking him about the extinction of the Truffula trees; fictional trees that are said to be "softer than silk" and having the "sweet smell of butterfly milk". The Once-ler, in exchange for 15 cents, a nail, and the shell of a great-great-great grandfather snail tells him about his invention the Thneed, a product that could be anything and everything at the same time, and how he destroyed the environment where the Truffula trees grow when he sourced and grew his Thneed business from the tufts of the Truffula trees until there were no more trees left.⁴ The Lorax is a creature that tries to defend and speak for the trees, who acts as a reflection of a whistleblower or an environmental activist. The Once-ler, who ignores the Lorax's warnings and continues his sustainable business practices to the point of no return, acts as a reflection of the corporations that ignores environmental experts and activists in favor of profit.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17224775>

² <https://www.thewoodword.org/entertainment/2022/04/21/booklash-the-lorax/>

³ <https://discover.bklynlibrary.org/?booklist=428602>

⁴ Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971)

The 2012 film adaptation of Dr. Seuss' children's book remains just as relevant as the children's books was when it was released in 1971— if not more, with how it expands on the capitalistic aspect of the book and focuses more on the fully corporatized dystopian city, Thneedville, introduces its zillionaire business-man Mayor Allocius O'Hare.

For this essay, I will be examining this movie with focus on how it portrays capitalism, the core features of capitalism, and its effects on the environment and society of Thneedville, and how it compares to portrayal of capitalism in the broader media of 21st century America. The purpose of this essay being to investigate “To **what extent does the movie The Lorax represent capitalism in 21st century U.S.A.?**” through analysis of lyrics, visuals, dialogue and storytelling.

Portrayal of Capitalism in The Lorax:

Exploitative, competitive, innovative, and failed—the 21st century has allowed for several critical attitudes and portrayals in media to become popularized with the end of the Red Scare of the '50s in which the era of Capitalism being hailed as the primary defense against Communism had come to an end, leaving it vulnerable for more critical perspectives. These days, there is said to be no other economic system as dividing as Capitalism, with Ayn Rand arguing that capitalism encouraged the moral use of self-interest to help the economy⁵ and nation while Karl Polanyi had argued that self-interest became market-priority over human and social principles with how capitalism compromised human morality⁶. Capitalism is defined to be “*characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market*”⁷, and widely accused of perpetuating a culture where loss of morality and extreme self-interest is normalized, even encouraged.

⁵ <https://ari.aynrand.org/issues/government-and-business/capitalism/>

⁶ <https://theconversation.com/the-great-transformation-by-karl-polanyi-is-a-classic-critique-of-capitalism-but-it-wasnt-an-overnight-success-227727>

⁷ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/capitalism>

The core features of an economic system that is capitalistic is that it revolves around concepts like private ownership, profit motive, free market, competition, wage-labor, customer sovereignty and capital accumulation.⁸ Not all of these concepts have to be present for a system to be defined as capitalistic as every system exists as a spectrum, but for the case of the 2012 *The Lorax*, there many aspects of the movie clearly reflect enough core features of capitalism in order for it to be considered capitalistic.

Private ownership can be defined as the legal right of individuals or private entities to own, control, use, and transfer property and productive resources. The legal right over property and productive resources are obtained via legal recognition of ownership by deeds and contracts⁹— in the 2012 movie *The Lorax*, The Once-ler travels to the valley where Truffula Trees grow and settles there, using the Truffula Trees to create his Thneed enterprise, the land to build his factories and develop his urbanization project Thneedville. What the Once-ler does cannot fully be put under the umbrella of “private ownership”, as no legal processions happen on screen, and no documents that prove that the Once-ler has private ownership are ever shown. However, a term that better fits the Once-ler’s sudden unprecedented ownership of the land of the Truffula Trees is “enclosure”, which is the privatization of common land through semi-legal/illegal means. Enclosure, though not private ownership, is considered the first step to the process of “Primate Accumulation”, which can be simplified as the practice of land and resources being forcefully taken over for the benefit of the economy¹⁰. Enclosure is not a practice that modern Capitalism encourages because of how it violates and takes away the freedom of other entities to private ownership; but it’s one that Capitalism tolerates, as a necessary means to an end that involves kick-starting profit and economic return, especially in the context of colonialism and foreign economic systems. However, the allowance of the act of enclosure on the Truffula Trees by the Once-ler in the world of the Lorax is only just one sign of there existing a capitalistic economic structure.

⁸ Chang, H.-J., *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010)

⁹ <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/economics/economic-systems-capitalism>

¹⁰ <https://medium.com/@jrcoleman97/the-hidden-origins-of-capitalism-how-the-enclosure-movement-created-wage-slavery-ddaa9eea9739>

The Once-ler: *“I have done nothing illegal, I have my rights; and I intend to keep biggering and biggering and turning more Truffula Trees into Thneeds, and nothing is going to stop me.”*¹¹

Which brings up another feature called Capital Accumulation, which is that profits are reinvested to grow the business and economy, which furthers the profit and allows for even more reinvestment to grow the business. When The Once-ler hits big with his Thneed idea after the score *“Everybody Needs a Thneed”*, he turns the profit he gains from the preorders of the townspeople from the edge of the valley into expansion by hiring his family and multiplying the labor power— additionally during the score *“How Bad Can I Be?”* visuals of factories being built¹² show that the Once-ler reinvested the profits he made when selling his Thneed into developing his Truffula Tree processing operation, allowing for the production of more Thneeds out of Truffula Trees the more profits are made. Capital Accumulation, is also demonstrated by O’Hare who, in a scene where he is talking with his marketing team about the promotion of his newest line of packaged air O’Hare’s Bottled Air, acknowledges how the environmental degradation from the production of his Bottled Air will be a reinvestment into further production of bottled air and capital gain. This brand of capital accumulation, achieved by the cyclic degradation of the environment being an investment is called Accumulation by Dispossession¹³, and summed up perfectly with O’Hare’s joyful remark:

O’Hare: *“So in other words, the more smog in the sky, the more people will buy!”*¹⁴

This brings us to another criterion of capitalism, for there to be a profit motive and for the entities of a market to be driven forward by their aim to make money. Profit maximisation is a frequent talking point in the movie, and sign that there exists a profit motive for all entities in the 2012 The Lorax universe. The Once-ler is particularly driven by a quest for profit maximization, with dialogues where he talks of *“biggering”*¹⁵ every aspect of his production of Thneeds and having *“big plans”*¹⁶ for his business, always thinking about the next level

¹¹ *The Lorax*, directed by Chris Renaud (Illumination Entertainment, 2012), 00:57:53–00:58:18

¹² *The Lorax*, 00:54:53

¹³ <https://www.exploring-economics.org/en/discover/anti-capitalist-chronicles-accumulation-by-disp/>

¹⁴ *The Lorax*, 00:11:36

¹⁵ *The Lorax*, 00:55:11

¹⁶ *The Lorax*, 00:50:58

and next way to maximise his profits using the resources of the Truffula Tree Valley. For the Once-ler, “How Bad Can I Be?” is an entire musical number dedicated to how profit motive shifts his viewpoint to the bad he is doing to the environment and how his aim to make profits corrupts his moral compass. One last criterion that strengthens the fact that the economic system in the Lorax is Capitalism is the existence of limited government intervention, and what can be assumed to be an entirely free market with no regulations— where supply and demand is the deciding factor for products, and the sovereignty of customers in that process is demonstrated by how much ridicule the Once-ler faces initially from the townspeople of the settlement by the valley where the Truffula Tree grows when he first tries to sell his Thneed¹⁷, pushing him to the edge of giving up on his product¹⁸. Having had a minimum supply of one Thneed when the demand was near zero, the supply of Thneed increases proportionally when demand begins to pick up, proving the supply and demand system that characterizes the free market and how much effect customers voluntary exchange has on the continuance of the economic system.

The Lorax: “Nobody’s going to buy that thing.

The Once-ler: “Good to know! Well, fortunately, you’re not the target market, weirdo.”¹⁹

Limited government intervention exists for both the Once-ler’s market for Thneed and O’Hare’s market for Air— for the case of the Once-ler there is no intervention by any institution when the environment visibly starts to suffer damage from the production of his product, and no talked-of coincidence for the Once-ler. It’s the same case for O’Hare, who is not once asked to own up for the destruction he furthered outside of the boundaries of Thneedville. On top of gross negligence of governmental institutions, the Mayor of Thneedville is O’Hare— with seemingly no other governments keeping the business mogul in check and preventing him from leading Thneedville with his own self-interest in mind. This is a symptom of late-stage capitalism called Corporatism²⁰, where the line between the institution that makes the rules might start working hand in hand with the institutions who won’t hesitate to break them for profit, purely because of the amount of control the institution that cares about profit has over the economy. Despite this not being all the categories an

¹⁷ *The Lorax*, 00:42:36

¹⁸ *The Lorax*, 00:43:03

¹⁹ *The Lorax*, 00:42:12–00:42:19

²⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/corporatism>

economic system has to fit into in order to be considered capitalistic, all economic systems exist within a spectrum, and the economic system existing in the world of *The Lorax* 2012 it has enough to be considered extremely late-stage in the spectrum.

Effects of Capitalism in The Lorax:

In the 21st century media, capitalism is not often something that is directly stated to exist but rather a system that is noticed through its effects on the society, environment, and institutions around it. Movies more commonly revert to sending subtle but noticable signals about the effects of capitalism, like for example how job layoffs motivated by profit maximisation causes job insecurity with struggling single fathers (*'The Pursuit of Happyness'*), or like how profit-driven and consumerist environments lead to extreme desensitization and loss of morals in individuals (*'American Psycho'*), etc. For the 2012 *The Lorax* movie, if it were not for the obvious messaging about environmental degradation and morally-corrupt corporate figureheads willing to cross boundaries for profit maximisation, *The Lorax* would seemingly fall short in its representation of the effects of capitalism in comparison to those in media at first glance. There are no traces of wealth inequality between the members of Thneedville evokes a sense of the effects of capitalism being undersated: no visible housing gaps can be spotted in the visual layout of the city, no differences in education access or healthcare disparities are ever mentioned, or even hinted at. The environmental destruction doesn't affect the citizens of Thneedville as severely as it should affect, with everyone able to afford buying air from O'Hare with their seemingly equal wages. For all accounts Thneedville is portrayed as a utopia, with the only drawback of environmental destruction caused by capitalist greed being that there are no trees or anything not artificial other than them, which is shown as a situation they are content with in the opening score "*Thneedville*";

Residents of Thneedville: "*In Thneedville, we love living this way,*

Living in paradise,

It's perfect!

And that's how it will stay"²¹

²¹ *The Lorax*, 00:03:46–00:03:57

Additionally, in the beginning of the movie the Lorax introduces Thneedville as a city that's content with their artificial ways:

The Lorax: “*We open in Thneedville,
A city they say,
Was plastic and fake,
And they liked it that way!*”²²

This happiness in a scenario of a world severely destroyed by greedy corporations that are uncontrollably milking the destruction in ways that maximise profit is a stark contrast to how other pieces of 21st century media handle the effects of similar scenarios on a society, with capitalism shown to mainly be causing effects that are deeply destructive and negative for a society. But upon further investigation what seems like an understatement of the effects of capitalism can be put into the perspective of “*Commodity Fetishism*”²³; a term Karl Marx coined that describes how when consumer goods are treated as having inherent meaning and value, it distracts consumers from questioning the economic system behind them. That is the case with Thneedville, the commodity fetishism of artificial and plastic products is what keeps the people of Thneedville complacent with the environmental destruction outside of their walled city, and distracts them from questioning the corporatist regime O'Hare has them living under.

Commodification is another way in which capitalism is noticed to affect the world of the 2012 *The Lorax* movie. Commodification is the process of turning things that normally wouldn't be a source of profit into sellable goods for profit, things like culture, identity, and even human needs. In the 21st century, commodification can be noticed with how cultural and social practices are packaged and turned into opportunities for consumption—commodification can also be noticed with how certain human needs like water consumption, food, and shelter are treated like products to be purchased instead of rights that are needed to be guaranteed. For the 2012 *The Lorax*, once the Once-ler practices his right of enclosure on the Valley where the Truffula Trees grows, the tufts of the Truffula Trees become a commodity for the locals living at the edge of the valley; the natural resource becomes a

²² *The Lorax*, 00:01:13–00:01:20

²³ <https://www.hamptonthink.org/read/what-is-the-fetishism-of-commodities>

product that has a price-tag, that is marketed as the revolutionary product Thneed and owned by the singular entity the Once-ler. Because of capitalism and the goal of Profit Maximisation being present as one of the core features of capitalistic systems; the Once-ler's commodification of the Truffula Trees only advances into the commodification of the Valley where the Truffula Trees grow when the Once-ler plans the urbanization of the valley with the creation of Thneedville, creating architectural scale models for the city right before the scene where the last Truffula Tree falls²⁴.

Air is also another natural resource which everyone should have the right to have uncontrolled and unlimited access to, that is commodified by a business-man; trademarked and marketed as "O'Hare Air", bringing O'Hare massive profit and continuing capitalism's goal of unlimited profit maximisation.

Residents of Thneedville: *"Oh, look its,*

Aloysius O'Hare...

The man who found,

A way to sell air."

O'Hare: *And became a zillionaire!"*²⁵

Environmental degradation is the most central effect that capitalism is observed to have on the world of the 2012 *The Lorax*. The titular Lorax is first introduced to the audience at the beginning sequence of the movie, where he claims to speak for the trees, and he first enters the actual story when the Once-ler chops down the first Truffula tree, appearing from inside of the stump in a flash-lightning storm²⁶ and going to confront the Once-ler. When the confrontation draws no results, with the Once-ler lying, obfuscating and trying to blame the environmental damage he's caused on one of woodland animals²⁷; the Lorax sets it in his mind to drive the Once-ler away from the Valley where the Truffula trees grow. However, due to the Once-ler's drive for profit and due to him having already invested too much in with his search for the Truffula trees for it to not succeed, the Once-ler refuses to leave the valley where the Truffula trees grow, and the Lorax settles with having the Once-ler promise

²⁴ *The Lorax*, 00:57:09

²⁵ *The Lorax*, 00:03:29–00:03:42

²⁶ *The Lorax*, 00:22:47

²⁷ *The Lorax*, 00:24:47

not to chop down another tree²⁸, and to from then on only harvest the tufts one by one with care. However, incentivized by the prospect of profit maximisation via saving the time and labor power it takes to sustainably farm the Truffula tree tufts, the Once-ler breaks his promise to the Lorax and reverts back to chopping down trees.

The Once-Ler's Mother: “Oncie, we got us a little problem,” ...

“See, we’re not making Thneeds fast enough.”

The Once-Ler's Father: “Harvesting the tufts takes too long.”²⁹

Profit maximisation, a core feature of capitalism, is what drives the Once-ler to further his degradation of the environment, causing the “smogulous smoke”³⁰ from his factories to taint the air unbreathable and the “schlopitty schlop”³¹ of the waste he dumps in the rivers of the valley where the Truffula trees used to grow become unlivable. This environmental degradation is what ultimately results in air becoming a commodity marketed by the O’Hare monopoly, and the society of Thneedville becoming walled off psychologically and physically from the destruction that is outside of the city.

This state of having walled off from the destruction is exacerbated by the rampant culture of consumerism in Thneedville, with the residents having an extreme pride in and an obsession with everything they are surrounded by being artificial and highly commercialized. In the beginning score “Thneedville”, we get shots of balloon bushes and synthetic trees that have no purpose other than lights and aesthetics, with phrases like “Got-all-that-we-need-ville”³², “Satisfactions-garunteed-ville”³³—that point towards lifestyles built on purchases and extreme materialism. It can be observed how from their extreme consumerism stems their ignorance and the lack of responsibility they have to the ongoing environmental destruction outside; lyrically, their mentions of their ignorance is a fact that is sandwiched between descriptions of the positives of their consumerist utopia in Thneedville, showing how consumerism is a side effect of capitalism in both how corporate growth depends on it and how consumers over-indulge as a way to mask reality.³⁴

²⁸ *The Lorax*, 00:39:24

²⁹ *The Lorax*, 00:51:33–00:51:44

³⁰ *The Lorax*, 00:55:23

³¹ *The Lorax*, 00:55:45

³² *The Lorax*, 00:02:15

³³ *The Lorax*, 00:02:45

³⁴ <https://fee.org/articles/reasons-for-anti-capitalism-ignorance-arrogance-and-envy/>

Residents: *“In Thneedville we don’t want to know,
Where the smog and trash,
And the chemicals go...
In Thneedville we have fun year round,
We surf and snowboard right in town,
We thank the lord for all we’ve got,
Including this brand new parking lot.”*³⁵

By keeping themselves distracted with consumerism, the people of Thneedville allow for corporations to run around unchecked, which furthers capitalist agendas and allows for capitalism to also affect institutions like the government. That’s why O’Hare can use his position as the Mayor to establish a surveillance state that safeguards his business, catching and even attempting to stop Ted when he crosses the Thneedville’s walls³⁶ and into the outside world to talk to the Once-ler about the Truffula trees, which he sees as a threat to his monopoly on air.

O’Hare: *“Here’s the deal, I make a living selling fresh air to people. Trees? They make it for free. So, when I hear people talking about them, I consider it kind of a threat to my business.”*³⁷

Capitalism in The Lorax vs. 21st Century Media:

While capitalism in the 2012 *The Lorax* is portrayed loud, exaggerated, and visibly destructive, capitalism in the U.S.A.’s 21st-century media is more subtle, normalized, and embedded into everyday systems. Capitalism is more material and industrial in the 2012 *Lorax*— trees are physically cut down, factories are built, smog fills the sky, and environmental collapse is a direct and visible consequence of profit maximization and capital accumulation and various core features of capitalism. The Once-ler’s business expansion clearly demonstrates the growth imperative of capitalism, and O’Hare’s monopoly on air reflects corporatism and accumulation by dispossession. The effect of capitalism on the

³⁵ *The Lorax*, 00:02:49–00:03:19

³⁶ *The Lorax*, 00:31:13

³⁷ *The Lorax*, 00:31:16–00:31:28

environment is the main focus and is externalized onto the environment, with corporate greed and profit maximization unmistakably the dependent factor of that destruction.

In contrast to that more material and industrial portrayal, 21st-century media often shows capitalism through cultural and psychological extraction, not visible environmental collapse and comical capitalistic figures. Instead of natural resources being commodified; for the 21st century media identity, attention, and personal data are the commodities.³⁸ However, consumerism as distraction, corporatist institutions, and capital accumulation despite ecological damage are just a few effects characteristic of capitalism that *The Lorax* and most 21st century media commonly make topic of.

The key difference between 21st century media and the 2012 *The Lorax* movie lies in the visibility of capitalism, and additionally the ending of the 2012 *The Lorax*. Because while the *The Lorax* reflects a portrayal of capitalism and its effects on society, institutions and environment, through blatant and loud figures, visuals, dialogues— 21st century media presents capitalism as an invisible structure that is normalized, deeply negative, unequal and undeniably rooted into systems.³⁹ Where O'Hare was thrown out of town when the citizens of Thneedville turned their backs on him in favor of planting the seed of the last Truffula tree; a comical and exaggerated way to show that the capitalistic system of Thneedville has been overthrown— 21st century portrayals suggest that capitalism is a system that adapts and evolves, changing gradient in its spectrum but remaining present. O'Hare's removal implies that such structures are not invincible— a contrast to broader 21st-century portrayals in media.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the 2012 movie *The Lorax* represents capitalism in 21st century U.S. to a partial extent with its accurate portrayals that link the story to core features and concepts of capitalism, and details involved in the extent of the effect of capitalism on institutions, environment, and society. Through the Once-ler's expansion in the Truffula Tree valley, his reinvestment of profit into growth, O'Hare's control of air, and the dystopia of Thneedville; it

³⁸ <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-commodification-of-everything/articles/the-commodification-of-self>

³⁹ <https://www.pragcap.com/the-great-normalization/>

is allowed to come to the conclusion that the 2012 *The Lorax* is a great representation of capitalism. However, it's not necessarily a representation that reflects the broader sentiment towards the economic system that exists in media when compared side by side, where while in the 21st century American media capitalism shows itself through cultural and psychological extraction for profit, *The Lorax* portrays it through visible capitalistic elements of Thneedville, environmental collapse, and comical corporate figures.

A limitation to my research of capitalism and *The Lorax* was setting general characteristics for 21st century U.S. media, where the richness and variety of the reflections of capitalism make it hard to forsake the nuance and sum up 21st century media's portrayal of capitalism into broader statements like it was done for this essay. Capitalism in *The Lorax* matters because of its messaging about the economic system that's targeted towards a younger generation and understanding the details of it's portrayal, it's effects, and how it compares from the media at large is important to encourage the generation of further pieces that encourage critical attitudes towards existing systems and discourage blind acceptance.

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