GOTHAM AND THE GOTHIC CITY: GENTRY'S HEROES AND WORKING-CLASS VILLAINS IN A MARGINALIZED SOCIETY

Gotham e a cidade gótica: Heróis das elites e vilões da classe trabalhadora em uma sociedade marginalizada

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this article is to discuss the representation of the working class and poor people as villains and monsters in two 1980s Batman comics, stemming from social and economic issues in the real New York City of the period. Through the article, I connect these elements with late nineteenth-century Gothic texts, especially *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and with 1930s and 1940s Batman comics, examining the representations in the fictional Gotham City in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke* (1988).
KEYWORDS: Batman; Gothic; Dangerous Classes; Urban Space.

RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é discutir a representação da classe trabalhadora e de pessoas pobres como vilãs e monstros em dois quadrinhos do Batman da década de 1980, partindo de questões econômicas e sociais da cidade de Nova York no período. No decorrer do texto relaciono estes elementos com textos góticos ingleses do final do século XIX, especialmente *O Médico e o Monstro*, e com quadrinhos do Batman das décadas de 1930 e 1940, investigando as representações na ficcional Gotham City em *O cavaleiro das trevas* (1986) de Frank Miller e em *A piada Mortal* (1988) de Alan Moore e Brian Bolland.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Batman; Gótico; Classes Perigosas; Espaço Urbano.

Batman is a well-known character that emerged from the pages of comic books and has been adapted to different media such as films, video games, cartoons, and toys. The vigilante is the alter ego of Bruce Wayne, one of the richest men of the fictional Gotham City; the character dresses in a costume emulating a bat in order to fight criminals in a decayed urban space populated by lawbreakers.

My objective in the present article is to discuss the representations of the working class and poor people which I argue, in general, as monstrous and villainous in the Batman comics selected for the analysis here proposed, being them depicted as dangerous, unhuman, and deformed. In order to do that, I adopt a Gothic approach, drawing comparisons between classic nineteenth-century texts, whilst also examining the deterioration in life conditions and the process of decay in New York City, the real counterpart of Gotham City, avoiding a psychological analysis. The following discussion is a revised, enhanced and more mature version of the second chapter of my master's thesis *Gotham's Dark Gargoyle: Gothic Representations in 1980s Batman Comics* (2019). In the thesis I also use the Gothic approach to the text and the theory it entails, arguing about the political existence of superheroes, focusing on Batman in the first chapter, while in the third[1] chapter I examine elements of humor and horror, both inseparable parts of the Gothic text, present in Batman comics.

As proposed by David Punter and Glennis Byron in *The Gothic* (2004), Gothic writing emerges in literature as a popular narrative choice in periods of crisis (p. 39), being the late nineteenth-century English literature an appropriate example of such phenomenon. The same can be observed in two distinct time periods concerning Batman. The first one, in the 1930s, is a phase marked by a huge crisis in capitalism, favoring the rise of a superhero like the "Dark Knight"; it is also true in relation to the late twentieth century, with the release of *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). This "return" of Batman, which actually begins in the 1970s, coincides with an economic and social crisis, paralleled by the failure of a teleological apprehension of time, marked by many questionings about the notion of progress, which was the basis for both capitalist and socialist societies.

My focus lies in two specific 1980s comics, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), created by Frank Miller, and *The Killing Joke* (1988), written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Brian Bolland. These two comics are recognized by comic readers and

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1   An early version of this chapter was published in Portuguese as "Gótico em quadrinho: entre o humor e terror em A piada mortal" in Suellen Cordovil da Silva and Tiago Marques Luiz's *O humor nas literaturas de expressão de língua inglesa* (2018).

researchers as two of the most iconic Batman stories, influencing the Dark Knight's films and comics produced since then. In order to carry out the discussion, I also include a brief discussion of Batman's incarnation in late 1930s and early 1940s, since the beginning of the character and the environment which he inhabits are established within that period.

In 1939, when Batman was created, the titular character dwelled in New York City, later on changing to a fictional location called Gotham City, albeit still based in New York. As previously mentioned, the 1930s decade is a period of great economic changes and social crisis in the United States, whose effects would be felt until the recovery of the economy with United States entrance in World War II in the subsequent decade. During the 1930s, the unemployment rates, poverty and homelessness were among the problems city dwellers endured. When Batman was created, the major urban areas in the United States had increased in population. At the same time, with the economic crises from the late 1920s and the 1930s, there was a raise in crime rates, especially mob-related infractions in urban areas such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia (Crime). In that context, Batman emerges as a fictional response to a historical reality, addressing the question head on and proposing a solution to criminality, so much so that his first enemies are not supervillains, but mobsters and petty criminals. In relation to that, Cary Adkinson argues that:

> Superheroes are simultaneously extra-legal vigilantes and symbols of the dominant cultural ethos. The social problems created by the dominant cultural ethos are incapable of being resolved by the hegemony's own agents and institutions of social control. Only the superhero whose vigilantism is counter-hegemonic by definition, has the power to uphold and protect the dominant class's interests when its own institutions fail to do so. (2008, p. 249)

To put it rather plainly, Batman originates as the aspiration of a rich white man who turns to vigilantism for vengeance[2]. From this perspective, he is the representative of the safeguard of private property and the defender of capitalism, criticizing the inefficacy of the police and government, which grant rights to crime suspects without immediately punishing them. Batman represents the hero who decided to fight crime with his own hands instead of relying on police enforcement and in the judicial system. In this sense, he is a vigilante, someone who embodies the answer to issues that especially urban dwellers had fear of, such as physical violence, murder and robbery.

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2   Bruce Wayne's parents were assassinated by a burglar in the streets of Gotham.

At first, faced with 1930s increasing crime rates, Batman used to kill criminals as the final punishment. The character changes over time but still preserves his main feature: the fact that he is someone from the establishment[3] fighting criminals in his city.

Adkinson develops the idea that the superhero genre, of which Batman is part, is based on a dubious relation: even though it represents the dominant class aspirations, particularly the defense of private property, the legitimization of political and judicial powers, and police enforcement[4], this is done through the creation of a figure who is marginal to that system, going beyond the reach of those powers to fight criminality as an outlaw who prevents, stops, judges and punishes criminals, sometimes by killing perpetrators. The character represents a hegemonic defense of the *status quo*, and, at the same time, is counter-hegemonic in his defiance of the laws and institutions, which are part of the hegemonic powers.

Batman, then, plays the role of the protector of the urban area of Gotham, as a member of the establishment and defender of its interests, standing as a gargoyle in the city skyline. Ernst Gombrich says that gargoyles had a duty to protect the building from evil spirits (1995, p. 6). Gargoyles then protected the physical structure and its inhabitants by preventing malevolent entities to do them harm. Batman is a creature made to protect Gotham, represented by the character's image on top of buildings, sometimes mingled with stone gargoyles, as if suggesting they are the same, just as exemplified in figura 1.

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3   Adopting Norbet Elias and John Scottson's idea of establishment as groups in the upper scales of power, including economic power, that deny groups of outsiders the same privileged position in society. For further reading see *The Established and the Outsiders* (1994).

4   Police enforcement is necessary to fulfill Batman's objective of combating crime and, at the same time, preserving class privileges and the structure that enables him and others like him to retain socioeconomic status, just as every right-wing ideology (KONDER, 2009, p. 27). One example of police enforcement bond with Batman is the relationship between Batman and Commissioner Gordon supporting one another. *In The Killing Joke* and in *The Dark Knight Returns* Gordon has a supporting role, being the victim/hostage, as well as Batman's conscience, telling Batman to obey the law (even though it is not possible to be sure if he did) in the first one. In the second comics, Gordon is a friend, backing Batman and breaking the rules to give the hero what he wants. It is only when Gordon ceases to be Police Commissioner that the police enforcement is seen as bad or inept.

FIGURA 1 – BATMAN E GÁRGULAS

FONTE: Miller (1986. p 48).

In this panel from *The Dark Knight Returns*, all buildings in sight have gargoyles of their own, as five gargoyles are depicted in the scene in two or three different buildings. Nonetheless they are ineffective in avoiding crimes and protecting city dwellers, once they are made of stone. Just a gargoyle made of flesh and bones could safeguard the city, and that is what Batman emulates, based on his own set of moral codes.

NEW "GOTHAM" YORK

Batman is the hero of Gotham City, even though in his first stories he was a vigilante in New York. The representation of Gotham kept the same atmosphere and characteristics of Batman's previous home city, only changing its name to be set in a fictional location. In order to understand why New York City was selected to be the urban background for Batman stories, it is necessary to understand the city's overall situation and the living conditions in 1930s United States, the context in which the Dark Knight was created.

Recalling the rise of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, a period in which major changes took place in the modes of production, it caused the centralization of production in factories, in which machinery was installed, forcing workers to commute every day to the factory. That change would

also force workers to live near their city jobs, moving from the rural areas to urban sites. In order to protect their privileges, instead of investing in the city, the new power holders expelled "from the urban center and even from the city the proletariat, destroying the 'urbanity'[5]"[6] (LEFEBVRE, 2001, p. 22).

The most famous "reform" carried out to expel the unwanted from urban centers happened during the administration of Baron Haussmann as mayor of Paris between 1853 and 1870. Based on an eugenic project, Haussmann destroyed old buildings and narrow and tortuous alleys in order to build new edifices and large straight avenues, pushing the working class to the outskirts of the city, expelling them from the urbanity. Haussmann's reform was the blueprint to similar projects, all of them with social hygienist purposes of pushing to the suburbs the lower-class inhabitants that had established themselves in those cities due to the factory implementation stage of the Industrial Revolution.

In the United States, the situation of eugenic city planning was not the same as in other Western countries. Christopher Tunnard says that, in spite of the debate among architects and urbanists in the late nineteenth century, "it was only in the first decade of the twentieth century that cities began to accept it [urban planning] as responsibility of local administration"[7] (1971, p. 89). According to Tunnard, the delay in city planning in the United States was due to an unwillingness of US citizens to accept the interference of government, which in their point of view would constrain the free initiative.

The US distrust in city planning was solved by adopting the same solution Haussmann had adopted in Paris, remodeling the urban center. Following that project, "urban zoning quickly became a popular method to eliminate the unwanted and raise the land value" (TUNNARD, 1971, p. 91). One of the first cities to receive this treatment in the US was New York, with the first zoning project in Harlem in 1916 (when it was still a white middle-class neighborhood), setting the mark to be applied in the country. At the same time, the first skyscrapers, e.g. the Metropolitan Life Insurance building (1906), were built in New York. While the city grew horizontally and vertically, a storm awaited, for in 1929 a social an economic crisis of gigantic proportions struck the United States (it is worth noting that, in different degrees, all countries felt its effect). The Empire State,

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5   For Lefebvre, "urbanity" is a synonym of "urban society", in the sense of a democratic city, shared and planned for all its dwellers.

6   From the original: "Do centro urbano e da própria cidade o proletariado, destruindo a 'urbanidade'".

7   From the original: "foi apenas na primeira década do século vinte que as cidades começaram a aceita-lo como encargo do governo local".

whose construction began in 1930, became firstly a symbol of the decay of the decades of the growing city, as it "remained for ten years as a memory of another era, desperately searching for tenants"[8] (TUNNARD, 1971, p. 107).

The city in which Batman is created is the decadent New York, trying to be saved by federal investment, populated by a massive army of unemployed and homeless people. It is not a coincidence that Bob Kane choses New York as home for Batman, as it was the biggest US city with 7.454.995 inhabitants in 1940 ("Biggest"), during the economic and social crisis. The hero arises as an entity to control and combat the symptoms of that crisis, although its causes would not be addressed in Batman's comics.

The name of Gotham City was first used in reference to New York in the periodical *Salmagundi* (1807-1808), by Washington Irving, as a comic description of the city, just like in "The thrice renowned and delectable city of Gotham" (IRVINE apud GONÇALVES, 2018, p. 2). Vilson Gonçalves proceeds in the origins of Gotham in medieval England. Gotham, an Anglo-Saxon word for Goats' Town, is a village in *Nottinghamshire* (UK) that has a story associated with it from early twentieth century. The story tells that when King John was passing through the village, and its inhabitants, afraid that the meadows would become public lands as was the custom, decided to act as fools to distract and block the king's entourage, being successful in retaining the lands, in spite of the fame of fools which befell the village (GONÇALVES, 2018, p. 3). Gonçalves affirms that

> Even before the Gotham's name were associated to Batman's narratives, it already included the problem of city representation: a place of madness or theatricality of madness. For Burrows and Wallace (1999, p. XII), New York dwellers would hardly admit the nickname if the village of Gotham did not provided any redemptive quality – and there was, as its madness had been strategical[9] (GONÇALVES, 2018, p. 4)

Irving adopted the denomination of the British city for parodic effects, and the use of this denomination by Bob Kane and Bill Finger may be seen as a way to use an old New York City epithet and a discussion over the "strategic madness" that is a multimillionaire dressing up in a bat costume in order to solve the city's criminality.

8　From the original: "permaneceu por dez anos como lembrança de uma outra era, desesperadamente em busca de inquilinos".

9　From the original: "antes mesmo que o nome de Gotham fosse associado às narrativas de Batman, já comportava a problemática da representação de cidade: local de loucura ou de teatralidade da loucura. Para Burrows e Wallace (1999, p. XII), dificilmente os habitantes de Nova York admitiriam o apelido se a aldeia de Gotham não tivesse alguma qualidade redentora – e a tinha, pois sua loucura havia sido estratégica."

Gotham's representation is a major factor in Batman's narrative, as the tone of the narrative starts from the glomming and dark environment. About that, Gonçalves points out that "for each Batman, there is a Gotham"[10] (2018, p. 11), once the depiction of the fictional city serves to enhance the plot in the narrative, working as a character in itself, with whom Batman interacts.

The uncanny, violent, impossible to domesticate, and wild city, as a character or background, can describe New York in the 1970s and 1980s, serving as scenario for films such as *The Warriors* (1979), in which the city is a dark place, covered in dirt painted in graffiti, and populated by gangs. That is not the real city, as much as the city in the film *Ghostbusters* (1984) is not the real one, but the representation and the conditions of the real city, as seen in Dr. Peter Venkman's (played by Bill Murray) dialog in *Ghostbusters II* (1989) "have you been outside lately? Do you know how weird it is out there? We've taken our own head count. There seem to be six million completely miserable assholes living in the tri-state area" (REITMAN, 1989). The boundaries between the real and the fictional city are not so clear, mingling the real and the fictional settings. In this context, Emily McCrystal states that the "The Gothic city thrives on being an organic state that is unstable, polluted, and infected. This is a liminal state, neither completely devastated nor able to maintain complete order" (2018, p. 315); it may be a representation of both the real New York or the fictional Gotham City, the real London or the fictional London in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

THE ARRIVAL OF BATMAN

As concerns the relation of "Gothic and decadence", David Punter and Glennis Byron point out that Gothic narratives are linked to times of crisis, re-emerging to communicate sociocultural matters. Three examples provided by them are *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dracula*, highlighting how such texts were written in a "time marked by growing fears about national, social and psychic decay", "being linked primarily by a focus on the idea of degeneration" (2004, p. 39). However, in these Victorian-era narratives, even though the main background was the big city of London, none of them deal with city problems in a straightforward manner (such as Dickens' novels, for example), they focus, instead, on nobility and middle classes characters, as Punter and Byron add:

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10   From the original: "Para cada Batman, há uma Gotham".

> In the new fictional Gothic landscapes of the city, however, it is not primarily the criminal underworld or the poor that are implicated as a source of horror. The focus is usually far more on the middle classes, and on exposing what underlies the surfaces of the supposedly civilized and respectable world (2004, p. 40).

It is possible to see the character of Bruce Wayne alongside those Victorian era characters. In Stevenson's novel, Dr. Jekyll turns into his alter ego, Mr Hyde, and roams freely in the city at night, doing things that his more respectable persona was not able to do. Andreas Reichstein, in his article "Batman – an American Mr Hyde", makes a comparison between Kane and Finger's Bruce/Batman and Stevenson's Jekyll/Hyde, in which we can see a reminiscence of Victorian Gothic classics.

Reichstein also traces comparisons between Gotham and Manhattan, however not demonstrating awareness that, at the outset, they used to be the same city. William Uricchio does a similar approach in his article "The Batman's Gotham City™: Story, Ideology, Performance". Uricchio points out that "Gotham is explicitly modeled on the 'dark and brooding' aspects of New York City's architecture and atmosphere" (2010, p. 121). Moreover, Uricchio argues that the aforementioned depiction of the city is not the background for a showdown between Batman and the supervillains, but an arena to combat "regular" criminals (2010, p. 120).

By changing the name from New York to Gotham, the atmosphere of the previous name was preserved and, as pinpointed by Uricchio, it is, sometimes, just a generic city working as background for the action, whilst in other cases it functions as an important element of the story. In *Batman* no.4 published in 1940, with no indication of date in the edition, only labeled "winter issue", the following panel is the first of the third story in the volume, occupying two thirds of the page (Figura 2).

FIGURA 2 – NEW YORK IN BATMAN'S NEWSPAPER

FONTE: Kane; Finger (1940, p. 27).

The newspaper gives a clear indication that the story takes place in New York, as written in its front page. Another point that is relevant for the discussion here proposed is the fact that, in the yellow dialogue bubble, the narration brings the description that Batman was "the nemesis" of the "men of evil", and alongside Robin, Batman "had crashed the loathsome criminal vultures who sought to prey on society" (KANE; FINGER, 1940, p. 27). Batman's mission was to stop the degenerated lawbreakers, "petty criminals" in Uricchio's words. Even though Batman fights those "petty criminals" for their part in city violence, these were only symptoms of a huge economic crisis, in a period in which 14.45% of the labor force in United States was unemployed, taking into consideration that only 56 million subjects were considered part of the economically active population – while the total US population was 101 million people and millions depended on others to survive (Unemployment). Necessity led to a raise in crime rates and, it is worth highlighting, the crisis control measures were first applied in the countryside areas (TUNNARD, 1971, p. 107); with that in mind, escalating crimes such as theft and robbery may help explain the creation of a character like Batman. The first unemployment insurance law was established in the State of New York and, stated in the New York State Unemployment Insurance Law, enacted in 1935, declared that any person "unemployed through no fault of their own" would receive a financial support (NEW, 2014, p. III-2).

This information suggests that the problem of unemployment was bigger in New York than in other places, as it was the first State to approve some sort of financial assistance for workers. Despite being declared constitutional in 1936, the document says that it was first applied in 1938. By the time Batman was created, the problem was not yet solved. Only during WW II, unemployment rates fell to numbers close to those which preceded the 1930s crisis, that is explained due to the improvement in the economic conditions.

William Uricchio, when talking about the city of Gotham from Batman's perspective, presents a list of descriptions made by Dennis O'Neil[11] and Frank Miller comparing which New York is the one represented in their Gotham (2010, p. 125). They present Gotham as Downtown Manhattan at night, mentioning Hell's Kitchen, Tribeca, SoHo, Bed Stuy, The Bronx, poor neighborhoods with high criminality activity, which created a dark, frightening and deteriorated background for Batman's adventures.

> This depiction of Gotham helps Batman to work as a character by persuading the reader to empathize uncritically with the hero's actions. Gotham – or at least the parts inhabited by the Batman – is indeed 'dark, moody and frightening' (URICCHIO, 2010, p. 125).

The risk of uncritically reading Batman's comics is the tendency to support the hero's main goal in the narrative that is to "restore order" (URICCHIO, 2010, p. 126). In that sense, it is possible to say that Batman aims for order instead of social justice.

THE INESCAPABLE GOTHAM: MODERN LABYRINTH

The modern city is a setting for exploring nineteenth-century Gothic themes, particularly in relation to population density and size, which creates social division, namely, situations of uneasiness and unfamiliarity for former dwellers and power holders, as new inhabitants arrive in the city. In that context, dark alleys and proletarian neighborhoods cause fear in the bourgeois and in the nobility. Batman is partially a nobleman and partially a bourgeois, settled in the city for generations, claiming to be its protector from the degeneration of the newcomers, which makes him an oligarch ("aristocrat"). He is also a successful industrial owner of factories and machineries.

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11   O'Neil was a writer at DC Comics and responsible for changing Batman stories in the 1970s. In 1986 he became editor of all comics within Batman's universe until 2000.

When talking about Victorian Gothic, Punter and Byron identify an approximation between readers and the narrative subjects in the London settings, being "disturbingly familiar: the bourgeois domestic world and the new urban landscape", as the city is a place in which horror lingers in the figure of "criminals, madmen and scientists" (2004, p. 26). Realism embraced the Gothic elements, as seen in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1838), in which "the city, with its dark, narrow, winding streets and hidden byways replacing the labyrinthine passages of the earlier castles and convents, is established as a site of menace through the importation of various traditional Gothic motifs and scenarios" (PUNTER; BYRON, 2010, p. 28).

Jimmy Stamp, an US architect dealing with Batman and Gotham city, discusses how Gotham is the representation of modern urban paranoia, with the titular character being "inarguably a product, an expression, of the city he lives in. But is he its demon or its savior?" (STAMP, 2009). With that in mind, Stamps questions whether a product of that environment may function as a personification of its problems, or if it can somehow (allegorically or metaphorically) produce a hero who will save and transform that location through his actions. Answering Stamp's question, Batman is a product of the violence and corruption of the city, but not in the sense that he can solve the problems by fighting crime, once this is only the symptom of a more complex situation. A multiplicity of issues (unemployment, poverty and the lack or ineffectiveness of public administration) corroborates the way Gotham city is depicted.

Using Punter and Byron's idea that the perpetrators of evil in the cities are the madmen and criminals, in Batman the supervillains such as the Joker, the Riddler, and Penguin are madmen criminals, representing singular crimes in Batman's comics, as well as not appearing in every story. The ones most commonly seen as foes in the Dark Knight comics are regular criminals, such as robbers and burglars, rapists and drug dealers, the ones that execute the majority of crimes in the newspapers pages as well as in comics. That is also the case in *The Dark Knight Returns*, in which, in spite of the presence of antagonists such as the Joker, Two-Face and Superman, during most of the pages, the troubles are caused (and combated by the vigilant) by street gangs and petty criminals.

In the article "Rates of crime and Unemployment: An Analysis of Aggregate Research Evidence" (1987), Theodore Chiricos points out that during the 1970s decade, "unemployment rose more sharply and to higher levels than at any time since the 1930s" (p. 191). In this sense, the context of both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Killing Joke* are close to the origins of Gotham's cape crusader, characterized by a high tax of unemployed people, urban violence, and situated in a time of crises, as it was the case in

the 1930s. The context of production of those comics is marked by a breakdown in the capitalist system and, in the 1980s, what can be noticed is a *fin-de-siècle* disappointment, the end of the expectation of a brighter future based on the idea of progress. The issues of criminality, poverty and unemployment in 1980s New York City are a direct follow up of the 1970s crisis.

In "Declining Crime Rates: Insiders' Views of the New York City Story" (1998), George Kelling and William Bratton present some data about New York City in the 1980s. Following up the problems of the 1970s, the situation was similar in the subsequent decade. Kelling and Bratton describe the subway system in 1989's New York City as "nightmarish", pointing out that the decline in the number of passengers in the subway was due to the city economic decay, and, therefore, ""homelessness" was frightening passengers and causing them to abandon the subway in droves" (1998, p. 1220) – even after an 8 billion dollars upgrade in the subway system. Unemployment, poverty and homelessness marked New York City during the 1970s and 1980s.

If city dwellers were suffering from the economic and social crisis, poor people, and especially non-white citizens, were being segregated and pushed to very poor neighborhoods. According to Emily Rosenbaum, this "ghettoization [process] was not limited to the 1970s, but continued to devastate the worst-off minority areas of New York City well into the 1980s" (1995, p. 21).

The idea of an economic crisis marked by unemployment and decay of urban areas is seen in *The Killing Joke* as Alan Moore and Bryan Bolland focus on the Joker. The plot follows two timelines: in the present time, focusing in the supervillain (the Joker) and his associates, and in flashbacks, concerned with the character's backstory: an unemployed man with a pregnant wife, being him approached by two robbers in order to attempt a factory heist (Figura 3). The man accepts the offer, as he needs money to support his family. The robbery goes wrong, that man gets disfigured in toxic waste and later becomes the Joker.

FIGURA 3 – JOKER AT THE BAR - FLASHBACK

FONTE: Moore; Bolland (2014, p. 14).

In need of providing for his wife and unborn child, the man accepts what would be just "one big crime", with no intention of becoming a criminal himself, but with the expectation that this robbery would be enough to enable them to move to a better neighborhood and also supply food, clothes and material goods. The neighborhood is one of the main complaints that the man has, as he currently lives in a rented apartment in a poor area (Figura 4). Jane Jacobs in *Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1961) criticizes how the cityscape in New York (and all big modern cities) is planned to exclude people from one neighborhood to the other, forbidding city integration and creating separate spaces for every urban category. For instance, there are the area for parks, the area for good restaurants, and the area for poor housing, in which, according to Jacobs, people would only live in such poor housing until they found a way to move away from

it (p; 112). For Jacobs, "an unsuccessful neighborhood is a place that is overwhelmed by its defects and problems and is progressively more helpless before them" (1961, p. 112), for which there would be no solution for a neighborhood to solve its problems, only by the will of the dwellers[12]. Gentrification projects in New York neighborhoods of Tribeca and SoHo during the last two decades show that when the status of the place changes, old inhabitants are expelled alongside (or as one of) the problems.

FIGURA 4 – JOKER AND WIFE - FLASHBACK

FONTE: Moore; Bolland (2014, p. 8).

A big city, in Jacobs' vision, is a place constituted of small spaces that are not connected, as big cities do not grant their citizens accessibility to the entire city. Returning to Lefebvre, the right to the city is limited (141-145). We can call the city a labyrinth, with all its streets, avenues, alleys, neighborhoods, and zones, whereas also being a maze due to their inhabitants only knowing a small part of it, only seeing the remaining metropolis from the distance, imagining where it ends. The city as a

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12   In the 1940s census, New York City had 7.454.995 residents, a higher population than in the 1980s census, which reached the number of 7.071.639 inhabitants. The peak of New York's population was in the 1970s census, that presented the population as high as 7.894.862 subjects living in the city. During the 1970s economic crisis which affected most countries, and middle and upper classes abandoned New York. "The 1970s are considered a low point for New York City. More than 820,00 people fled the crime and an unreliable transit system over the course of the decade, moving from the city to the suburbs" (GRITTY). City problems were the same discussed by Jacobs in 1961, with a lower population but higher unemployment and poverty rates comparable with the 1930s.

labyrinth is an image of great Gothic potential, as the maze is the place of confusion where people get lost and may even go mad trying to find a way out. When talking about Gothic literary tradition, Botting presents the idea that "[t]he horror of the labyrinth and its confusion of fears and desires lies in its utter separation from all social rules and complete transgression of all conventional limits" (52). Newcomers to this labyrinthine site did not know the rules and limits of urban space, and transgression was part of their daily routine. During the 1930s, transgression became part of the routine of all city dwellers, living among it or committing transgressions, during the crisis, in what can be read as a development of that labyrinthine reality, "as places of radical politics and confusion, are identified as dangerous, subversive sites destroying established boundaries and conventions" (BOTTING, 2005, p. 53).

Moore and Bolland only depict the city as a major experience, presenting the Joker with a story for the acts that led to his first crime and to his transformation, justifying his actions before the accident which turned him into a madman and supervillain. The difference between the settings of the flashback from the rest of the story is that it presents the city, its deteriorated urban spaces, such as in a poor neighborhood and in a simple bar inhabited by thugs and drunkards. The background for the rest of the story is Gordon's House, presenting a middle-class neighborhood not placed in the urbanity, while Arkham Asylum and the Batcave are elements detached from the urban area, aside from the social problems affecting Gotham.

Beyond the crisis and unemployment rates brought by Chiricos, another 1980s specificity set the tone for Miller's city. In "Anomia, outsiders e identidades no tempo presente através de *Batman: A Piada Mortal*" (2011), Thiago Monteiro argues that governments in the United States and in Great Britain were aligned with the idea of dismantling the Welfare State and labor regulations which protected the working classes and the poor. Both Reagan and Thatcher took part in a process of "dissolution of a social order, producing the feeling of displacement and uneasiness" (MONTEIRO, 2011, p. 4) that are represented in *The Dark Knight Returns*, including the caricature of the then US president. The characters are mostly poor people, unattended by the State. We see that in the Joker background story through the atmosphere his unemployed character attends: the dirty bar, the small apartment in a poor neighborhood with streets populated by prostitution (representing the marginal society and its moral distortion) and the factory with loose safety regulations in which the Joker fell in a tank of chemical waste. After becoming a supervillain, the place the Joker inhabits is a decayed and bankrupted amusement park. Monteiro concludes that

Moore and Bolland's story is one in which "the narrative of *The Killing Joke* is not centered in Batman, but in the fictional universe, that circumscribes the character"[13] (MONTEIRO, 2011, p. 4), that is, the city that circumscribes the hero's upper-class world.

The plot in Moore and Bolland's comics is based on a chaotic society, abandoning once again city dwellers on their own, while labor relations crumble, poverty increases, alongside unemployment. In Frank Miller, the story is set in the city, taking those elements of a broken society and moving it to Gotham (Figura 5). Miller's version of the environment is one that makes an older Bruce Wayne, in his 50s, return after ten years of retirement and who is one more time fighting crime, donning the Bat-suit once again.

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13   From the original: "Os governos conservadores de Reagan e Thatcher promoveram, no curso da década de 1980, profundas reformas neoliberais. Desfazia-se em dez anos a estrutura do Estado do Bem-Estar Social que por quase meio século havia regulamentado as relações entre capital e trabalho criando redes de proteção contra o infortúnio e garantindo algum tipo de segurança as sociedades capitalistas após a II Guerra Mundial. Entendemos esse processo como a dissolução de uma ordem social, o que produziu um sentimento de desencaixe e mal-estar cujas vozes podem ser ouvidas, lidas e vistas no enredo desta *graphic novel*. A trama narrativa de *A Piada Mortal* não é centrada em Batman, mas sim sobre universo ficcional que circunscreve esse personagem."

FIGURA 5 – VIOLLENCE IN GOTHAM

FONTE: Miller (2002, p. 27).

The full-page scene selected depicts the image of a dark Gotham, focusing on a dirty sidewalk of a random place in the city, where Batman, for the first time after coming back from retirement, fights a criminal; the crook makes his move, attacking a woman that seems to be poor or low-middle class (based on her clothes and the neighborhood she is walking back home). Crime is not portrayed as a necessity, but it is possible to read the social convulsion of the city due to an economic crisis in the period. Besides that, there is the criticism made by Miller to the US president Ronald Reagan in *The Dark Knight Returns*, and while not directly addressing his austerity policies, Miller includes Reagan's caricature, made as a liar and manipulative president. However, Frank Miller

never presents another conceivable city, only the decadent metropolis, in which there is no visible border, populated by gangs, corrupts, moralists, hypocritical and passive citizens.

The city is a contested place, with political-bias, class, and gender marked by one vision of the city. For Valéria Cristina Pereira da Silva, "the labyrinth is not only in the differences of the urban fabric, breaking the modern perspective of the mass plan, but above all, the ideas that forge the city"[14] (SILVA, 2009, p. 155). In that sense, the city – presented as multiple in Moore and Bolland narrative – depicts the struggles of other groups of people, making poor people to actively try to change their lives and realities (even though they do so through crime). In Miller's story, there are gangs, evil for the sake of being evil, and those presented as passive watchers or victims of the criminals.

DANGEROUS CLASSES: URBAN GOTHIC AS CLASS MARGINALIZATION

The term "dangerous classes" was used in the 1872 Charles Loring Brace's *The Dangerous Classes of New York*, in which he recognized in immigrants, prostitutes, homeless, working classes and poor people, broadly speaking, the cause of social convulsion and deterrent of a better economic advance in the city. Brace is not the first one to use the term, as it appears in an 1865 article in *The New York Times* entitled "European Social Reforms.; The Vitality of England Dangerous Classes Reformatory Efforts" referring to London. The article highlights the fact that the city, which at that time had more than 3 million inhabitants, was crowded, with more than a million newly arrived from rural areas, and that there was "indeed, a frightful mass of social evils and inequalities. The condition of the homeless and lowest poor in London, is one of the most fearful spectacles in the civilized world" (European). The tone of the article is alarming. In the subsequent paragraph, the notion of London as a collapsed metropolis became clearer, since in the city

> you find them in street after street and lane upon lane, thousands by thousands, hungry, filthy, ignorant, imbruted and cunning; vagrants, thieves, beggars, "tramps," burglars, outcasts, and all the nameless crowds of people living daily from hand to mouth. Here they burrow and live and breed, increasing at alarming rates in every way (European).

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14   From the original: "O labirinto não está apenas nas diferencialidades do tecido urbano, quebrando a perspectiva moderna do plano de massa, mas, sobretudo, as ideias que forjam a cidade".

The city then congregated a mass of poor people, seen as a social problem that should be dealt with. For the *New York Times*, if not for the "aristocratic classes", London would be lost, as "the middle and upper classes are brave enough. There would be no lack of daring men to fight for law and order", fighting those dangerous classes, namely every manual laborer, unemployed and all sorts of marginalized subjects. Bruce Wayne is certainly one of Gotham's brave aristocrats who fights the "dangerous classes". Batman was not searching for improvement in the social and economic conditions of Gotham's population, but only fighting criminality deriving from the crisis, fighting the dangerous classes all over the city, as they are seen as the problem to be opposed, while upper classes are taken as the saviors of morality, civilization and order.

Roger Luckhurst refers to London as representative of the Gothic Victorian *fin-de-siècle* context, in which Dracula appeared, for instance. According to Luckhurst, the late 1980s and 1990s highlights a "contemporary Gothic revival" (2002, p. 527). During that period, a great variety of literary pieces (including a comic by Alan Moore about Whitechapel murders) took place in a mournful London of the 1980s, linking this version of the city to the Victorian one. For him, the modern city "evades totalized planning" and the haunted one is inherent to modernity in the spaces it creates. Luckhurst also argues that in the Gothic revival there is a return to a Gothic representation of the city through a ghostly creation of the fear of the masses, including the working class and lower classes.

If Luckhurst argues that Victorian London and the eugenic projects for the city are part of the Gothic context, exploring lower classes as the origin of the haunted representation of London, Linda Dryden states that the invocation of atavism[15] in urban Gothic, such as Jekyll and Hyde, "defines its states as Gothic" (2003, p. 89). Both are relating political projects aimed to eliminate the poor and the social marginalized city dwellers, labeling them as frightening.

Dryden claims that *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which sold more than forty thousand copies in its first print, was a "Gothic horror story" made in the *fin-de-siècle* period in which the nation seemed to be in danger of being taken for the "primitive 'other'" (2003, p. 76). Exploring the theme of duality, this Gothic trope is seen through a hygienist and atavist gaze. Jekyll is a respectable member of the establishment, a rich doctor living in the heart of a wealthy neighborhood. On the other hand, Hyde was a man (usually described as a creature) living in a poor neighborhood, with an

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15   Cesare Lombroso's atavism was a "scientific" method in criminology during the second half of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, in which the physicist judged if one was a criminal by their appearance, studding the shape of his head, the size of the nose, presence of tattoos, abnormal bodies and other characteristics based in prejudice and exclusion.

appearance that was not tolerated by Jekyll's friends. In atavistic theory, it is possible to say whether someone is a criminal by analyzing his/her physical appearance, based on a radicalized and discriminatory process which was considered science in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The binary, the *doppelgänger*, as in the case of Jekyll and Hyde, is similar to the condition of Batman and the Joker. Andreas Reichstein traces the comparison between Batman and Bruce to Jekyll and Hyde in "Batman — An American Mr. Hyde?", in the selected comics, nonetheless, the relationship between Batman and the Joker can be read, too, as complementary to each other. For instance, in *The Dark Knight Returns*, the Joker was in a catatonic state since Batman retired, returning to his normal self only after the Dark Knight return to action, depicting his dependency on the hero. In *The Killing Joke*, they say that one will eventually kill the other, or them both, as well as showing a version of the past in which Batman was responsible for the villain's creation. Like Jekyll, Batman comes from a wealthy family, gifted with a physical appearance considered normative and positive, while Hyde and the Joker share the opposite pole of society. In the case of the binaries Jekyll/Hyde and Batman/Joker, Hyde lives in Soho, a peripheral neighborhood of London, a place of prostitution, "tramps" and criminals, while the Joker came from a poor New Yorker neighborhood before turning into a criminal and a deformed figure. Both Hyde and the Joker are abhumans, with their bodies reshaped: one shortens and gets hairy, while the other one has the color of his skin changed and his face deformed, besides the fact that they both became wicked, with a grim smile in the face and a violent nature.

In addition to that, the real city is divided in rich and poor neighborhoods, ghettos created to keep the undesirable far from the dominant classes: theses layers can be trespassed. For Erica McCrystal, talking about the porosity of the city, using Stevenson's novel as an example, "Hyde commits his most notable crimes not in darkened, impoverished Soho but under the bright lamps of bourgeois neighbourhoods" (2018, p. 314). McCrystal is talking about the trespassing of the line, between poor and rich spaces, between villains and heroes. This is true in relation to *The Killing Joke*, in which the Joker goes to Gordon's house in order to kidnap him and shoot his daughter, Barbara, but criminality does not need to trespass to be confronted. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman goes to poor neighborhoods in order to combat crimes. Batman fights regular criminals wherever they are, for his crusade is not to get rid of criminality in his neighborhood, as he lives in an isolated manor, but to get rid of criminals in the entire city.

Dryden argues that, as their appearances are divided into good and evil parts of the self (and of society), Robert Stevenson represents "the perception that the race itself

was succumbing to degenerative tendencies that threatened the very fabric of society" (DRYDEN, 2003, p. 77). The criminal type is always associated with the working classes, with the dangerous classes. In late nineteenth century, the decaying of the British Empire was seen as a spreading of working classes' degeneration, which affected society in general, including high classes. Batman may be seen as perpetuating the notion that he is the representative of the aristocratic group that would protect the city, as in the *New York Times* article, whilst being, at the same time, someone contaminated by the Joker (lower classes) degeneration. The city is where every degeneration takes place, the home of a new proletarian class menacing the comfort of the upper classes. In that sense, Dryden highlights that:

> Hyde's nocturnal criminality echoes public insecurity engendered by the expanding city even before awful events in Whitechapel in the summer and autumm of 1888, and the Bryant & May match girls strike pressed home the point that the proletarian was a constant presence on the city's street (2003, p. 82).

Whitechapel crimes were the ones committed by the so-called Jack the Ripper, assassinating women[16] in the district of Whitechapel, a poor working-class neighborhood on the margins of the upper-class London. The Bryant & May match factory strike was a huge strike of 1400 female workers fighting for better working conditions at the factory. Those two events were marks of the marginal perilous city just outside the upper-class city. The city is frightening because they fear those millions marginalized, degenerated, lurking in the dark[17]. London had become a huge place to fear, "a labyrinthine hell" (Dryden, 2003, p. 86) in which criminals could hide, just as Hyde after committing a murder. Dark alleys and buildings were the perfect place to be if someone had no wish to be found. Batman's foes in Gotham city lurk in the streets, covert by darkness and hideouts, just in the margin of the wealth symbol that is Wayne Manor, outside upper-class walls, in the dangerous world of the city, a place to be feared, a place inhabited by the other.

The perilous other is the poor inhabitant of an ethnic neighborhood, the homeless person living in the subway, or any other decadent or marginalized location, such as the

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16   By the time of the crimes they were identified as prostitutes, even though researchers such as historian of Victorian age, Hallie Rubenhold, disagree, suggesting that the five victims were in fact working class women labeled for being by themselves at the street.

17   By 1807 London received its firsts gas lighting, but poor neighborhood like East End would not receive any of that until the twentieth century (DRYDEN, 2003, p. 91).

amusement park in *The Killing Joke*. The place is depicted as if it has been abandoned for some time, with broken rides, a dark and decayed environment. While the realtor is not confident that he would sell it to anyone, surprisingly for him, the Joker demonstrates excitement with the place. One element that calls the attention in that scenario are the posters of the freak show cast. Those subjects are depicted as having abnormal figures, with an uncommon number of limbs or non-conventional body shapes, being that the case of the "Fat Lady", whose poster headline shows the phrase "gals, be glad it ain't you" (MOORE e BOLLAND, 2008, p. 6) (Figuras 6 and 7).

FIGURA 6 – JOKER – FAT LADY'S POSTER

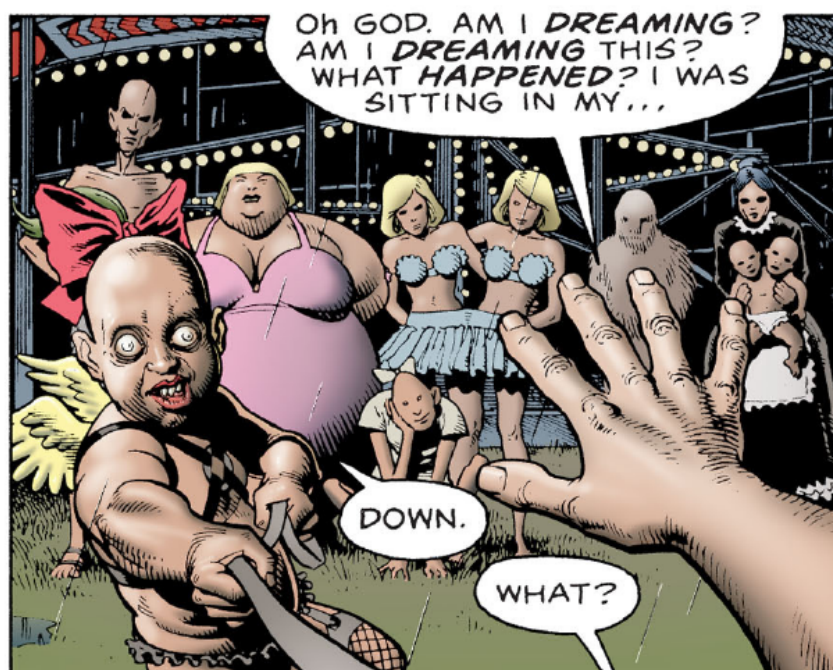FONTE: Moore; Bolland (2014, p. 6).

FIGURA 7 R– JOKER AT AMUSEMENT PARK

FONTE: Moore; Bolland (2014, p. 6).

The Joker acquires the park and embraces the subjects of the freak show, accepting their deviant figures. The freak show then becomes Joker's henchmen in this story, following the acceptance the villain demonstrates to them (Figura 8). Using Kelly Hurley concept of abhuman in Gothic tradition, "the 'proper' somatic response to abhumanness, the sensation of disgust" (2004, p. 45) would be produced by those characters. In a social reading, it is possible to see another possibility, as the Joker being the one who accepts and helps these social outcasts. If the 1980s presented an economic crisis for normal bodies, abhuman characters suffered a lot more in the period. According to the report "Has the Employment Rate of People with Disabilities Declined?" (2004) produced by Cornell University under the guidance of David C. Stampleton, during the 1980s, unemployment rates for people with disabilities were around 60% for men and slightly below 80% for women. In the story it is not possible to know whether the freak show members are evil, and despite their appearance and relationship with the villain that renders them as bad guys, they flee when Batman arrives. From a social gaze, they were offered help by an outcast like them, and accepted the proposition, while the hero appears only to confront them.

FIGURA 8 – FREAK SHOW

FONTE: Moore; Bolland (2014, p. 20).

If society is rejecting the freak show and the Joker is embracing them, it is more due to the fulfillment of his evil plan. Nonetheless, those characters' representation are within Dryden and Luckhurst's discussion of the Gothic depiction of the haunted, as they were the evil presence, the elements to be feared, the marginalized, the lower classes. The freak show characters can be framed in Cesare Lombroso atavism by their appearance. As Hyde, their mischievousness is printed in their faces and bodies, born marginal and monstrous. As Maria Beville says, in Gothic texts the limits between what is real and what is fictional is not clear (2009, p. 15); the freak show is the marginalized, the dangerous classes of a city populated by unemployed and poor subjects seen as threatening. By using Lombroso's theory, there is a return to the past, reminding the reader not only of the 1930s Batman context, but also racist and prejudiced theories from the past century, since Gothic is a return to the past, as pointed by Botting (2005, p. 1). However, that return to the past questions the modern "enlightenment and human values" (BOTTING, 2005, p. 1), as Lombroso's theories was already seen in the 1980s as an invalidated pseudoscience that were once an instrument of marginalization.

In conclusion, nineteenth-century classic Gothic literary pieces that adopted the notion of dangerous classes to represent working class and the poor, in general terms, as

the villain, can be read in parallel with Batman comics, as we have this trope reused as the Dark Knight enemies, mainly in the figure of petty criminals, gang members, the Joker's henchmen, and the Joker backstory in the *The Killing Joke*.

FINAL REMARKS

Just like London in Stevenson's narrative, New York/Gotham City is a place "haunted" by lower classes. Batman arises in a New York City populated by unemployment, homelessness, and criminality in 1939, a similar context in the stories by Miller and Moore and Bolland, created in the 1980s. The narratives present a city permeated by the constant fear of encountering a criminal lurking in the shadows of Gotham's streets, usually petty criminals, that will be combated by Batman, the alter ego of Bruce Wayne – a rich white man belonging to a traditional Gothamite family. There is a class struggle in this representation, as a rich man uses the shadows and dark environment of the city to fight poor criminals, which are seen as the "dangerous classes".

The approach of discussing two 1980s comics with nineteenth-century Gothic texts allows me to trace a parallel between two different contexts of crises in big cities, in which the rich are the heroes, while the poor are the degenerated characters, villains, and monsters. Whilst the upper class would save the city, the working class and poor people are its doom. This degeneration is also seen in their bodies, once the villains are presented as deformed (body and faces), whereas Bruce Wayne, as a representative of aristocracy/ oligarchy, can assume his monstrous side, Batman, although avoiding the degeneration and acting like the city's gargoyle savior.

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