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Levine's Marxist Toys

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Perhaps no modern poet can be classified as more American than Philip Levine, who was once described by fellow poet Edward Hirsh as “a large, ironic Whitman of the industrial heartland” (Poetry Foundation). Levine grew up in a Detroit ravaged by the Great Depression and began working in the auto industry at the age of fourteen. These formative experiences never left Levine; themes of industry, class, and the humble laborer struggling against poverty would go on to dominate his work. Through his poetry, Levine attempted to give a voice to the voiceless and was recognized for his achievements when he was named Poet Laureate of the United States in 2011. So, it seems a little ironic that the poetry of this American laureate, this “Whitman of the industrial heartland,” features several prominent ideas of Karl Marx—whose communist ideology is often considered antithetical to American capitalism. Levine wrote about poverty and the working class and it always carried a subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, critique of capitalism along with an implied connection to Marxism. Nowhere is this connection to Marxism more prominent than in Levine’s poem, “The Toys,” which crafts an intense look at an unusual relationship between a boy and a crippled woman. The poem features many questions and ambiguities and uses Marx’s ideas of wealth and status to comment on the relationship between children and the physically handicapped in a cap-

italist economy, as well as exploring humanity’s collective commodification within that same capitalist society.

Before delving into the substance of the poem’s text, it is important to examine the character concepts Levine is using here and how they relate to both literary tropes and economic theory. That the main conflict of the poem is driven by the character of a child is not incidental. During the industrial revolution, Capitalism expanded as new technology and machinery spread across the Western world. These machines, usually powered from burning coal, required constant upkeep and cleaning. No one was better suited for these treacherous jobs than children, whose small frames and nimble hands allowed them to fit into places larger adults couldn’t reach. Of course, due to the dangerous nature of the work, many children were severely maimed or killed. Given these horrifying details it is easy to see how some historians, like J.L. Hammond, “have interpreted child labor in industrial Britain as a crime of capitalism” (Reed). Child chimneysweeps, for instance, became so commonplace, they eventually formed a literary trope common to Romantic and Victorian writers such as Blake and Dickens. A line from Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper” describes the wretched lives of young boys gang-pressed into the industrial age and ends with a scathing indictment of capitalism Marx himself might be proud of, “So if

all do their duty, they need not fear harm” (Blake 24). While this harsh life of child labor functioned as a literary trope, a shortcut to highlight the poverty and powerlessness of working-class children, it was also a lived reality for these human beings, one which many of Levine’s readers, working class themselves, would likely be aware of. By comparison the boy in Levine’s poem is privileged, a child who has likely never had to deal with any of these issues, and that is the point. A working knowledge of child labor and the peril that afflicted generations of working-class children during the Industrial Era, highlights the comparative advantages the boy in the poem has had, while at the same time providing a possible hint at the woman’s class background, insinuating that she did not have the same level of privilege as her younger counterpart.

The boy in Levine’s poem owns “a selection of his choicest walking toys” (Levine 20). While simply owning toys doesn’t automatically mean the boy comes from a wealthy family, the language and the historical context strongly imply it. According to the United States census, the average yearly income for men in 1955, the year the poem was published, was \$3,400 (US Census Bureau). Meanwhile the price of walking toys and action figurines ranged, according to the advertising segment of a 1954 copy of *Billboard* magazine, from around \$6.50 on the low end, for a non-moving doll, to \$57 on the high end, for a large walking teddy bear (Merchandise). This means that a single walking toy could cost up to nearly 2% of a man’s yearly income, a fairly high percentage for a non-essential luxury item. Despite this, the boy in the poem has multiple toys. The phrase “a selection of his choicest walking toys,” tells us the boy has enough toys to only show the “choicest” among them. While this does not directly say the boy is wealthy, his ownership of multiple luxury goods, given the price in relation to yearly salary, indicates that his family are members of the bourgeoisie. This puts the boy in an awkward position, one of both privilege and powerlessness. While children’s products make up a huge market share of goods bought and sold, it is not the children who are generally buying them but rather the parents (Hill 37-40). Children can ask, beg, plead, or

connive to get their wishes, yet ultimately the cash forked over belongs to mommy or daddy. Children are unable to control their lives, locations, or the external forces around them. It is important to understand all these factors to see how Levine characterizes the boy, especially in relation to the crippled woman, who is heavily implied to be in a lower socio-economic class.

Though not directly stated, Philip Levine uses disability as a shorthand, calling upon Western historical and literary connotations to imply the crippled woman is in a lower economic class than the boy. The connotation of disability in canonical Western literature is often of poverty, from biblical lepers too poor to seek treatment to Georgian and Victorian chimney sweeps and coal miners covered in toxic soot. These industrial issues, much as before, were both a literary trope and a lived reality. As discussed above, early industrial machinery could often be fatal or cause serious injury or disability. When the United Kingdom attempted to regulate labor laws in relation to factories and mines in the *Mines and Colliers Act of 1842*, the leader of the opposition, Charles Vane, the Marquess of Londonderry, argued against raising the age for operating dangerous machinery to twenty-one. While he acknowledged this would cause fewer injuries, he did not want to limit the amount of mine operators. “While it afforded a guarantee for security [and] would at the same time not be likely to inflict injury and inconvenience on those engaged in the mines. He believed that fifteen was an age at which there could be no danger in allowing the persons usually engaged to work at those engines” (*Mines and Collieries*). By today’s standards, fifteen is an unacceptable age to put children in charge of heavy duty industrial machinery, and even then it put more workers at risk and, in the long run, caused more work-related accidents for those of lower class, leaving those who were not killed seriously maimed or ill. Levine strongly related to the perils of working-class children thrust into industrial jobs at a young age, as he started working in the Detroit auto industry at fourteen, a full year younger than mine operators a century prior. Though Levine was never seriously injured in the factory, and was able to eventu-

ally leave Detroit, Detroit and his experience as a young worker would never leave him, with critic Herbert Leibowitz writing, "Levine has returned again and again in his poems to the lives of factory workers trapped by poverty and the drudgery of the assembly line, which breaks the body and scars the spirit" (Poetry Foundation). Leibowitz does not mince words, specifically drawing attention to the labor conditions of Levine's youth and their effect on both physical and emotional health. Even in our modern day, there is still a genuine link between health and wealth. *The Harvard Gazette*, in a study of American poverty in 2016 noted, "Being poor in the United States is so hazardous to your health... that the average life expectancy of the lowest-income classes in America is now equal to that in Sudan or Pakistan" (Ruell). Many disabled people are caught in a negative feedback loop. Being too sick to work, they are also too poor to afford medical treatment, meaning they become poorer and subsequently sicker (Hudson 37-43). Though none of these literary or historic examples directly tell us that the woman is lower class because of her injury and ill health, like with the child, her role when viewed in the context of these general historical trends and Philip Levine's early life experience, invoke the Marxist concept of powerlessness.

Karl Marx, the leading voice in communist ideology, states in his 1875 "Critique of the Gotha Programme" that "one man is superior to another physically... and supplies more labor in the same time... This equal right is an unequal right for unequal labor. It recognizes no class differences... but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment, and thus productive capacity, as a natural privilege. It is, therefore, a right of inequality" (Marx 1). Levine takes this idea of inequity and marginalization and crafts this poem around two margins, the disabled woman representing poverty and the child representing unearned privilege. Levine purposely juxtaposes these figures together, both symbols of powerlessness from a Marxist viewpoint. Neither can actively make a profit, so neither can be a traditionally central figure. Yet this poem attempts to bring these margins to the center, engaging in a conversation over status.

Marx purposely equated wealth with status. The proletariat were not simply poor; they were fundamentally different from the bourgeoisie. Their difficult lives of work and toil hardened the proletariat as a whole, while, in general, the bourgeoisie had not dealt with the same amount of struggle and therefore did not develop the same conscience towards humanity. For Marx, it was this lack of compassion that made the bourgeoisie problematic, stating "it becomes evident that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society...because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery... Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie; in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society" (Marx and Engels). To Marx, the bourgeoisie was an evil force, one that deserved a violent overthrow. Levine, however, took these same ideas and softened them, equating the upper class to spoiled children. Like the child with his toys, the bourgeoisie are stuck in a perpetual state of arrested development. Children are not fully developed, either mentally or physically, and cannot be completely responsible for their actions, being too childish to understand their own nature. There is an innocence to the wrongdoing of children, which is stated from the poems opening line.

Levine begins the poem with the concept of forgiveness: "The crippled woman will forgive the boy" (Levine 1). This highlights forgiveness as a major issue throughout the piece, leaving the reader to answer the ambiguous question: What act is the woman forgiving and what implications does this bring to their respective characterizations? In the context of the poem's action, the woman is shown toys by the boy, seeming to mock her disability, "Although she never thought of it that way / A toy was what her motion most resembled" (Levine 3-4). However, seeing as the boy likely represents the bourgeoisie and the woman the working class, this draws an interesting implication. Though the forgiveness can be read as more literal within the poem, as in the woman forgiving the boy for a hurtful question or statement, this forgiveness also carries a greater connotation; a hint that the woman realizes that, just like herself, the boy is randomly born into his position

in the world and has no control. He too is powerless. However, this acknowledgment does not erase their differences, as there is still a significant income gap between them. Marx noted that the majority of wealth was owned by a select group of oligarchs, aristocrats, and titans of industry, with the poor forced to live on fragments of that wealth. He even admits that the bourgeoisie do not control the majority of the wealth, referring to the landed gentry, “In England, the capitalist class is usually not even the owner of the land on which the factory stands” (Ryan). This implies the major difference between rich and poor is simply a genetic lottery, a divide between the wealth of work and industry and the wealth of inheritance. While there are some genuine rags to riches stories, such as Andrew Carnegie, most of the world’s wealth was inherited, with Thomas Piketty noting in his book, *Capital in the 21st Century*, “it is all but inevitable that inheritance (of fortunes accumulated in the past) predominates over saving (wealth accumulated in the present)” (Buttonwood). It is no one’s fault if they are born rich or poor, yet there is still a huge stigma between classes. The poor are deemed poor because they are inferior and have somehow led to their own suffering by not being exceptional enough to turn a profit. This is known as Social Darwinism, that the poor, being inferior, were no use to society and would eventually either die off naturally or be eliminated through eugenicist practices meant to cull those deemed inferior to the upper class on the basis of race or class (Encyclopedia Britannica). This naturally created tension between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This tension went both ways, with the poor often resenting the rich and, in some cases, such as in Russia during October 1917, leading violent revolutions against the elite (Smele). This tension is mirrored in the interaction between the woman and the boy. Though they are able to see some common ground, the woman is still viewed as less than the boy. She is viewed as his toy.

The poem equates human beings with machines, specifically toys, suggesting that the lower class exists for the amusement of his or her economic superiors. This concept fits within Marx’s theory of alienation, which warns of workers be-

coming cogs in a machine and losing their humanity. Marx, who lived in the age of industry, was concerned that machinery devalues human labor, “machinery is intended to cheapen commodities and, by shortening the part of the working day in which the worker works for himself, to lengthen the other part, the part he gives to the capitalist for nothing. The machine is a means for producing surplus-value” (Booth). Marx’s main fear, in wake of innovations like the assembly line or piecemeal manufacturing, was that workers would lose their skills and become mechanized instruments designed to produce a profit without enriching society. Levine takes these ideas and combines them with the earlier theme of powerlessness, synthesizing it into the idea of being a toy. The woman is referred to as a toy multiple times, “A toy was what her motion most resembled” (Levine 4). This is a comment on her strange movement. Due to her injury, she likely walks in a strange, toy-like way. However, it goes deeper than this. In the second stanza, the speaker states, “This child marveled at her animation / That came within a breath of being human. / The postures of her pain had brought him joy” (Levine 15-17). This implies the boy has a kind of ownership over her, as he finds joy from her pain, the same way a child playing with figurines gains satisfaction when one is injured or defeated. And while the boy can see a base level of humanity, it is not quite enough, it is only “a breath of being human.” The ownership of human beings is a very Marxian concept, as Marx believed that by controlling the means of production you controlled the workers as well. Next the boy brings out his other playthings, “A selection of his choicest walking toys” (Levine 20). These cog-based wind-up toys can move, walk, and labor in a way the woman can’t. But they, like any good 20th century laborer toiling away at assembly lines, manufacturing machinery piecemeal, lack free will, appearing and acting the same, “Round and round they went, proud and free, / Then stopped with identical smiles on identical features” (Levine 33-34). Here, Marx’s feeling of alienation is realized, as a group of people have become so homogenized and similar all they can do is perform their predetermined motions for their superior. How-

ever, as Marx dreamed of, there is still always a possibility to overthrow the ruling class.

The final few lines of the poem hint toward a Marxist revolution. Though the crippled woman begins the poem by forgiving the boy, the final lines deal with a rejection of forgiveness and a rise of hostility between both parties. After the toys' display, the woman stares outside and allows her resentment to grow, "The great verbenas, frozen on the trellis, / Boomed her deep uncoiled plea for violence" (Levine 27-28). The transition between forgiveness and violence showcases the discontent of the proletariat over their infantile masters. The infantile master is portrayed more negatively here as well, with the speaker referring to him maliciously twisting the key to keep the toys dancing, "She had no need to speak who knew that sure / And winding hand whose second twist was malice" (Levine 29-30). The child has lost any sympathy for the woman, replacing it with a hardened exterior, which is shown through purposely controlling and manipulating the toys with a cruel intent. The boy is trying to hurt the woman and, by analogy, the proletariat, for his own selfish means. The line, "the postures of her pain had brought him joy" suddenly loses the possible childlike innocence replaced with a cruelty equal to someone intent only on the bottom line, someone comfortable justifying profit as a cause for pain. Perhaps this is a subtle jab at the systemic issues of class, that even well-meaning individuals born into a broken system will abuse it for their own benefit even at the cost of another human being's dignity and livelihood. Either way, the boy is no longer powerless. Gone is any justification due to his age or from the allusions to child-labor; he is now the power of the status quo that needs to be replaced with revolution.

Levine's use of literary tropes and Marxist philosophy to highlight the plight of the working class comes as no surprise. Published in 1955, this is an early Levine piece and relies on a more traditional format, borrowing aspects from other modernist poets (Stacey). In his later career he would break this mold, defining his own style but always keeping his original working-class background at heart. Due to this background, there is a sympathy given

to the crippled woman, from her capacity to forgive to her need for violence. Through these contradictions she is portrayed very much as human, even as she is compared to a toy. Levine's poem critiques the system surrounding people, but not the people themselves. It is not that they are guiltless, but rather that they are the products of something greater than themselves. The beginning of the second stanza echoes this claim. Though it seems out of place at first, the line "Was it the onus of a father's crime / That had yoked her tight within a cage of tears?" is given meaning when considered in this light (Levine 11-12). The father's crime doesn't refer to the woman's father or the boy's, but rather their collective forefathers, the bankers and traders and merchants who built capitalism up and turned it into an invisible force, the unseen hand of the market throttling our throats. To Levine, we are all children of this system, powerless to stop it. Some of us may be born healthy and wealthy, others poor and hurt, yet we are all part of it, dancing along because we must, the keys on our backs winding and turning like clockwork, but still trying to remain human along the way.

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