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*Angels and Insects: The Hidden Truth*

*Angels and Insects* is a motion picture based on A. S. Byatt's novella *Morpho Eugenia*. Set in the mid-Victorian era in the late 1850's and early 1860's, the film depicts, through a series of metaphors and allegories, the similarities and contrasts between the life of "civilized" aristocrats and a colony of ants. William Adamson, the main character, is a naturalist who returns to England after having spent time in the Amazon among savages and losing all of his possessions in a shipwreck. Left penniless and homeless, Adamson is taken in by Sir Harold Alabaster in exchange for assisting him in his ongoing study of insects. Once living within the Alabaster compound, Adamson discovers the dysfunctional and uncivilized behavior of the Alabasters, giving rise to his longing for and eventual return to the company of the savages of the Amazon jungle.

Life in the Alabaster household is depicted in terms of insect life. This similarity is evidenced in the plot as well as the photography, particularly as the story and the camera focus on the resemblances between upper class society and insect colonies, especially ants and butterflies. One of the most striking similarities, however, is expressed through costume design. For instance, some of the women's gowns are decorated with ripe fruit favored by insects while others actually resemble the physical appearance of insects. One woman is costumed in a bold black and yellow striped gown, alluding to the fact that this woman is like a bumble bee. Another woman is attired in a gown whose color, texture and pattern suggest that she is like a butterfly. While this analogy relates primarily to womanly attire, there are other striking similarities as well.

For instance, the servants scurry up and down the dark and narrow hallways of the

Alabaster mansion like ants in a colony. Additionally, the manner in which Lady Alabaster conducts herself, not unlike a "queen ant", and the way in which other skitter about her further contribute to such a comparison.

The contrasts between the Alabasters and insects are presented to further the idea that civilized life can be immoral. For instance, whereas both live as organized, social creatures whose primary purpose is reproduction, ants show neither decadence, hatred nor duplicity as the Alabasters do. Furthermore, ants serve their queen selflessly while humans in this film tend to be self-serving. Although humans think of themselves as civilized, the product of generations of sexual selection, their true barbarism of their nature often surfaces. Such behavior is underscored by the fact that Eugenia is having sexual relations with her brother Edgar. Although incest is repulsive and unacceptable in society, Eugenia and Edgar's justification of this ungodly behavior is maintaining the purity of their bloodline.

The movie also contrasts the passionate abandon of the Amazon natives to the illusory structured restraint of England's aristocrats. While life at the Alabaster mansion appears to be rigid and straitlaced, there is a degeneracy underlying this Victorian veneer which is always lurking. For instance, Eugenia, who to William appears to be an "angel," is, in actuality, a demoralized, debauched soul. Eugenia's sexual relations with her brother have destroyed her and others around her, including a previous fiance who committed suicide upon discovering her deplorable secret. During that era, women were considered to be blond, beautiful, heavenly "angels," which sheds light on the contrast between Eugenia Alabaster and her relative Mattie Crumpton, for while Eugenia appears to be an "angel," dark haired Mattie is likened to an "insect." By the end of the movie, however, the audience discovers how deceiving appearances really are, for Mattie blossoms into an angel who saves William Adamson from the trap that the Alabaster family have created to ensnare them into their world of duplicity and evil. In the end, Adamson finds the behavior of this elite society too much to bear and returns to the uncivilized

Amazon jungle with Mattie, leaving the "angel" behind and taking the "insect" with him. At least in the Amazon, human beings are in direct contact with the truth.