

ANALYZING THE GAPS AND SILENCES OF A TEXT: LITERATURE AS A HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSE TO CLASSISM¹

ANALISANDO AS LACUNAS E SILÊNCIOS DE UM TEXTO: A LITERATURA COMO RESPOSTA HISTÓRICA E SOCIAL PARA O CLASSISMO

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ABSTRACT: Within this article I propose an analysis of specific utterances of *The turn of the screw's* (JAMES, 1898) governess; my purpose is to promote this bridge between the fictional environment concocted by James and the social, political, and economic one which go way beyond the literary scope. Learning about the death of the former governess, readers also learn about the social configuration and stratification of the house as a whole. It seems, thus, that at every major moment for the unpacking of the novella, the narrator asks readers to reflect upon the issue of classism (MARX, 1845; 1848), ubiquitous in the story; this might occur perchance, but it is also perchance that literature is constructed.

Keywords: History. Society. Literature.

RESUMO: Neste artigo eu proponho uma análise das falas da governanta de *The turn of the screw* (JAMES, 1898); minha proposta é promover uma ponte entre o ambiente fictício criado por James e o ambiente social, político e econômico que vai além do escopo literário. Após descobrir que a antiga governanta faleceu, os leitores também vão descobrindo a configuração e a estratificação da casa como um todo. Parece, logo, que, em cada momento de desenrolar da história, o narrador pede aos leitores que esses reflitam acerca da questão de classismo (MARX, 1845; 1848), onipresente na narrativa; isso pode acontecer por acaso, porém também de acasos se constrói a literatura.

Palavras-chave: História. Sociedade. Literatura.

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INTRODUCTION

*Ideas that enter the mind under fire
remain there securely and forever.*

(Leon Trotsky)

In a nutshell, one could suggest that, ideologically, the assumed goal of Marxist thinking is to set forth basic tenets for one's delineation of a fairer society – in all levels that might be imagined. Through descriptive and analytical approaches, Marxism idealizes and thus defends the possibility of “a worldwide classless society by exposing the oppressive ideologies (belief systems) that keep the nations of this planet bound within socioeconomic systems” (TYSON, 2001, p. 54). Conscious that our world is one where a relatively small number of people are extremely wealthy while most people are struggling, or even failing, to get by, pondering upon political and social alternatives for evading the ubiquitous presence of class division is a crucial step that, in my view, all of us should be willing to take. Bearing that in mind, the scope of this article consists in the reading and critical analysis of Henry James' *The turn of the screw*; 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 (1845; 1848). 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, 1848, p. 44). In the configuration of James' novella, these new forms of struggle and class antagonisms are the ones to be found, insomuch 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, 1848, p. 44).

To scrutinize how class antagonisms are given shape within James' novella is not however something completely new; as a matter of fact, “since its publication *The turn of the screw* (JAMES, 1898) has received a great number of interpretations” (BRUMM, 2002, p. 92). 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; “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” (SIOTA, 2010, p.



208). 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 analyzing the issues of class division and struggle present in the book. 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 himself. “The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think” (MARX, 1845, p. 26). 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, 1845, p. 28). As to illustrate his point, the German philosopher brings 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, 1845, p. 29).

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 in given no time to make up illusions and ideas about themselves” (MARX, 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” (p. 31). It is exactly this opposition, insightfully presented by Marx, which comprise the overall context of this article – bearing in mind that his critique not only addresses the economic sphere of society, but actually the whole array of activities surrounding those who are subjected by class division. “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” (HARVEY, 2012, p. 65). 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” (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 – analyzing, through Marxist literary criticism, how it responds to institutionalized mental conceptions of the world, either reaffirming and/or



problematizing them. Apropos, “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (MARX, 1848, p. 41); 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, 1848, p. 42). 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. After all, the socioeconomic system in which we live does much more than simply determining who has the most power. It also determines, “how we are educated, and it influences our religious beliefs, which together control to a great degree how we perceive ourselves and our world” (TYSON, 2001, p. 62).

THE TURN OF THE CLASSIST STRUGGLE

If “for a rigid class system to survive its people must be convinced of the natural superiority of those born into the upper class” (TYSON, 2001, p. 65), such naturalization of a purported superiority can only take place through reaffirming structures that are built and endorsed by the classes that harvest the fruits of an unfair relationship. Classes are positions that transform the subjective into concreteness; through classism, difference appears where it would not exist – inferiority emerges, and superiority is granted. Within the narrative analyzed herein, that employee and employer belong to rather distinct classes even the most oblivious reader is able to infer; however, James’ novella is original mainly given how it constructs the relationship between both. “After assuming her position at Bly, Douglas implies that the governess has developed a passionate romantic fascination with her employer, the master” (LAUBENDER, 2004, p. 4). 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). 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" (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" (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. Moreover, "*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. 723). 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.



That is precisely 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 "to understand literature means understanding the total social process of which it is part" (EAGLETON, 1976, p. 555). At the beginning of the novella, 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 organized 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. It seems 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.

"Class positions derive from social relations in economic life or, more specifically, from employment relations" (GOLDTHORPE; MCKNIGHT, 2004, p. 3). 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" (p. 4). And indeed they are; assuming her role as the governess, the main character of *The turn of the screw* 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” (p. 5). Two subjects’ class positions make the former a distinct person if compared to the latter. As mentioned previously, the governess esteems her employee 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” (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* 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 “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” (EAGLETON, 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* give readers a chance to realize 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” (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, p. 13).

Once 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) bechove 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. “The tensions that occur in the private area delineated in James’ story play a determining if covert role in the organization of modern society” (BRETT, 1992, p. 11). 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. This situation 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, 1845, p. 38). There is no clear-cut villains and/or victims in the process of capital organization; 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 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, 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* 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" (p. 13). 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 materialized 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. The 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 polarized 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, 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 realize he/she is not free at all. Actually, Marx does not seem to see any problem in class interaction – even though he does see a problem in the existence of class itself – inasmuch as he considers 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" (p. 38). Divisions, interactions, differences are not inherently problematic – what is problematic is their naturalization 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, 1845, p. 39). Capitalism, in this sense, has not created differences; only homogenized a fallacious version of them. The characters who best impersonate the impossibility of transgressing class boundaries in James' novella – also symbolizing 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). 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” (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 standardized. 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” (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 are 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” (p. 5). To some extent, there are numberless obstacles restraining all characters in *The turn of the screw* 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 categorizing class representatives and members; moreover, “for this society, class mobility was unnatural – its irregularity and difference called into question accepted social norms and laws” (p. 7). 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 institutionalized social rules.

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* 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, “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” (BONTLY, 1969, p. 735). The particulars that the story demands are asking readers not to see the ghosts as transparent beings, but actually as mirrors. Housekeeper and governess talk about ranking, classes, scales, levels; it is as if socially situating Peter Quint and Miss Jessel would ultimately materialize into a logic explanation for their mysterious destinies – which reinforce the importance of class for contextualizing 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). 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 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. 59). 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 in 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. The relevance of understanding how *The turn of the screw* 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). No work surfaces and/or is maintained within a void: everything is social, and everything is historical. That is also true in what regards both our collective and personal constructions as subjects, reason why it is essential to understand how “marxism is concerned with how the socioeconomic system in which we live shapes our personal identity” (TYSON, 2001, p. 81). Such shaping has been ignored long enough; and literature might provide us with the very means necessary for preventing alienation from keeping up in the control of the steering wheel of history. Marxist thinking



might not be the answer for our problems, but, as James' (1898) novella demonstrates, it may help us ask many questions we so often take for granted.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to popular belief, the positions we occupy as subjects within the globe are not (pre)determined by the will of God, nature, fortune, and/or destiny, "it is our education and our religious beliefs that do much of the convincing by determining how we perceive ourselves and our world" (TYSON, 2001, p. 73). Ignoring such process is therefore unacceptable, and, in this sense, a literary production which 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). The assertion that literature must not avoid being historicized – 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 demonstrates 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. “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 finally appeared; now we just need to stop running from them and start listening to what they have to say. Now, talking of ghosts, “the most important intervention made by cultural criticism in the twentieth century was to desacralize and demythologize ideas of literature and culture” (SZEMAN, 2009, p. 40). 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 desacralized and demythologized 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” (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 naturalized – 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). 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.

A Marxist literary approach towards productions like *The turn of the screw*, 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 literature devoid of history; there is nothing devoid of history – 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 criticized 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 defence 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. Knowledgeable that "classism is the belief that our value as human beings is directly related to the social class to which we belong: the higher our social class, the higher our natural, or inborn, superiority" (TYSON, 2001, p. 96), it is high time contemporary reasoning presents the common subject with other epistemological possibilities for providing us with positions. Class has never defined who we are – it has only served to stop us from being.



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