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*Research Article*

**THE PROCESS OF ‘THEM’ISATION: A MARXIST READING OF  
BARRY HINES’S *A KESTREL FOR A KNAVE***

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**Abstract**

*The objective of this article is to propose a Marxist reading of Barry Hines’s *A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968) and to analyse the them-us contradiction through a close reading of the subjective experiences of the protagonist, Billy, in order to put forward that the antagonism between ‘them’ and ‘us’ is, despite the fact that it seems to comply with the Marxist conception of class and class consciousness, perceived more in cultural and personal terms than in economic terms. The article suggests that the lack of a class-conscious approach based on the exploiter and the exploited is, as in the case of Billy and his defiant and self-centred reactions to the world of ‘them’, unable to lead to a radical transformation of the money-oriented world, capitalism, and that this, on the contrary, interpellates Billy, a fictional representative of the socio-historical reality of the English working class, into the totality of the social relations of production and materialises the hegemonic and reductionist politics of power relations. This process will, over the course of the article, be referred to as the process of ‘them’isation.*

**Keywords:** Barry Hines, *A Kestrel for a Knave*, Them-Us Dichotomy, ‘Them’isation.

**‘ONLAR’LAŞMA SÜRECİ: BARRY HINES’İN *A KESTREL FOR A KNAVE*  
ADLI ROMANININ MARKSİST OKUMASI**

**Öz**

*Bu çalışmanın amacı Barry Hines tarafından yazılan *A Kestrel for a Knave* isimli romanın Marksist okumasını yapmak ve ‘onlar’ ile ‘biz’ arasındaki antagonizmanın – bu durum her ne kadar sınıf ve sınıf bilinci gibi Marksist kavramlarla benzerlik gösterse de – ekonomiye dayalı kaygılardan ziyade kültürel ve kişisel kaygılarla şekillendiğini ileri sürebilmek adına, romanın ana karakteri Billy’nin kişisel deneyimleri üzerinden yola çıkıp onlar-biz çelişkisini analiz etmektir. Bu çalışma, sömüren ve sömürülen ikilemine dayalı sınıf bilincinden yoksun olma durumunun, Billy ve O’nun ‘onlar’ın dünyasına yönelik sığı ve*

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benmerkezci tepkileri örneğinde de olduğu gibi, para egemen düzenin radikal bir dönüşümüne yol açmayacağını ve bu durumun, sanılanın aksine, İngiliz işçi sınıfının sosyotarihsel gerçeğinin kurgusal bir temsilcisi olan Billy'i üretimin sosyal güçlerinin totalitesine entegre edeceğini ve güç ilişkilerinin hegemonik ve indirgemeci politikalarını meşrulaştıracağını belirtmektedir. Bu durum ise makalede 'onlar'laşma süreci olarak kuramsallaştırılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Barry Hines, *A Kestrel for a Knave*, Onlar-Biz İkilemi, 'Onlar'laşma.

## INTRODUCTION

*A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968), written by Barry Hines in the third person and set in Yorkshire in the 1960s, tells the story of a day in the life of a working-class boy, Billy Casper, who is about to leave the school and expected to work down the pit like others, including his half-brother, Jud, in the region. In the novel, Billy, mistreated at home and at school, defiantly resists to being part of any form of social participation; instead, he finds solace and feels significant when he finds and trains a kestrel. Despite appearing somewhat simplistic in terms of its content, the novel gives a voice to those in the English working-class milieu and realistically delineates the harsh conditions of post-war Britain such as poverty, politics of education and lack of prospects for working-class young men through the eyes of its protagonist.

In terms of its treatment of raw materials belonging to the working-class culture and of its indirect emphasis on external economic and social factors shaping the lives of its characters, the novel, in contradistinction to the arguments regarding a new classlessness, fictionalises the class-divided nature of English society and its impact on the downtrodden and is, therefore, reminiscent of a traditional working-class narration. The novel, through its indirect engagement with the industrial process and the dynamics of the money-oriented world in the 1960s, reflects English society as divided between 'them' and 'us' through its aesthetics of literature, revealing the class-conscious attitude of the English working class which reinforces solidarity and fosters a self-conscious sense of having the same class identity. This article will, in this context, explore the novel's portrayal of the them-us dichotomy and of the real nature of the socio-historical context of class consciousness in relation to the complex political and cultural circumstances in England during the 1960s. The article will also critically lay out the process of the ideological interpellation of the working class – which I refer to as the process of '*them*'isation – into the social relations of production through the analysis of the domestic, cultural and political tendencies of Billy.

## THE DICHOTOMY OF 'THEM' AND 'US'

The Manichean dichotomy of 'them' and 'us', metonymically symbolising the class antagonism discursively constructed on the opposition between 'them' and

'us', is actually one of the recurrent themes in English literature, especially in post-war English literature, and was extensively theorised by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life*. In order to explore the central bias of the working class in Britain towards the upper class in terms of mind-set, lifestyle, culture and political tendency, Hoggart, though in a somewhat reductionist and deterministic manner, proposes that the world of 'them', according to the poor, includes bosses, the policemen, soldiers, civil servants, parsons, local authority employees, teachers or anyone or any institution representing the ideological interests of the Establishment:

'They' are 'the people at the top', 'the higher-ups', the people who give you your dole, call you up, tell you to go to war, fine you ... 'get yer in the end', 'aren't really to be trusted', 'talk posh', 'are all twisters really', 'never tell yer owt' (e.g. about a relative in hospital), 'clap yer in click', 'will do y' down if they can' ... 'Treat y' like muck'. (2009: 58)

Alan Sillitoe, a post-war English affiliated with the Angry Young Men movement just like Barry Hines, similarly analyses the psychological condition of being poor in relation to the socio-political order of Britain and focuses on the perception and comprehension of the working class regarding the world around them:

The poor know of only two classes in society ... [They] are *them* and *us*. Them are those who tell you what to do, who drive a car, use a different accent, are buying a house in another district, deal in cheques and not money, pay your wages, collect rent and telly dues ... can't look you in the eye ... hand you the dole or national assistance money; the shopkeeper, copper, schoolteacher, doctor, health visitor, the man wearing the white dog-collar. (1964: 127)

Such an ideological positioning of the working class towards the agents of 'them' seems to comply with the Marxist conception of class and class consciousness and might actually be attributed to the distribution of the means of production. In the seventh chapter of *Capital III* where the manuscript breaks off, Karl Marx offers three basic categories – bourgeoisie, petit-bourgeoisie and working class – and gives a definition of class with respect to an individual's objective position within the relations of production. Subjective feelings, level of income, lifestyle or patterns of income do not locate an individual's class position (Callinicos, 1987: 4-6). Rather, his location within the social relations of production and whether he owns the means of production determine his *objective* class position. Considering this argument, the antagonistic attitude of the English working class towards 'them', which explicitly stands for the bourgeois class owning the means of production, purchasing labour power in return for a low wage and not selling its labour power, might be viewed as a revolutionary class consciousness. Positioning themselves in opposition to 'them', the English working class define themselves as part of 'us', and this challenges and fragments the totality of the hegemonic discourses regarding new classlessness and creates internal frontiers within English society through the discursive formation of

new social antagonisms. However, since the them-us contradiction does not turn into a unified, conscious and collectivised struggle that has the potential to result in a radical change on behalf of the working class, it would not be wrong to argue that this ‘consciousness’ is defiant and self-centred and perceived *more* in cultural terms than in economic terms as I will attempt to reveal through a close reading of the novel.

In the novel, ‘them’ live in detached houses shielded from the road and from each other by trees planted at regular intervals; wear suits; have carpeted halls and stairs with fresh daffodils; and own radios and posh cars (16-20). ‘Us’, on the other hand, have no proper access to essential household items and to many facilities and services and are pushed into extreme poverty: “There were no curtains up ... He shivered and scuffled around the sheet, seeking a warm place” (9-11). Despite the fact that the unequal accumulation of wealth between the two classes implicitly highlights social stratification and economic disparity in English society, the them-us antagonism is *fundamentally* expressed through the inner and outer conflicts of Billy Casper and unfolded in relation to his cultural, social and economic milieu. The apathy of the protagonist towards the police officers, one of the representatives of ‘them’, is, for instance, apparent in his conversations with Mr. Farthing in the school. Billy, saying that he has “reformed” (103) and is no longer in trouble with the police, complains of that “police allus come to [his] house, even though [he has] done nowt for ages” and that “they don’t believe a word [he says]” (103). His discomfort with the police is not actually about fear but mistrust and anger because he, as a young boy growing up in a working-class area, perceives them as someone who represents authority, law, the Establishment, and the interests of ‘them’ – although this is not based on politically-motivated concrete ideas in their distinct theoretical, cultural and historical context – and who watches and bullies them perpetually.

William Woodruff in *The Road to Nab End* (2002), an autobiographical account of his life and a social commentary on poverty and impoverished life conditions in a weaving community in the UK during the Great Depression, makes the point that they were brought up to distrust and avoid the police officers since they defended the rich (184-5), while Richard Hoggart argues that the working-class people believe that “the police always look after themselves”, that “they’ll stick by one another till they’re blue in the face” and that “the magistrates always believe in them” (2009: 58). Considering these arguments, Billy has a similar tendency towards the police officers, but he mainly locates his position in relation to his personal impulses driving his social and cultural experiences rather than embracing a revolutionary class-conscious attitude against the disciplinary mechanisms of ‘them’ which interpellate him into cultural, social and historical norms of English society and indoctrinate him about who he is and how he should act: “I feel like goin’ our and’ doin’ summat just to spite ‘em sometimes” (103).

In the novel, the reactions of the working-class characters towards the education system, schooling and teachers reproduce the traditional dichotomy of

'them' and 'us' and, to a certain degree, reveal the contradictory consciousness of them stuck between class identity and upward mobility. The working-class characters, becoming aware of their class limitations in a non-politicised atmosphere, are interested in taking up educational activities in order to move up the social ladder and to be respected more; however, they also have strong doubts of the value of education and are worried about the fact that their children might change and act as one of 'them': "I didn't want to be a teacher. To my mind they were on a par with the police, agents of repression. No, it just seemed like a very pleasant way of perpetuating my adolescence" (Hines, 2009: 86). This mistrustfulness and scepticism towards the school system intrinsically seem to be in line with the argument that education system is linked to the interest of the ruling class, that schools are one of the most significant legitimising forces of modern capitalist society and that schools function as an instrument of the class rule of the bourgeoisie. As V. Lenin points out in one of his speeches:

The bourgeoisie themselves, who advocated this principle, made their own bourgeois politics the cornerstone of the school system, and tried to reduce schooling to the training of docile and efficient servants of the bourgeoisie, to reduce even universal education from top to bottom to the training of docile and efficient servants of the bourgeoisie, of slaves and tools of capital. They never gave a thought to making the school a means of developing the human personality. (28 August 1918)

Nonetheless, the education system is not *consciously* viewed as an ideological state apparatus or as one of the tacit modes of control practices, through which the ideological hegemony of the ruling class is exercised and exerted, the realities<sup>1</sup> of 'them', the Establishment, are passively justified by means of decentralised units of control and the social relations of production are naturalised and materialised. (Althusser, 1971; Bourdieu, 1984; Hardt and Negri, 1994; Gramsci, 1999; Deleuze, 1992).

The reason of the scepticism is, again, self-centred and defiant and primarily about the fact that they do not want to lose their local and cultural autonomy despite having an enduring working-class identity. It is more like a reaction to the mechanism that aims to forcefully discipline and morally integrate them into 'them' world. To give an example, in an episode, Billy, because of daydreaming during the Lord's Prayer, is told to see Mr. Gryce, the strict head teacher in the school, and gets caned: "It's fantastic isn't it, that in this day and age, in this super-scientific, all-things-bright-and-splendiferous age, that the only way of running this school efficiently is by the rule of the cane." (69). In another episode, Billy attends a physical education class and is forced to wear clothes that do not fit since he does

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<sup>1</sup> This is apparent in one of the episodes in the novel in which the teacher asks the students to clarify what fact is: "The things that we read about in newspapers, or hear on the news ... all these are facts. Have you got that? Is that clear?" (72).

not have a kit and his mother refuses to pay for it. Billy is told to play as a goalkeeper, but he intentionally lets in the winning goal<sup>2</sup> in order to end the class. Mr. Sugden, the teacher, consequently humiliates him in front of his classmates and forces him to take a cold shower. Even though such disobedient actions of Billy might metaphorically stand for the fact that he undermines the ideological and moral hegemony of the status quo, the codes of his rebellion or resistance remain within an isolated, self-centred and private sphere and are unable to challenge the cultural, social, political, moral and economic realities of ‘them’.

Language functions as a battleground, and the use of language is significant in terms of perpetuating hierarchical power relations and discursively establishing and imposing *the* reality. In the novel, Billy uses the Midlands working-class accent by omitting one sound in a word or skipping a syllable, which, indeed, liberates the voice of the protagonist from the constraints of standard English, interweaves spoken and written forms of speech and reflects linguistically accurate representations of the working-class identities in a more realistic way. Rather than conforming to the use of a more acceptable speech pattern and prioritising the Queen’s English, the language of ‘them, Hines’ protagonist, through the vernacular language, an exterior symbol of a collective identity, challenges the homogenising representational codes of the cultural/linguistic hegemony of ‘them’ and rejects a hierarchy of discourse dominated by a superior accent, the true one.

The use of the vernacular language by Billy is, of course, not a conscious or tactical or strategic choice. As an atomised and inward-looking character, he is probably not even aware of the process of ‘soft’ resistance and is wholly informed by his own personal concerns and benefits, which creates a vicious circle and does not eradicate the social and economic forces creating his own desperate situation and alienating him to his own existential being and to others. To give an example, on one occasion, Billy would like to borrow some books on falconry in the local library, but he is not allowed to get any books since he is not a member of the library. While attempting to convince the librarian – one of ‘them’ – of the fact that he urgently needs the books, Billy feels abased and humiliated by the librarian’s patronising manners and consistent use of standard English: “No! Now go on home and get that form signed ... Now what?” (41). However, rather than verbally rejecting this situation that creates a cultural and linguistic distance between him and ‘them’, he

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<sup>2</sup> In spirit, the novel is close to Alan Sillitoe’s “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner” (1959) in which the governor of the prison, the “in-law bloke” (9), attempts to integrate Smith, the “out-law bloke” (9), into the mainstream values of the society. He asks Smith to be “an honest man” and win the cross-country race through “hard honest work” (9); however, Smith, for his own beliefs and sense of honesty, does not compromise and deliberately loses the race in order not to sell his soul to the governor. Like Billy’s letting in the winning goal on purpose, the disobedience of Smith is also practically defiant rather than revolutionary since his self-centredness is exercised in his own interests and has nothing to do with his awareness of the clash between labour and capital (Bağlama, 2017, 14-6).

slips the book entitled *A Falconer's Handbook* inside his jacket and leaves the library. On another occasion, Billy meets the youth employment officer – an agent of state bureaucracy, part of 'them' – and has a serious conversation about where he would like to work in the future. The officer disdainfully asks many questions and asserts his authority and superiority through his dialogues in 'proper' English: "I say, are you listening ... I haven't got all day you know ... Don't you have any hobbies at all ... What's the matter with you lad? Sit down, I haven't finished yet" (171). Despite the fact that Billy does not cross over into 'them' accent and unwittingly sustains his own community's linguistic practices and registers, he does not even think about reacting to the manners of the officer; he, instead, quietly listens to the officer, stares at the leaflet given by him and runs straight out of the schools and all the way home after the meeting is over.

The reduction of Billy, a fictional representative of the socio-historical reality of the English working class, to a passively instrumental role within the mechanisms of 'them' world results in his alienation, and his voluntary acceptance of the situation, which is another defiant action, might be interpreted as an escape from the perceived unpleasantness of his life. Billy, failing in the school and having a disintegrated family with no bright future vision, feels powerless, meaningless and victimised and, therefore, would like to find a purpose and compensate for his sense of entrapment and directionlessness by actualising himself through different inward and outward escape mechanisms. Such escape mechanisms as finding peace in nature and training a kestrel absorb his anger, create an illusory authority-free space, where he gains a relative control over the processes shaping his day-to-day experiences, lead him to internalise the narratives of the realities of 'them' and subsequently integrates him into the world of 'them' by his own consent, which I refer to as *the process of 'them'isation*. In other words, Billy identifies himself with the pernicious and inaccurate representation of the self, in which he interiorises and performs the discursively constructed cultural and moral codes of the dominant power structures, 'them', and the real nature of his identity is reconstituted and remoulded through major social and political institutions of 'them'. He, as the victimised, becomes the victimiser.

In the novel, Billy, away from the school, the family and the deadening routine of his life, pays close attention to the visual beauty of nature, listens to it, finds tranquillity and feels "fresher" (51). He finds a young kestrel in the wood, keeps it in a shed, speaks to it all the time, feeds it with beef, mice and birds and leaves everything behind. Finding peace in nature might, at first glance, have positive connotations; however, the immediacy of Billy to the natural world reveals the ambiguous position and duality of him and actually passivates him within the isolated, self-centred and individualistic sphere of 'them' order rather than locating the deep sources of his personal anger within the relations of production, in particular within the them-us dichotomy perceived more in economic terms. The case of Billy is, for that reason, different and needs to be contextualised in order to put forward that he makes use of what nature offers in his own favour, as in the example of



exerting his power and domination over the kestrel by constantly giving orders to it, and *daftly imitates* the daily practices of the cultural and moral codes of ‘them’: He trains the kestrel and expects it to be obedient to him, a situation which he himself experiences in the school. In an episode, Billy, for instance, comes across a little boy pedalling a tricycle in tight circles and intimidates him with his kestrel in order to assert his superiority: “It kills little kids on bikes ... It’s a piece o’ leg off a kid it caught yesterday. When it catches ‘em it sits on their handlebars and rips ‘em to pieces. Eyes first” (62). Billy’s superiority complex and tendency towards cruelty might, in this regard, be interpreted as a reflection of the transformation of his human nature and individuality in relation to essentialist constructions ascribed by ‘them’, and this, despite different forms of antagonisms between ‘them’ and ‘us’, materialises the hegemonic and reductionist politics of power relations and subordinates ‘us’ to the prevailing mode of production, capitalism.

To comment, Billy, in the class on fact and fiction with Mr. Farthing, is asked to tell a story and Billy starts to explain his adventures with the kestrel regarding how he has caught and trained it. He suddenly captures the attention of the class and the teacher through fluent descriptions and a well-organised spontaneous demonstration and uses a couple of technical words that he has mastered on falconry training. The teacher, unable to understand Billy and asking him to clarify and spell the terms like “jesses” (80), “bating” (81) and “creance” (83), constantly nods and finds the true story very “exciting” (83). Then, feeling self-confident and greeted by a splatter of applause, Billy, despite being shy and antisocial, even finds the courage to ask questions to the teacher. After the class, Mr. Farthing, deeply interested in the kestrel, visits Billy and watches how Billy commands it. During the show, Billy confidently tells Mr. Farthing to stop, not to breathe deeply and to keep looking away from the kestrel. Saying “sorry” (145), Mr. Farthing, at the end of the show, applauds Billy softly.

Considering these occasions, Billy, taking control of the signifying system in the class and telling the teacher what to do during the show, exercises his own superiority over the teacher, another representative of ‘them’. Since Billy “manages to subvert the hierarchy of intellect on which the school institution rests” (Alcala, 2016, 383), the relationship between the teacher and the pupil is radically deconstructed, and this role subversion might be interpreted as an effective form of the resistance to the Establishment and of the deconstruction of the systematic interpellation of ‘us’ as the subordinate and the weak within a ‘them’ episteme. However, this does not, in reality, interrupt the domination of ‘them’ and, rather than undermining the binary paradigms, redefines Billy’s own identity through the narratives of ‘them’. To put it simply, Billy, though not consciously, is in need of getting rid of his sense of inadequacy, powerlessness and inferiority and, therefore, creates his own sphere of dominance and power in order to be more visible. Internalising the cults of the money-oriented world, such as social-property relations and self-centredness, and practically acting like ‘them’, he, albeit through modes of illusionary self-fulfilment, actualises himself through giving orders to the kestrel and

telling the teacher what to do, and, despite his discomfort with the agencies of 'them', seeks for 'them' recognition and acknowledgment, which is, again, a defiant attitude.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that the English working class might have a tendency to perceive and comprehend the world around them as divided between 'them' and 'us' and that such an ideological positioning against 'them' might bear some similarities with the Marxist conception of class consciousness, the them-us contradiction and structural inequalities in society are perceived more in cultural and personal terms. The lack of a class-conscious approach based on the exploiter and the exploited does not, therefore, result in a radical transformation or does not bring a permanent solution to the shared experience of injustice and inequality of the members of the working class that have a strong sense of group membership. This, on the contrary, confiscates their human nature, reshapes their consciousness and integrates them into the totality of the social relations of production. Billy's defiant, daft and self-centred reactions and his gradual moral, ideological and cultural interpellation into the world of them – the process of 'them'isation – in order to escape from the perceived entrapment in the working-class milieu might, in this sense, be a representative of the real nature of the socio-cultural context of the English working class in its historical actuality. However, this does not necessarily mean that the working class have a homogeneous and fixed culture and that diverse subjectivities can be presented as a unified group since it would, in itself, be a fallacy.

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