

Billy Elliot by Melvin Burgess

Background:

Billy Elliot is set against the background of the 1984/5 Coal Miner's Strike in Northern England during Margaret Thatcher's administration, a defining moment in the economic and social history of the United Kingdom. The story shows how the son of one of these miners overcomes social prejudice to make his dream of being a ballet dancer come true.

Themes:

1. Coming of age and self-discovery:
Billy Elliot explores the growth and change of a pre-adolescent boy and his own discovery and acceptance of the fact that he is different from other boys of the same age.
2. Fulfilling one's dreams:
Billy's initiation into adolescence faces him with the challenge of standing up for his beliefs and dreams regardless of his social and economic background and expectations of society.
3. The father-son relationship:
Two generations clash due to their conflicting views of life, gender roles and the future. "Lads do football, boxing, or wrestling – not friggin' ballet!" complains Jackie when he learns that his son wants to be a ballet dancer. However, as Billy finds the courage to rebel and shows his talent to Jackie, the father overcomes his prejudices and decides to support him at any cost.
4. Class issues:
The Elliots represent the hardships of working-class miners during the mid-eighties in Northern England; the Wilkinsons reflect how the middle class is practically unaffected by such political developments in spite of being the victims of unemployment as well, and posh Londoners at the Royal Ballet School show how the upper class remains indifferent to what is happening at the time.
5. Gender issues:
Billy must struggle against society and his own family, since it is generally believed that ballet is either for girls or for gay boys. Both his father and his brother are shocked when they find out that Billy prefers ballet to boxing and that his best friend, Michael, is probably gay. But Billy never gives up and succeeds in challenging all stereotypes and getting support not only from his family but also from his community.

Chapter-by-chapter summary

<u>Chapter 1: Billy p.1</u> Billy Elliot is the son of a poor coal miner in Northern England who is very different from all the other boys: he prefers dancing to boxing and he wants to become a ballet dancer.	<u>Chapter 2: Jackie Elliot p.9</u> Billy, whose mother has died, stays at home taking care of his grandma, Nan, while his father and brother are on strike on the picket line fighting for the coal mines not to be closed.
<u>Chapter 3: Billy p.14</u> After taking his boxing lessons, Billy sees the girls in Mrs Wilkinson's class across the hall. As he watches them, he starts making the ballet moves and he soon ends up in the ballet class learning how to spin and even wearing ballet shoes himself.	<u>Chapter 4: Jackie Elliot p.28</u> Jackie worries about his two sons. Tony is always angry and acting crazy trying to start a fight with the scabs, since they want to break the strike. Billy spins round in circles saying he is practicing a boxing move but he looks like a ballet dancer. Jackie learns Billy has not taken his boxing classes for months and has kept the money.
<u>Chapter 5: Billy p.37</u> Jackie sees Billy taking ballet lessons and gets furious. They both argue and Billy runs away to Mrs Wilkinson's house. She tells Billy that he should audition for the Royal Ballet School and that she will teach him.	<u>Chapter 6: Michael p.48</u> Billy visits his friend, Michael, who is wearing his sister's clothes and lipstick. Billy tells Michael that he wants to be a ballet dancer in London. They both realise that they are different from the other boys their age in their town.
<u>Chapter 7: Billy p.54</u> Billy starts practicing for a ballet audition and gets very nervous as it gets closer. Tony and Jackie have a fight and Tony runs away. One night Billy sees his dead mother, Sarah, and feels that she wants him to dance at the audition.	<u>Chapter 8: Tony p.70</u> Tony attacks a policeman's horse and ends up in jail. Jackie and Billy go to court to fetch him and Billy misses his audition. Mrs Wilkinson gets furious and tells the Elliots what has happened. Tony can't believe that his brother wants to be a ballet dancer.
<u>Chapter 9: Jackie Elliot p.80</u> Jackie feels disappointed because the Social organised a Christmas dinner for all of the family members of the strikers. He misses his wife and feels like he can't give anything to his sons. He chops his wife's old piano for wood.	<u>Chapter 10: Billy p.83</u> Billy visits Michael and they drink his father's liquor and build a snowman using all the dirty snow in his yard. Michael puts Billy's hands under his jumper and kisses him on the cheek. They run to the Social together.

<p><u>Chapter 11: Michael p.86</u></p> <p>Michael, in a dancing skirt, and Billy, in his ballet shoes, stand in the boxing ring. While Billy is showing his friend some ballet moves his father enters the hall and sees them. Billy jumps, spins and dances for his father, who leaves the hall upset and very surprised with what he has seen.</p>	<p><u>Chapter 12: Jackie Elliot p.89</u></p> <p>Jackie goes to visit Mrs Wilkinson to find out whether Billy can still go to the audition. He wants to help Billy audition in London and he knows that he needs a lot of money for that. He decides to sell Billy's mother's ring.</p>
<p><u>Chapter 13: The Pawnbroker p.94</u></p> <p>The pawnbroker can see the dismay on Jackie's face when he comes in to sell his wife's ring. He offers him far less for the ring than what it's worth the Jackie's emotionally.</p>	<p><u>Chapter 14: Jackie Elliot p.98</u></p> <p>Jackie decides to go back to work as a last resort for raising money for Billy. As he enters the building the crowd around him roars and when Tony sees him he feels ashamed.</p>
<p><u>Chapter 15: Tony p.101</u></p> <p>Tony is shocked to see his father inside the bus entering the mines. He tries to stop him but Jackie tells him in tears that he is doing it for Billy's future. Tony persuades his father not to go work in the mines and they both ask George, Billy's former boxing teacher, for help. They soon organise a raffle to raise money for Billy's audition.</p>	<p><u>Chapter 16: George p.104</u></p> <p>Tony and Jackie approach George, Billy's old boxing coach, to help them raise funds for the audition. George can see that Jackie is stressed and sad and Tony is the one who helps by speaking to the people at the fundraising meeting. Tony and his father are close to each other again.</p>
<p><u>Chapter 17: Billy p.112</u></p> <p>Jackie and Billy go to London. Billy is very nervous and feels he doesn't belong there. When he finishes the audition, he is sad and hits a boy. The teachers call Billy and Jackie into the audition room. They tell Billy off for what he has done and they also ask him some questions.</p>	<p><u>Chapter 18: Jackie Elliot p.120</u></p> <p>All the family is nervous after the audition and, when the letter from the Royal Ballet School finally arrives, they are all gladly surprised to learn that Billy has got into the school. However, there is no party because the strike ends on that day and the workers have to go back to work because the bosses have won.</p>
<p><u>Chapter 19: Billy p.128</u></p> <p>Billy leaves for London and says goodbye to Mrs Wilkinson, his friends, neighbours and especially his mother.</p>	<p><u>Chapter 20: Jackie Elliot p.133</u></p> <p>Time goes by and Jackie and Tony go to London to see Billy on his first night as the main dancer in the Royal Ballet Company. Billy dances wonderfully and they are proud of him.</p>

Extra activities:

Watch the following videos to get more information about the novel:

1. Boys and dance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGpO6YCFNSU>

Now read what Billy says about dancing on p. 25-26 in the novel.

- a. What does Billy like about dancing? What doesn't he like about it?

Make a list like this:

Cons	Pros

2. Miner's strike, 1984, England,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxSWhMV70Lo>

- a. What do you see? Choose the correct words.

road blocks	gangs of policemen	horseback	motorbikes
long sticks	picket lines	fires	riot shields
children	lorries	school buses	dogs
			firewood

Now read Billy's account of the strike on p. 70-71 in the novel.

- b. List all the similarities between what you see in the video and what's in the novel. (Use the words in the box).
- c. List all the differences. (Use the words in the box).