Billy Elliot

Billy Elliot is more than a typical Cinderella story. It is an acute depiction of class struggle and the scathing reality of inequality within society. Becoming a ballerina is in itself not an extraordinary feat, but what makes Billy’s story worth telling are the obstacles he had to endure in the process. Billy Elliot cannot be truly appreciated without understanding the sociological implications of Billy’s environment and the extent of its influence on Billy.

From the get-go, Billy Elliot paints a vivid picture of the strife of the British working class under Thatcher. Billy’s father and brother are members of the National Union of Mine Workers in the midst of a strike against managing authorities. Animus among workers against the government and the upper classes, albeit always high in the particularly class conscious society of Great Britain, is especially rife, and the movie closes in on the counterculture of the workers against the establishment through the lives of Billy’s father and brother. Billy and his family live in a tight working-class neighborhood where they all carry a strong sense of community and unity in their rebellion against the upper classes and authorities. This is clear in the scene where Tony (Billy’s brother) flees from police while his neighbors allow him to run through their homes and assist him in his escape. The father and Tony are both miners and take pride in their union membership, a fact that can be examined in their strict adherence to union action and the implicit codes of honor they tout in scenes such as when they ran into a deflector in the grocery store and when the brother catches the father about to break strike and dissuades him. Their pride in their class is inextricably linked to the emphasis on machoism that pervades the entire counterculture. Men are seen engaging in “manly” activities (e.g., boxing) and calling each other out for their femininity throughout the movie. Furthermore, there exists a strong aversion in their minds towards homosexuality or concepts associated to homosexuality, leading to the wont use of the word “poof” as an offensive slang. Billy himself is severely reprimanded by his father and brother on several occasions for his fixation with dancing and pursuit of ballet, being called a “wanker” in the process. The model of masculinity that the working-class men of Billy’s neighborhood aspire to is highly contextual and is defined in relation to their blue-collar identity. Sons proudly follow their fathers to become miners without giving thought to any other potential career paths, as is seen in the case of Billy’s brother. Billy himself is seen struggling with the choice between becoming a miner or becoming a ballerina, an alternative that would not have emerged had it not been for his encounter with Mrs. Wilkinson and her suggestion of auditioning for the Royal Ballet School. Their blue-collar work and macho sensitivity are key components of the counterculture prevalent among the working-class and a pivotal part of their identity, an identity rooted in class. It is interesting to see the mellowing of this attitude among Billy’s father, Tony, and their male friends as they witness Billy’s talents and begin to see Billy’s success and therefore ascension in the social ladder as a feasible prospect. The father, who was among the most adamantly opposed to Billy’s dancing at the start of the film, grows comfortable enough with his son’s dancing that he not only permits Billy to audition for the Royal Ballet School but takes him to the audition and actively helps out. In the audition scene, the Father’s demeanor makes it clear that he is trying to suppress his usual countercultural ways and assimilate into high society (dressing nicely, speaking politely, etc.). This indicates that participation in the counterculture is not so much a choice as it is a necessity borne on them via the accident of birth, a necessity they are willing to shed as soon as it ceases to be a necessity (i.e., as they ascend the social ladder and escape the working-class). Such is the depiction of working-class counterculture in Billy Elliot, a counterculture that chains people to the class they were born in and renders them socially immobile.

Besides culture, language also plays an important role in delineating class differences in Billy Elliot. There are two types of languages observed in the movie: restricted code and elaborate code. When Billy’s father scolds Billy about his dancing, he never specifically addresses the reasons why he disapproves. Even when pressed by Billy to explain his position, the father responds aggressively by yelling at Billy for questioning his authority. In this scene, the father employs restricted code where he does not comprehensively explain motives or reasons and instead demands unquestioning obedience. Restricted code is observed in many of the other working-class characters of the film, in contrast to elaborate code used by Mrs. Wilkinson and her family. Mrs. Wilkinson is of a higher social standing than Billy’s family. One indicator of her class is her speech. On several occasions she encourages Billy to stand up to his father and reason with him, lacking the understanding which Billy has that his father does not respond to reasoning and discussion. She even makes an unfruitful attempt to reason with Billy’s family herself. Her husband also seems to speak in the same, comprehensive and explanatory manner as her. When Billy visits their house and curiously asks the father to explain his dissenting position on the strikes, he takes the time to, albeit confrontationally, explain to Billy his criticism instead of berating Billy with an expletive as Billy’s father would have likely done. The employment of different codes of speech is especially evident in Billy’s interview scene. In it, the interviewers, consisting of upper-class individuals with clean accents and proper English, question Billy and Billy’s father on dancing and their motives for joining the school. Billy responds to their intricate questions with “I don’t know” and is unable to express his thoughts or motives behind dancing. His father also responds to questions by affirming or negating but fails to provide much information further than that. The frequent use of fillers by Billy such as “sort of,” “like,” and “dunno” are also indicative of restricted code. The disparity in the language codes employed by Billy and his interviewers, the working-class and the upper-class, make communication visibly difficult between the two and testify to the effects of language on hampering social mobility.

A central focus of this movie is Billy’s relationship with his family. The movie follows Billy’s growth. His family, specifically the growing environment that they created for him, is pivotal to his development. The process of Billy’s development can be described as accomplishment of natural growth. Billy’s father hardly involved himself in Billy’s life besides a few instances including Billy’s boxing lessons and his ballet towards the end of the movie. Billy was free to do as he pleased when his father and brother were out during the day picketing or working. His actions were seldom monitored, allowing him a great degree of freedom to hang out with his friend Michael until late or practice his dancing behind his family’s back. However, he was strongly bound to his family and obligated to take care of his grandmother. As mentioned earlier, the language spoken between him and his family members was blunt and curt, and besides angry confrontations that were in response to direct situations that needed to be addressed, there were no conversations or long talks between individuals in the family. All of these are characteristic of working-class child rearing methods, summed up as accomplishment of natural growth. Lack of encouragement to pursue his desires and entrapment within the family that are seen in the movie contributed to a feeling of constraint in Billy which manifested in his nervous breakdown in front of Mrs. Wilkinson and his fear and frustration when Mrs. Wilkinson argues with his brother and father. Pursuing ballet could have been much easier had it not been for the constraint that Billy’s upbringing had put on his shoulders.

So, with all these odds stacked against Billy, how was he able to enter the Royal Ballet School and leave his old life to enter a new one previously unimaginable? In short, it was Mrs. Wilkinson. Before Billy began taking ballet classes from her, he was convinced of following in his family’s footsteps to become a miner. That was all he knew; the only option available, or even conceivable, to him. That was his standing in the game, and he knew to act accordingly for children from his background did not have any other choice. What changed his mind was Mrs. Wilkinson who had an entirely different “habitus,” or feel for the game. Mrs. Wilkinson was of a higher SES and richer in cultural capital. When Billy visits her house after fighting with his father, we get a glimpse of her living as a member of the middle class. She owns a car and lives in a moderately large house indicating an abundance in financial capital. However, more impressive is the eastern artwork on her wall, expensive looking china, decorations and lavish furniture, all of a refined, bourgeois taste. This scene shows us how amply she possesses cultural capital and signifies the difference in their worlds which explains their difference in habitus. To her, attending the Royal Ballet School was not a dream or an impossibility. She understood what it took to get there and furthermore felt a sense of entitlement that she (Billy) deserved it, a sense that Billy himself did not share which he made clear in his harangue against her after one stressful practice. Furthermore, to Billy, dancing was a passion, something he did to make himself feel better. It was never a tool for escalation within the social hierarchy. Billy had no concept of the value of an education and the importance of going to school and acquiring institutional merit. It was Mrs. Wilkinson who had translated his passion for ballet into something more by instructing him to take the audition and join the school. By following Mrs. Wilkinson and benefiting from the advantages of her habitus, Billy was able to find his way to the audition.

At the audition, the conflict of social class that runs deep throughout the film reaches a climax. Perhaps the most important sociological concept in analyzing the audition scene is cultural capital. It is evident that Billy and his family lack cultural capital. They do not own any books, none of them are well versed with manners and social decorum, and although not clearly stated in dialogue, it does not seem like any of them have graduated college or have an impressive educational track record. Their community library is a small caravan filled with a moderate supply of books, suggesting that the community as a whole severely lacks in objectified cultural capital. The tapes that they own are all pop music and not classic. The only thing they had in their house that was close to objectified cultural capital was their piano which they deemed unnecessary and discarded in the middle of the movie. In one scene where Billy is speaking to Mrs. Wilkinson, we find out that he is unfamiliar with the classical story of Swan Lake. These all point to the deficiency of cultural capital in Billy’s family, which is juxtaposed with the culturally rich members of high society in the audition scene. When Billy is in the changing room preparing for the auditions, he alone looks out of place and under immense pressure while the other boys seem comfortable with their setting. One boy hears that Billy is from Durham and immediately associates it with a famous cathedral, a fact about the city that Billy himself did not know. This speaks volumes to the disparity in cultural capital between Billy and the other boys. In the following scene, when Billy is receiving a checkup, the medical examiner assumes that his name is William, which would be more typical of a middle-class child, and not Billy. Billy is often used as a nickname for William but is seldom used as the formal name of a child in wealthier circles. In this way, names also reveal class-based taste and can lead to varying expectations formed by people who hear them. By assuming Billy’s name to be formally William, the examiner reveals that he does not expect anyone outside of the wealthy class to be auditioning and is subconsciously ruling out the possibility that Billy is from a working-class background. Similarly, later when Billy says his name to the interviewers, one of them bemusedly asks for his name again. This might be interpreted as bewilderment towards the unusual name of Billy. We can further observe the effects of disparity in cultural capital in the audition scene when Billy runs to his father and says that he changed his mind about wanting to the take the audition. Billy had been uncomfortable to the environment of the school from the start due to the high levels of cultural capital he was not accustomed to, and his rejection of the environment can be likened to the self-selection effect. The self-selection effect is the effect of cultural capital differences causing working-class children to feel uneasy and reject environments abundant in cultural capital such as schools. Likewise, Billy is so uneasy about the school and its bourgeois ways that he begs his dad to go skip the audition and hits a fellow examinee after his audition from confusion and feeling threatened. In order to be accepted and fit into the upper class, one must be not only financially wealthy, but must also be privy to the intricate ways and elusive sensibilities of the upper class. The whole audition scene emphasizes the challenges in upward social mobility as a result of cultural capital.

Billy Elliot is a movie following a young, beleaguered boy’s escape from his modest roots and leap into higher society. The concepts of counterculture, language, child-rearing, habitus and cultural capital facilitate a deeper understanding of the difficulties that Billy faced in his journey. Although this movie ends happily with us celebrating the ultimate success of Billy Elliot, his case is a minority. In reality, it is important to understand that environmental constraints and the precariousness of birth robs people of opportunities to achieve what Billy was able to achieve. Billy’s story is heart-warming and inspiring, but we cannot allow ourselves to be completely sanguine until the conditions which made Billy’s story a miracle are addressed and controlled for every individual on this earth, granting all an equal opportunity to realize their true selves. (Total words: 2450).