



## A different affair from my own scant home: Marx and the issue of class in english literature

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**ABSTRACT.** As he shifted from the manufacturing of studies on philosophy to the conception of a dialectic on economy, Karl Marx triggered a vast array of reflections upon the issue of class – and upon how both subject and society shape and are shaped by such issue. The reason why it is so difficult for distinct possibilities of class organization to be envisaged is because this logic of capital accumulation has become the master narrative of social functioning. Nevertheless, truth is there is still time to transform capitalism as for a more egalitarian social order to be established. Therefore, the relevance of understanding how *The Turn of the Screw* (James, 1898) is inserted within the spatial and temporal context of Victorian England seems, at least to me, not amenable to question. A Marxist literary approach towards productions like James's one does not look for slotting in literature a discussion which is not there – on the contrary, it might give one an opportunity to rediscover what has always been present, but also neglected. There is no ahistorical literature; there is no ahistorical anything – hence the need for moving beyond such problematic understanding of the literary environment.

**Keywords:** Marx, Engels, England, class struggle, literature.

### Algo diferente do meu humilde lar: Marx e a questão da classe na literatura inglesa

**RESUMO.** Tendo transitado da escrita de estudos sobre filosofia para a concepção de uma dialética acerca da economia, Karl Marx permitiu o surgimento de diversas reflexões sobre a questão da classe – e sobre o modo como tanto sujeito quanto sociedade moldam e são moldados por tal questão. O motivo pelo qual é tão difícil que se enxerguem outras possibilidades de organização social é devido a essa lógica de acumulação de capital que se tornou a narrativa mestra para o funcionamento social. Logo, a relevância de entender como *The Turn of the Screw* (James, 1898) se insere no contexto temporal e espacial da Inglaterra vitoriana parece, pelo menos para mim, inquestionável. Uma abordagem literária marxista na leitura de produções como a de James não visa a forçar na literatura uma discussão que nela inexistente – muito pelo contrário. Tal abordagem busca dar a oportunidade de redescobrir questões que sempre estiveram presentes, apesar de negligenciadas. Não existe literatura sem história; não existe nada sem história – daí a necessidade de se desviar dessa compreensão problemática da atmosfera literária.

**Palavras-chave:** Marx, Engels, Inglaterra, luta de classes, literatura.

People believe in what they have. The rich believe in money, the intelligent believe in intelligence, the powerful believe in power, the Army believes in strength, the Church believes in morality. But you really shouldn't expect the oppressed to believe in misery, such as you shouldn't expect the starving to believe in hunger. (Christopher Hampton, *Savages*, 1973, p. 27)

### Introdução

As he shifted from the manufacturing of studies on philosophy to the conception of a dialectic on economy, Karl Marx triggered a vast array of reflections upon the issue of class – and upon how both subject and society shape and are shaped by such issue. Dialectically, then, “[...] the social character is the general character of the whole

movement: just as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him” (Marx, 1844, p. 45). As a matter of fact, in *Economic & philosophic manuscripts of 1844* (Marx, 1844), readers are reminded that it would be a mistake for one to postulate ‘society’ as if it were an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual. This is so simply because Marx understands the individual as a social being:

His manifestations of life – even if they may not appear in the direct form of communal manifestations of life carried out in association with others – are therefore an expression and confirmation of social life (Marx, 1844, p. 80).

It is exactly this opposition, insightfully presented by Marx and Engels, which comprise the overall context of this article – bearing in mind that their critique not only address the economic sphere of society, but actually the whole array of activities surrounding those who are subjected by class division. My hypothesis is that such fights have naturalized class divisions which are everything but natural, and the aim of this analysis is to set forth how literature might impugn this ubiquitous, regardless of how dubious, scenario. As David Harvey suggests in *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution* (2012, p. 65), it is now rather obvious that

[...] the reproduction of capital [...] implies capitalist class domination over state apparatuses – in particular those aspects of state power that administer and govern social and infrastructural conditions.

It is also true, however, that class divisions emerging from the reproduction of capital also impinge upon the subjects' lives directly, affecting not only their financial behaviour, but also “[...] their lifestyles as well as their labor power, their cultural and political values as well as their mental conceptions of the world” (Harvey, 2012, p. 66). Taking into account that literature and history are usually dialoguing with one another, my general objective is to identify if, and, if so, how, the literary environment operates as a reaction to class divisions and struggle – analysing, through Marxist literary criticism, how it responds to institutionalised mental conceptions of the world, either reaffirming and/or problematising them. In *The communist manifesto* (1848, p. 41), Marx and Engels write that “[...] the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”; in most temporal and spatial configurations, where men went class struggles also appeared.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 42).

Such constant opposition has accompanied Western society throughout its development; our tradition and our character is marked by the conflict between oppressor and oppressed, to such an extent

that any criticism against it might sound – as it does in many occasions – both delusional and self-indulgent.

The reason why it is so difficult for distinct possibilities of class organization to be envisaged is because this logic of capital accumulation has become the master narrative of social functioning. Nevertheless, truth is there is still time to transform capitalism as for a more egalitarian social order to be established.

The full realization of the radical egalitarian ideal may, of course, be a utopian fantasy. But, even if ‘classlessness’ is unachievable, ‘less classness’ can be a central political objective, and this still requires challenging capitalism (Cohen, 1995, p. 101, emphasis in original).

That is to say: if the path is a long one to be run, to complain about it does not help us take our first step. Every revolution, every considerable change in the structure of a given society, requires, I dare say, some level of utopia; i.e. to dream for this end is not per se an immature choice. The issue of choice is, apropos, one that requires some attention – that is, moving on to another step in what regards this social structure is, actually, a predictable continuation. What is unfair and questionable in our society is what gives us an opportunity to question injustices and to seize for fairness; contradictorily as it may seem, what makes one weak also makes one stronger.

At the very core of the Marxist construction of class analysis is not simply the claim that class relations generate deeply antagonistic interests, but that they also give people in subordinate class locations forms of power with which to struggle for their interests (Cohen, 1995, p. 360).

Depriving one from power makes one aware that such power exists, and that it is worth fighting for – the ones who stab us are also giving us the knife in the process. For this to become feasible it is nonetheless necessary to make out how class divisions are organised in the first place. In *The german ideology* (1845, p. 26), Marx and Engels explain how the ruling and ruled classes are distributed, first posing that “[...] the individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think”.

Within the social frame, behaving as the thinkers and producers of ideas, those at the top of the economic pyramid “[...] regulate the production and distribution of the ideas [...], the ruling ideas of the epoch” (Marx & Engels, 1845, p. 28). Aristotle, who lived from 384 BC to 322 BC, once affirmed that the worst form of inequality is trying to make

unequal things look equal. Many years afterwards, we got used to living in a society whose inequality has become rather 'equal' – as the capitalist model of class divisions scattered its roots throughout the globe making inequality the chief basis of contemporary society. Such aspect has nonetheless also resulted in a complex response to the notion of class division, whose main consequence – which has accompanied Western society since its conception – has been the process of class struggle. As for us to apprehend how class struggles occur it is important though for one to have a clear glimpse on how classes get ideologically organized in the first place, and, for doing that, no one better than Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves. As to illustrate their point, the German philosophers bring up the fact that

[...] where royal power, aristocracy, and bourgeoisie are contending for mastery and where, therefore, mastery is shared, the doctrine of the separation of powers proves to be the dominant idea and is expressed as an 'eternal law' (Marx & Engels 1845, p. 29, emphasis in original).

Within such supposedly eternal law, labour is divided insofar as two key spheres are generated; one which manifests itself as financially, socially, and politically active and another whose members' [...] ideas and illusions are more passive and receptive; because they are given no time to make up illusions and ideas about themselves" (Marx & Engels, 1845, p. 30). This is the picture wherefrom class struggle emerges, as the inevitable consequence of social divisions, inasmuch as "[...] this cleavage develops into a certain opposition and hostility between the two parts" (Marx & Engels, 1845, p. 31).

Having established my overall context and objective I shift now to the specific ones, which regard the reading and critical analysis of Henry James' *The turn of the screw* (1898); the specific context of my research is, thus, the novella – due to its rather rich account on the objective and subjective interface between bourgeoisie and proletariat, as defined by Marx. It has been discussed heretofore how class division became part of an endless historical process; but, notwithstanding its presence throughout the passage of time, it is also worth mentioning that, even though

[...] modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms, it has established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 44).

In the configuration of James' novella, these new forms of struggle and class antagonisms are the ones

to be found, inasmuch as they mirror the society wherein the book has been devised. What this means is that we shall no longer grapple with the complex divisions so common in feudal society, simply because contemporaneity is marked by a rather "[...] distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms; society as a whole is splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 44). To scrutinise how class antagonisms are given shape within James' novella is not however something completely new; as a matter of fact, as Ursula Brumm puts it in *Another view on 'The turn of the screw'* (2002, p. 92), "[...] since its publication *The turn of the screw* (James, 1898) has received a great number of interpretations". And this seems to be so because James indeed offers readers a vast arena of hermeneutic experiences as he leaves the literary atmosphere with so many unanswered questions unaddressed. There is no clear-cut, right or wrong, reading of the story; as well noticed by Raúl Siota in *The role of the governess in 'The turn of the screw'* (2010, p. 208), "[...] the lack of trustworthiness in its characters – and, therefore, in the events they relate – creates an atmosphere of fear and prevents the reader from making one-sided readings". Careful not to make such one-sided readings, my specific purpose it to focus on the governess' narration as to identify how Marxist literary criticism might contribute for detecting and analysing the issues of class division and struggle present in the book.

### Discussion: 'On the Place of a Servant in the Scale'

Reiterating what had been suggested by Brumm (2002) and Bontly (1969) – in Henry James' *general vision of evil in The turn of the screw* – avers that "*The turn of the screw* seems destined, like *Hamlet* and the fourth book of *Gulliver's travels*, to supply us with an inexhaustible source of critical controversy" (Bontly, 1969, p. 721). There are several reasons for the wrangling character of many readings of James' novella, but most of them agree when it goes to the fact that one "[...] may examine the story as a parable in which the fantasy of one level of meaning ironically reveals the moral and psychological reality of another level of meaning" (Bontly, 1969, p. 724). Nevertheless, as for both these levels to be addressed with palpability, it is essential for one to be aware that the fictional and the real – just like the bourgeoisie and the proletariat – are not categorically positioned as opposed realms, they are actually rather close and interacting with one another. This means not only that one cannot be really understood

without the presence of the other – for the fictional to be defined reality is required, as well as for bourgeoisie to be defined the proletariat is required – but also that both exist because and depend upon one another. This is why Marxist literary criticism seems to fit as accordingly as possible within this research, since it approaches the literary field aware of the fact that, as well put by Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and literary criticism* (1976, p. 555), “[...] to understand literature means understanding the total social process of which it is part”. Having said that, for this discussion I shall be analysing the specific utterances of *The turn of the screw*’s (James, 1898) governess; my purpose thereby is to promote this bridge between the fictional spaces and characters concocted by James and the social, political, and economic ones which go way beyond the literary scope.

At the beginning of the narrative, events are not yet told through the perspective of the governess, but shared by Douglas (who is talking to a nameless narrator) in a meeting organised by a group of friends. Douglas tells the story of the governess – an old friend, according to him, whose name is not given either – who was the youngest daughter of a poor country parson, and had been looking for a job for quite a while. The story starts as she gets “[...] to London, in trepidation, to answer in person an advertisement that had already placed her in brief correspondence with the advertiser” (James, 1898, p. 8). This advertiser would later present himself as the employer himself (also nameless, referred to as the uncle of Miles and Flora, who the governess would be asked to take care of); and his portly semblance has, still in the words of Douglas, a great impact on the woman. He

[...] impressed her as vast and imposing – this prospective patron proved a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage (James, 1898, p. 9).

His employer was everything she would never be: a male, rich, an educated lad – and her adulation towards him would be read by many critics as the first glimpse on the novella’s reflective articulations upon class divisions. This is described as a handsome, bold, and pleasant employer;

[...] he struck her, inevitably, as gallant and splendid, but what took her most of all and gave her the courage she afterwards showed was that he put the whole thing to her as a kind of favour, an obligation he should gratefully incur (James, 1898, p. 10).

Asking her to do the job as if asking one to do a favour is what draws the governess’ attention, and she does indeed begin to look at the job as a task which she should gratefully and pleasantly incur.

That employee and employer belong to rather distinct classes even the most oblivious reader is able to infer; however, what is most interesting about this previous description is nonetheless how it constructs the relationship between both. In *Screwing it up: the designation of difference as monstrosity in ‘The turn of the screw’*, Carolyn Laubender (2004, p. 4) observes that “[...] after assuming her position at Bly, Douglas implies that the governess has developed a passionate romantic fascination with her employer, the master”. This, who would later present himself as the uncle in charge of the two children he wants her to assist and protect, is someone who just at the beginning does indeed surface the pages of the novella in physical form – later becoming an omniscient image which would never again reappear, a platonic being whose portrait through the governess eyes makes one think even of a parallel between God and himself. Settling later into her position and gradually becoming satisfied with her daily chores, this issue would be expanded as

[...] the governess begins to fantasize that (in a interestingly eroticized way) she is ‘giving pleasure’ to the master by performing her tasks in the way that he had earnestly hoped for and directly asked of her (Laubender, 2004, p. 5, emphasis in original).

Given their class distinction – and her unwillingness at this moment to enter into some sort of class struggle – the governess knew the most effective way for her to ‘give pleasure’ to her master would be to do everything he asked her to (and, if possible, even more). She embodies the figure of the male reference, incorporating the absent uncle; consequently, “[...] the governess’ innocence and femininity, established early in the novel, become a source of confusion and contradiction as she assumes her rather patriarchal authorities as governess of Bly Manor” (Laubender, 2004, p. 6).

This contradiction would be enhanced later, as the governess gets more acquainted with her daily tasks and, more than that, gets to know the gloomy mysteries which envelop Bly Manor – the place wherein she is invited to work. Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, apprehensively answers all the governess’ intrusive questions – the first one of them concerning the woman she is now replacing. Mrs. Grose admits that “[...] there had been for the two children at first a young lady whom they had had the misfortune to lose. She had done for them quite beautifully – she was a most respectable person

– till her death” (James, 1898, p. 10). The reason for the death of Miss Jessel would never be confirmed, James leaves that gap for the reader to fill in. Many hypotheses have, of course, been raised – the most recurring of them that Miss Jessel was actually the current governess herself (readers remember that she is unnamed) and that, in fact, she and the kids are the only ghosts of the story (through such reading the ones she believes to be the ghosts would be actually real people). Apart from speculations we nonetheless learn that, because of Miss Jessel’s death, Miles (the boy) is sent to school by his uncle and that “Mrs. Grose, since then, in the way of manners and things, had done as she could for Flora” (James, 1898, p. 11). At that moment Miles is about to return from school (wherefrom the governess would also later learn that he had been expelled); and, as such, the two kids become the only ‘masters’ (the representatives of the ruling class) within the house, whose care is taken by Mrs. Grose and the governess, in a place where “[...] there were, further, a cook, a housemaid, a dairywoman, an old pony, an old groom, and an old gardener, all likewise thoroughly respectable” (James, 1898, p. 12). Learning about the death of the former governess, readers also learn about the social configuration and stratification of the house as a whole – like elsewhere, most people play the marginal roles, whereas just an insignificant few sit comfortably at the top of the pyramid.

It seems, thus, that at every major moment for the unpacking of the novella, the narrator takes readers to the class divisions ever-present in the story; this might occur perchance, but that does not make it less interesting whatsoever. Furthermore, class positions, divisions, and struggle are all about to be given much more attention, as well as their impact in the lives of the characters. In the article *The economic basis of social class* (2004, p. 3), John Goldthorpe and Abigail McKnight affirm that “[...] class positions derive from social relations in economic life or, more specifically, from employment relations”. From the moment she accepted the job, the governess unconsciously took another action that reaffirmed her social position; the employment relations could never be different, i.e. she could never imagine herself being in the position of her employer. “It is, therefore, in economic life that the implications for individuals of the class positions that they hold should be most immediately apparent” (Goldthorpe & McKnight, 2004, p. 4). And indeed they are; assuming her role as the governess, the main character of *The turn of the screw* (James, 1898) not only ‘decides’ upon what her job shall be, but also upon whom she shall be – what

one does, in this sense, is also what one is. To use the word ‘decision’ might be rather dodgy, however, for, while some people have indeed the free will to select what job position they are eager to accept, most would never be given such opportunity – an honest job that brings them money would be quite enough. One might conclude therefore that “[...] since class positions are taken to derive from employment relations, the positions of employers, self-employed workers, and employees represent an initial level of differentiation” (Goldthorpe & McKnight, 2004, p. 4). Two subjects’ class positions make the former a distinct person if compared to the latter. As mentioned previously, the governess’s esteem for her employee is based on everything that he is and that she is not – everything in financial and social terms; in our society there is nothing ‘beyond’ that.

The subject informs society, as well as society informs the subject – none of these stances take any decisions per se, without being influenced and/or convinced by the other. In this sense, and having mentioned that – as Marxist criticism has made clear – some subjects are granted more freedom to choose between this and that job, it is quite interesting to direct such attention towards the governess final resolution to become the governess of Bly Manor. As Douglas is telling the story to his friends he gets interrupted by the narrator, whose curiosity compels the latter to formulate a question. Right after learning that the last governess had died, the narrator asks:

‘In her successor’s place’, I suggested, ‘I should have wished to learn if the office brought with it...’ ‘Necessary danger to life?’ Douglas completed my thought. ‘She did wish to learn, and she did learn. You shall hear tomorrow what she learnt’ (James, 1898, p. 9).

Every time the narrated events are suspended bluntly with a lot of suspense permeating the air, and by the beginning of the next chapters Douglas would reappear to finish telling the story. Nevertheless, what the narrator is curious about is why the governess accepted the job if she knows the former governess has died and has no idea why and how that had happened. Regardless of her knowing such fact, however, she does not ask her employer if the job brought any danger to life; the governess was more worried about other things which were also, direct or indirectly, dangerous.

Meanwhile, the prospect struck her as slightly grim. She was young, untried, nervous: it was a vision of serious duties and little company, of really great loneliness. She hesitated – took a couple of days to consult and consider (James, 1898, p. 10).

The narrator was right; there were indeed considerable reasons for the governess to reconsider and, perhaps, even decline the proposal to work for her future employer. “But the salary offered much exceeded her modest measure, and on a second interview she faced the music, she engaged” (James, 1898, p. 11). It was the salary, therefore – and not the governess herself – which decided what would happen next.

Functioning as a mirror for the British society in 1898, *The turn of the screw* (James, 1898) could never be discussed as if it were devoid of the social matters of the time. No matter what aspects are being brought in throughout the pages of the novella, political, economic, and social issues are also there – they are never external to fiction, but an integral part of it. “Literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms of their authors’ psychology” (Eagleton, 1976, p. 557); writers are never alone inside a dome, they do not write from within an ivory tower which supposedly transcends the material world – as it has already been believed. On the contrary, their literary abstractness only emerges because of such world, and fits concretely in its ground. Literary works, Eagleton continues, “[...] are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the ‘social mentality’ or ideology of an age” (1976, p. 558). That is, writers get not pre-programmed, but strongly affected by the master ideology of an age – and their writing might serve to reinforce or to put such ideology into question. “That ideology, in turn, is the product of the concrete social relations into which men enter at a particular time and place; it is the way those class-relations are experienced, legitimized, and perpetuated” (Eagleton, 1976, p. 559). How class-relations are indeed experienced and perpetuated seems a rather pertinent matter for James’ novella; and, as the literary evidence brought previously suggests, the class relations established in *The turn of the screw* (James, 1898) give readers a chance to realise how “[...] men are not free to choose their social relations; they are constrained into them by material necessity—by the nature and stage of development of their mode of economic production” (Eagleton, 1976, p. 560). As the novella’s governess there are several people who, unable to choose their social relations, end up constrained into them by mere material necessity.

It is also true, however, that everyone interviewed by the governess’ employer beforehand had declined his proposal. This is a fact which he did not try to hide from her at all; as a matter of fact, Douglas explains that

[...] he told her frankly all his difficulty – that for several applicants the conditions had been prohibitive. They were, somehow, simply afraid. It sounded dull – it sounded strange; and all the more so because of his main condition (James, 1898, p. 11).

All the murky aspects shrouding the job, which made the protagonist (if we can call her so) at first uneasy about accepting it, were, the employer admits, prohibitive for all the other applicants with whom he talked before she appeared; moreover, besides all the mystery involving her prospects as the governess of Bly Manor, there was still another – main – condition. That detail makes the narrator curious, learning there was another condition he asks:

‘Which was?’ ‘That she should never trouble him – but never, never: neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything; only meet all questions herself, receive all moneys from his solicitor, take the whole thing over and let him alone’ (James, 1898, p. 12).

The job also entailed some sort of total responsibility transfer, whereby the governess would be given all needed authority and means to take care of her employer’s house and nephews, but, on the other hand, should in return never trouble him – under no circumstances whatsoever. The governess had nonetheless already decided; and, after being informed about the prerequisites of such position, answered positively. “She promised to do this, and she mentioned to me that when, for a moment, disburdened, delighted, he held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded” (James, 1898, 13). Again readers have an opportunity to see how bizarrely the governess understands her appliance for the job; looking at it as a ‘favour’, as suggested previously, she sees it also as a sacrifice – one for which she felt morally and emotionally rewarded. Furthermore, her feelings – which made her disburdened and delighted – are anew moving in the direction of making one spot some platonic affection towards her employer.

But who is this person anyway? “The employer, uncle of the two orphaned children Miles and Flora is actually their legal guardian, in effect, however, a non-guardian as he categorically rejects his responsibilities” (Brumm, 2002, p. 93). The condition of the governess’ employer is, in itself, paradoxical – since he emerges in the novella as a guardian who behaves as a non-guardian, outsourcing all the responsibilities supposedly falling to him. This is not an awkward image, but rather one which the contemporary reader is quite familiar with. Ours is a time when most emotional and affective responsibilities (among many others)

behoove an external member of the family – one who gets paid to do something we would be eager to do before the boosting of capitalism – such as educating family members, taking care of our children, doing house chores, etc. In the words of Philip Brett, in his article *Male relations in 'The turn of the screw'* (1992, p. 11), “[...] the tensions that occur in the private area delineated in James’ story play a determining if covert role in the organization of modern society”. The relation established between her employer and his nephews is indeed one which seems perhaps even more common in our society if compared to the time when James’ novella was written. Friedrich Engels writes in *The condition of the working class in England* (1887) that these tensions gradually naturalise a rather pathological organisation for the structures of families. Due to the profiteering and individualistic conditions that operate both in the private and public levels, children are taught that isolation is better than community. They

[...] can never feel at home in the family which they themselves found, because they have always been accustomed to isolation, and they contribute therefore for the already general undermining of the family in the working-class (Engels, 1887, p. 135).

In what concerns our ‘home’, it is fair to say that capitalism operates both indoors and outdoors – there is no way to get rid of it as we get back to our families (on the contrary, the relationship established among relatives is a response to every other relationship that permeates society). Engels (1887) would later present a picture that is rather well represented by the governess’ boss, who is a seemingly honest and reasonable subject, but that incorporate the features of English bourgeoisie. In his words,

English bourgeois are good husbands and family men, and have all sorts of other private virtues, and appear, in ordinary intercourse, as decent and respectable as all other bourgeois; even in business they ‘easy’ to deal with; but, ultimately, it is still self-interest (Engels, 1887, p. 220, emphasis in original).

This situation therefore does not occur by chance, it is a clear symptom of class divisions – and one of the motivations for class struggle.

The division between the personal and the class individual, the accidental nature of the conditions of life for the individual, appears only with the emergence of the class, which is itself a product of the bourgeoisie (Marx & Engels, 1845, p. 38).

There are no clear-cut villains and/or victims in the process of capital organisation; both her

employer and the governess herself are victims of a social conditioning which goes way beyond them. In her case because she is accepting a job which she would not, unless she needed the paycheck so badly, in his case because he opts to refrain from the company of the only members of his family in order to provide for him and them.

In this sense, capitalism (as described by Marx) gives one the illusion of freedom; “[...] in imagination, individuals seem freer under the dominance of the bourgeoisie; in reality, of course, they are less free, because they are more subjected to the violence of things” (Marx & Engels, 1845, p. 39). It is exactly this violence of things which so harshly make inroads upon the lives of subjects occupying a marginal condition within the social system. Class divisions make ones more prone to actively control those things which are violent and others to suffer passively from such violence. It is not as if one did not give the other an opportunity to ‘enter’, to interact with the class condition one represents; in fact he/she often does, but it is the manner whereby such contact occurs that makes all the difference. Capitalism structures itself in a way that one class is only allowed to gaze upon the other as to reinforce the idea that one is superior while the other is inferior – in this sense class divisions are inherently ambivalent; if there are values, judgement of values are bound to be also there. Perhaps one of the first occasions in *The turn of the screw* (James, 1898) when the idiosyncrasies of class positions are evinced is precisely when they are brought into the arena as to establish some dialogue – when one reality faces another. This happens when the governess, after ultimately accepting the job, arrives at the place wherein she is about to live and work. “I remember as a most pleasant impression the broad, clear front, its open windows and fresh curtains and the pair of maids looking out” (James, 1898, p. 12). At first, the governess’ description includes no comparisons – it is only a description per se; nevertheless, readers already have an idea about how different from her reality this image must be inasmuch as she had been presented to us as a very poor girl who would now be living in such a large house – whose veneer could be considered even austere for ‘someone like her’. She would still later describe

[...] the lawn and the bright flowers and the crunch of my wheels on the gravel and the clustered treetops over which the rooks circled and cawed in the golden sky; the scene had a greatness that made it a different affair from my own scant home (James, 1898, p. 12).

As it often happens, James' acid comments would appear in the last sentences; everything which had drawn the governess attention – the house front, its windows, the flowers, the trees – also materialised into a strange corporeality (a nice, but unachievable condition). It was too much greatness for someone who did not have yet any chance to see something – anything – great about herself. This just described scene, which made the governess' working environment such a different affair from her own scant home, is what constitutes the capitalist imaginary notion of class harmony. Scenes like that are a clear translation of a process which maids, masons, tenants, caretakers, and many other professionals (Marx's proletariat) unavoidably go through in their working lives – spending a long time building, maintaining, and/or allowing the survival of realities which would never be available for them. The relation between polarised employers and employees, coexisting in different but concomitantly same worlds, provides the framework for the illusion of a global village – and the capitalist scaffold for sustaining such framework is what Marx names the illusory community wherein bourgeoisie and proletariat coexist. This illusory community is one whereby subjects have supposedly combined with one another; but the fundament of such community “[...] always took on an independent existence in relation to them, and was at the same time, since it was the combination of one class over against another, not only a completely illusory community, but a new fetter as well” (Marx & Engels, 1845, p. 37). Such community provides the pillars for the neo-slavery of the contemporary subject, one whose freedom is rather arbitrary – enabled up to the moment when there is no danger for the individual to realise he/she is not free at all.

Actually, Marx and Engels do not seem to see any problem in class interaction – even though he does see a problem in the existence of class itself – inasmuch as they consider such sort of interactions quite common, even desirable, for the evolution of human species as a whole. “Individuals have always built on themselves, but naturally on themselves within their given historical conditions and relationships, not on the ‘pure’ individual in the sense of the ideologists” (Marx & Engels, 1845, p. 38). Divisions, interactions, differences are not inherently problematic – what is problematic is their naturalisation in capitalist terms. We are all different, but we are not different because or in the way capitalism tells us so – there are actually less biased reasons to make us who we are, and more pertinent differences between us than the clothes we wear, the automobiles we drive, or the jobs we might have.

Class divisions have determined and predetermined such differences; they have made us believe that differences in class are in parallel with differences in human essence – for whatever that means. In this sense, capitalist differences are not present on subjects' faces, but on the masks they have been wearing as a consequence of capital accumulation and the neoliberal way of life.

In the course of historical evolution [...], there appears a division within the life of each individual, insofar as it is personal and determined by some branch of labour and the conditions pertaining to it (Marx & Engels, 1845, p. 39).

Capitalism, in this sense, has not created differences; only homogenised a fallacious version of them.

The characters who best impersonate the impossibility of transgressing class boundaries in James' novella – also symbolising the conflictive status innate to Victorian class coteries – are the ghosts who recurrently haunt the governess. After some appearances she decides to ask Mrs. Grose about them, as to find out if they were real people at all; it is at this moment that the governess discovers, after describing such figures to the housekeeper, that the ghosts' names were Miss Jessel and Peter Quint – being the former the last governess of the house (who she is now replacing) and the latter an ex-servant. There is a lot of mystery surrounding the relationship one had with the other, and also about the disappearance of both – hence her sudden but insistent curiosity.

‘I must have it now. Of what did she die? Come, there was something between them.’ ‘There was everything.’ ‘In spite of the difference?’ ‘Oh, of their rank, their condition,’ she brought it woefully out (James, 1898, p. 55).

The ex-governess, a little bit higher in rank when compared to Mr. Quint, was apparently having a love affair with him – but there is no literary evidence to assert that categorically; and the housekeeper brings their distinct conditions as a primary reason for her death – even though why and how she died is also an enigma which would never be solved.

‘She was a lady.’ I turned it over; I again saw. ‘Yes, she was a lady.’ ‘And he so dreadfully below,’ said Mrs. Grose; I felt that I doubtless needn't press too hard, in such company, on the place of a servant in the scale (James, 1898, p. 56).

Housekeeper and governess talk about ranking, classes, scales, levels; it is as if socially situating Peter Quint and Miss Jessel would ultimately materialise



into a logic explanation for their mysterious destinies – which reinforce the importance of class for contextualising James' novella. There was nothing, the governess continues, capable of preventing

[...] an acceptance of my companion's own measure of my predecessor's abasement. There was a way to deal with that, and I dealt; the more readily for my full vision of our employer's late clever, good-looking 'own' man; impudent, assured, spoiled, depraved (James, 1898, p. 57, emphasis in original).

His will to have a relationship which went beyond the professional level with the former governess made Peter Quint a spoiled and depraved man to the eyes of the housekeeper and current governess – a man unworthy of being trusted by their employer any longer.

'The fellow was a hound; poor woman, she paid for it!' 'Then you do know what she died of?' I asked. 'No, I know nothing. I wanted not to know; I was glad enough I didn't; and I thanked heaven she was well out of this' (James, 1898, p. 58).

Besides the maintenance of the mystery, it is interesting to notice that both women never talk about Miss Jessel's own feelings – as a woman, such feelings would be irrelevant in that historical period inasmuch as it behooves Mister Quint to make what is supposedly right for someone in his position. Notwithstanding her affirmation that she has no idea about how the story ends for the former governess, the current one interprets that she does have a clue.

'Yet you had, then, your idea.' 'Of her real reason for leaving? Oh, yes, as to that. She couldn't have stayed. Fancy it here, for a governess! And afterwards I imagined, and I still imagine – and what I imagine is dreadful' (James, 1898, p. 58).

She could not have stayed, neither could Peter Quint. Readers should remember we are talking here of a time when class divisions in England were ideologically unbreakable – and actually not that much has changed in the contemporaneity, but class issues are not as overtly unreasonable as they had once been. Besides that, since such was a society with rather unilateral values on classes and subjects' limits, another interesting detail to help one understand the novella is the fact that "[...] the Victorian culture that framed the creation of *The turn of the screw* by Henry James was also one fascinated by the existence of the perverse" (Laubender, 2004, p. 2). His usage of ghosts to articulate this acute critique on class division through the emergence of the perverse can be very well understood as a conscious response to such context.

Ostensibly, Victorian society was indeed one where the prescription of 'the normal' pervaded countless discourses becoming the standard by which all acts were judged – the normal were established as that which was objectively right or intended (Laubender, 2004, p. 3).

The governess' platonic feelings towards her employer, as well as Peter Quint and Miss Jessel's affair, were far distant from what is right or intended within Victorian society – there was nothing normal about such issues, which needed to be standardised. The reason for that is quite simple: "During the 19th century, social classes were supposed to be fixed, impermeable. A person was born into a set class and was expected to marry and live within that class for the rest of their life" (Laubender, 2004, p. 4). The gloomy aspects of James' novella are analogous with a Victorian approach towards the attempt to transgress class positions; the ghosts who so often haunt the governess are nothing but a reminder that anyone who endeavour to do so is bound to cause abhorrence and repugnance. "Any move to transverse class distinctions or ignore social limits was viewed by society with a certain amount of horror and shock" (Laubender, 2004, p. 5).

To some extent, there are numberless obstacles restraining all characters in *The turn of the screw* (James, 1898) who are eager to transverse such class distinctions or to surpass their social limits. Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, who are two of these characters, end up being objectively depicted as loaded with the governess' feelings of horror and shock – their condition as ghosts is, somehow, a metaphor for their class condition as social phantoms. Victorian society played a major role for categorising class representatives and members; moreover, "[...] for this society, class mobility was unnatural – its 'irregularity' and difference called into question accepted social norms and laws" (Laubender, 2004, p. 7, emphasis in original). Irregularity and abnormality are rather inherent to the presence of ghosts – just as it would also be when it goes to someone who, like Peter Quint, stubbornly tries to reposition oneself within already institutionalised social rules. What this means is that those whose behaviour manifests some sort of willingness to do so are not less dangerous than ghosts; furthermore, "[...] in a reactionary fashion, society labeled these transgressors, these others, evil, amoral, and even monstrous because of the chaos and disorder they evoked" (Laubender, 2004, p. 8). Here the comparison might seem far-fetched to the hasty reader, but it is far from being so inasmuch as the novella gives us openness to interpret such signs inventively. *The turn of the screw* (James, 1898)

unquestionably provides us with several articulations which make one rethink issues of social classes, class positions, and class struggle – metaphorically demonstrating how the latter is so stalwartly choked by the normative impositions of capital accumulation. Following such direction I finish my analysis of the literary evidence – which I judge to have supported, reiterated, and actually informed my research hypotheses – with one of Bontly's (1969, p. 735) comments at the end of his article:

James' readers have seldom failed to supply him with all the particulars the story demands, thus proving that the ghosts which haunt the governess, and which finally come to haunt the children, are the ghosts which-to some extent, at least must haunt us all.

The particulars that the story demands are asking readers not to see the ghosts as transparent beings, but actually as mirrors.

### **Final remarks: Literature as the product of a particular history**

In the article Marxist literary criticism: then and now, Imre Szeman (2009, p. 40) highlights that "[...] the most important intervention made by cultural criticism in the twentieth century was to desacralize and demythologize ideas of literature and culture". In this sense it is precisely because contemporary times have been providing us with a vast arena whereby normative ideas about anything whatsoever have been consecutively desacralised and demythologised that Marxist literary criticism proves to be so pertinent. In fact, the critic would later pose that one should be eager to experience any view on literature capable of helping subjects to put into question "[...] the social and political violence which shaped the consecration of categories into practices immediately associated with transcendent value" (Szeman, 2009, p. 41). Living in an extremely capitalist society, the contemporary subject has to deal with the fact that the particular interests encompassing the process of capital accumulation have been naturalised – ultimately being turned into the supposedly only acceptable reality, which is far from being the case. The contributions of Marxist literary criticism, as hopefully evinced in the analysis proposed by this article, go way beyond the transcendent values imposed by the notion of capital accumulation and class boundaries; its main axiom actually moves towards the opposite direction, questioning everything seemingly transcendental as to bring the common person back to the materiality of life. It is important to bear in mind, therefore, that Marxist literary criticism does not consist merely in

[...] a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings (Eagleton, 1976, p. 553, emphasis in original).

How novels are published and whether or not they mention working class representatives are indeed relevant questions, but not the only ones which are asked through such approach.

The relevance of understanding how *The turn of the screw* (James, 1898) is inserted within the spatial and temporal context of Victorian England seems, at least to me, not amenable to question. Literary meanings, therefore, should and are, through a Marxist lens, experienced

[...] as the products of a particular history. The painter Henri Matisse once remarked that all art bears the imprint of its historical epoch, but that great art is that in which this imprint is most deeply marked (Eagleton, 1976, p. 554).

The assertion that literature must not avoid being historicised – that it should, in fact, be approached always with some notion of its historical condition – is a quite polemic one; and, as Eagleton himself would later admit, "[...] most students of literature are taught otherwise: that the greatest art is that which timelessly transcends its historical conditions" (Eagleton, 1976, p. 555). Nevertheless, this surrealist attempt at suspending historical conditions, at forgetting about the physical and material in search of the metaphysical and immaterial is understood by Marxism – and also by myself – as a bourgeois fallacy; the concept of doing art to the sake of art is a notion emerging and reinforced by privileged classes that saw no need to insert social and political issues within the literary realm. Thing is nonetheless that trying not to position oneself before anything means that one is already inevitably assuming a position – avoiding politics is a political movement. The lack of interest in looking at literature historically is but a symptom of what occurs in any other sectors of contemporary society; a tendency which demonstrate how "[...] the resultant reproduction of class privilege and power through polycentric governance fits neatly into neoliberal class strategies of social reproduction" (Harvey, 2012, p. 82). In this sense the neoliberal class strategies of contemporaneity are not opposed to the Victorian period which marks Henry James' literature – they are rather even more detrimental towards the possibility of class transgressions.

Apropos, the literary text is incomplete because it needs a pivotal piece: the reader, that person who might bring some completeness which is particular and not transferable to another person – who might read this same text through rather dissimilar lenses. Far from constituting a supposedly coherent whole – which has only existed at the metaphysical level – literature “[...] displays a conflict and contradiction of meanings; the significance of the work lies in the difference rather than unity between these meanings” (Eagleton, 1976, p. 576). Pointing out the contradiction of meanings, giving readers the necessary tools to reassess them, Marxist literary criticism rescues the rich reflections of Karl Marx from the abyss whereto they have unfairly been tossed by contemporary paradigms as to efficiently expose they have never stopped being relevant. As a matter of fact

[...] the very absence of the socialist world, at least on its former scale, has brought the structuring force of economics to the surface in a way that has rendered its foundational role apparent to everyone (Szeman, 2009, p. 45).

It is not because socialist and communist ideas are not the pillars of the political system in vogue that there is nothing in the neoliberal society to which they might contribute – the logic is actually quite the inverse. The specific political circumstances of contemporaneity (a historical moment which finds capitalist and neoliberal fundamentals as rather problematic and which has triggered succeeding social, political, and economic crises) are desperately asking subjects to reposition themselves before such circumstances. Widespread and incontestable social troubles and conundrums emerging from capitalism “[...] have pushed critical energies in other directions, and will very likely continue to do so [...]” (Szeman, 2009, p. 46) – once again the world has been acting just like Marx had ominously predicted. It would serve us well to start effectively pushing our critical energies in a less injurious direction instead of allowing the interests of capital to do it at our behest; but maybe it is far too fanciful to believe something like that might really happen one day. The ghosts have appeared; now we just need to stop running from them and start listening to what they have to say.

A Marxist literary approach towards productions like *The turn of the screw* (James, 1898), does not look for slotting in literature a discussion which is not there – on the contrary, it might give one an opportunity to rediscover what has always been present (but also constantly neglected) within it.

There is no ahistorical literature; there is no ahistorical anything – hence the contemporary need for moving beyond such problematic understanding of the literary environment. “To understand literature means understanding the total social process of which it is part” (Eagleton, 1976, p. 556); there is always a social process underlying any action, and – in the case of literature – author, book, and reader are all perpetrators of such political actions. The specific persistence in discussing class divisions, relations, and struggles is indeed a particular characteristic of Marxist literary criticism; but this is not something to be criticised and/or overlooked – in my view such endeavour should actually be commended. As a matter of fact this discussion in Marxist thinking is a quite expectable detail inasmuch as “[...] the ultimate aim of anticapitalist struggle is the abolition of class relation and all that goes with it, no matter where it occurs” (Harvey, 2012, p. 121). Curiously, if one argues in defense of an anticapitalist struggle in literature he/she might be ostracized for supporting what some might name pamphleteer art – a production whose aim is not to provide an artistic experience, but one of political programming. But any art, in itself, is already pamphleteer; politics is not something we do when we are not doing other things: it is precisely when we are doing these other things that we are effectively doing politics.

In this sense a literary text that does not address social matters is talking through its silence; not only words have meaning – their absence, very often, end up meaning much more than their presence would. A literary work is thus

[...] tied to ideology not so much by what it says as by what it does not say; it is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences, that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt (Eagleton, 1976, p. 573).

Understanding literary absence as literary evidence is not such a far-fetched activity if one accepts that any choice is an ideological choice or that any reflection and/or discussion is a political one. As it would be expected, in the case of James’ novella, there are (as always) boundaries that author and work are not capable of trespassing – which reiterate the historicity of literature, the fact that subjects construct history such as history constructs subjects.

The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things; in trying to tell the truth in his own way, for example, the author finds himself forced to reveal the limits of the ideology within which he writes (Eagleton, 1976, p. 574).

It is not nonetheless because a text is ideologically forbidden to bring up certain reflections that readers are also bound to do so – the limits of the text lose palpability as soon as such texts encounters someone who is willing to read and to finish shaping it. Through his literary production, an author sets forth a work which “[...] is forced to reveal its gap and silences, what it is unable to articulate; because a text contains these gaps and silences, it is always incomplete” (Eagleton, 1976, p. 575).

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