



Literary Contexts: 80s British Fiction

Billy Elliot

Transcript

Punk: *The people's movement should be a people's movement, not government.*

Narrator: The 1980s. It's a decade we associate with big hair and colourful fashion. A time of MTV, VHS, sitcoms, sneakers and synthesizers. This was Billy Elliot's generation. Yet this slick surface masked a darker reality.

The characters in *Billy Elliot* reflect the struggles of different groups within British society, from the miners who battled the government, to the gay community who toiled in the face of the AIDS epidemic and widespread discrimination. It was also a time when women fought for equal rights and gender roles began to change. This period of tension and social upheaval impacted the motivations and experiences of different groups in different ways.

By the early 20th century, coal was one of England's key industries. At its peak in 1920, 1.2 million people were employed as coal miners. With the formation of the National Coal Board in 1947, the coal industry and its profits were now publicly owned. During the 1950s, power plants began reducing their use of coal and relying more on oil, gas and nuclear energy. The British coal industry faced increasing competition from overseas mines with lower wages and production costs. Many businesses found it cheaper to import coal from abroad. As demand for British coal declined, mine closures took away jobs and lowered wages. Strikes were mounted in response throughout the 1960s and '70s. The 1974 strike was especially disruptive to the country's power supply, causing the government to declare a state of emergency.

When the conservative party came to power that same year, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made immediate changes to trade union laws to considerably reduce union influence. In March 1984, the National Coal Board announced its intention to close 20 pits, which would result in the loss of 20,000 jobs.

Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mine Workers, called a national strike against the pit closures. More than 142,000 miners across the country joined the strike. *Billy Elliot* was filmed in Easington Colliery, a real coal mining town in east Durham, where more than 1 800 members of the NUM participated in the strike. There was immense solidarity among





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mining communities. Striking miners and their families stood united at the pit gates to stop the transportation of coal to outside businesses. It would also restrict the entrance of strike breakers, also known as scabs.

Reporter: *Only one miner ventured through the picket line on foot. When the colliery buses arrived, tempers flared because the men inside were insulated from the Yorkshire men's taunts.*

Narrator: Scabs were regularly ostracised from their communities and often became targets of violence. However, many men were forced to return to work simply out of desperation.

Witness: *Well I think it goes farther than picketing. In fact, I'll go as far as to say what we've witnessed this morning is terrorism.*

Narrator: Those who continued to strike had to rely on the dole to make ends meet. Many of the women from the mining communities formed women's action groups, which helped organise soup kitchens and food parcels.

Miner's wife: *Myself, and I know a lot of other women, we're all at back of our husbands. We feel more at side of him, not at back of him.*

Miner: *We've gone through all the pain barriers and Margaret Thatcher has tried to kick us to death. She's tried to starve us out, and it doesn't work. I don't know what she'll do next. She'll probably issue 'em with rubber bullets to shoot us. That's what she'll try to do. But it'll not work.*

Narrator: The government's condemnation of the strikes and frequent news reports of violence on the picket lines encouraged public opinion to turn against the miners and their tactics.

Thatcher: *You saw the scenes which went on in television last night. I must tell you that what we've got is an attempt to substitute the rule of the mob for the rule of law, and it must not succeed.*

Narrator: With the government refusing to compromise and frustration growing among the mining community, a vote was called by the NUM in March 1985. The majority voted in favor of returning to work. After 12 months and 11 000 arrests, the strike was officially called off. In the 10 years





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that followed, employment in the coal industry and the number of pits in operation fell by more than 90%. Mining towns endured widespread unemployment and economic decline, the legacy of which can still be felt today.

In 1980s Britain, stereotypically male traits, like strength and athleticism, especially among the working class, were often enhanced by participation in overly-masculine sports, such as football and boxing. Ballet, meanwhile, was traditionally seen as an elitist and middle class activity for girls and women whose families could afford to pay for dance lessons. Homosexuality was a taboo subject in England for the first half of the 20th century. Homosexual activity was illegal under the Buggery Act of 1533, and gay men were at risk of being prosecuted and imprisoned if caught. It wasn't until 1967 that the Sexual Offences Act legalised sexual acts between men in the privacy of their homes.

In 1988, the conservative government introduced Section 28 of the Local Government Act, which prohibited the discussion of homosexuality in British schools. Consequently, there was very little support or education for young people when it came to homosexual issues.

Male voice: *My teacher said to me, "We knew what was happening to you. We knew what you were going through and we couldn't do anything."*

Narrator: The arrival of AIDS and HIV at the turn of the 1980s caused the gay community to be further stigmatised within society. By 1985, over 20 000 AIDS cases had been reported worldwide.

Interviewee: *A friend of mine who works in a hair dressing salon, his employer tried to insist that he go and have an AIDS test simply because he was a gay man and for no other reason at all. He wasn't showing any symptoms.*

Narrator: Conservative and heteronormative attitudes were extremely prevalent in British society in the mid-'80s. A British social attitudes survey in 1984 found that 49% of people believed a man's job was to earn money while the woman looked after her home and family. Up until the 1960s, it was common for women to give up their career ambitions at a young age in order to raise a family. Those who entered the workforce were often





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relegated to low-paid, low-status jobs with little expectation of moving on to better things.

However, with the arrival of the contraceptive pill in England in 1961 and the introduction of the Abortion Act in 1967, women grew more empowered to be able to choose whether to have children. Furthermore, in 1968, a group of women at the Ford Motor Company plant in Dagenham went on strike to protest their male colleagues earning 15% more than them. This led to the passing of the 1970 Equal Pay Act, which stated that women could no longer be paid less than men for doing the same job. That same year, the first National Women's Liberation Conference took place at Ruskin college in Oxford to discuss women's rights. Feminist activism and literature continued to flourish over the course of the decade.

Reporter 2: *But most girls today expect more than just marriage out of life. And the fact that the number of girls who are now staying on in sixth forms have more than doubled in six years seems to confirm that.*

Narrator: By the 1980s, women were afforded greater opportunities relating to higher education and employment. Yet the fight against discrimination and prescribed gender roles would continue well into the 1990s and beyond.

Female voice: *When we used to walk onto the floor and go up and ask a job or a price, and they'd sort of come up right behind you, as though you were from Mars, and they'd stand there watching you and they'd crowd around, and just look at you and wait for you to make a mistake. And then they'd jeer and laugh and sort of shout.*

Narrator: *Billy Elliot* unfolds against a backdrop of severe discord in British society. A range of groups battled against hopelessness, inequality and oppression. Yet within the film, we also see a light at the end of the tunnel for the younger characters: Billy, Michael and Debbie. They represent a more progressive future, pointing towards the attitudes of the time the film was made.

