

How Are the Working Class Depicted in British Cinema Post-2000 and is There Still a Gender Inequality Found in These Films?

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Preface from Niamh Henry

This essay will discuss how the working-class men and women found in British cinema post-2000 are depicted and whether gender inequality is found in these films based on how the characters are presented, both in comparison and separate to each other.

Read Time (Approx.): 14 minutes

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According to the Cambridge dictionary, Working-Class is defined as “a social group that consists of people who earn little money, often being paid only for the hours or days that they work, and who usually do physical work”. Gender inequality is defined as the “social process by which people are treated differently and disadvantageously, under similar circumstances, on the basis of gender” (Kent, 2006). Film and TV pre-2000 was rich with truthful portrayals of working-class stories, with films such as ‘My Left Foot’ (1989) and the ITV show ‘Auf Wiedersehen, Pet’ (1983), post-2000's British cinema is varied in its portrayal of these stories, with both positive and negative ways in which these tales are shown, whether this be through the harmful notion of the “poverty of aspiration,” which according to the organisation ‘Growing Up in Scotland’ is defined as ‘when children's less successful progress in education is blamed on their, or their parents' poor aspiration’ (2018). as seen in films such as *Billy Elliot* (2000) and *Fish Tank* (2009). On the other hand, working-class characters have been used in films to present the freedoms that the working-class have in historical films, as they are not burdened by the expectations that middle and upper-class people must abide by in order to be seen as acceptable in society, as seen in film’s such as the 2022 remake of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in which the working-class gamekeeper, Oliver, provides the main character of Connie Chatterley with a sense of freedom and escapism from her mundane world with her handicapped husband. Whether the depiction is positive or negative, this essay will explore the portrayals of working-class men and women, whether their stories are shown positively or negatively, and how the real-life experiences that these people go through are presented in modern media, and if there is still gender inequality found in these films.

One of the most common storytelling tropes in films depicting the life of the working-class is the end goal of the main character “escaping their situation”, with Stephen Daldry's coming of age film, “*Billy Elliot*” being a clear example of this trope. The film follows the titular 11-year-old and his life during the miners strikes that took place from 1984 to 1985 across Great Britain; an event that crippled working-class communities across the UK, as mining was often the primary source of income for many towns and villages. The strikes were most devastating to communities in the North-East, Midlands and Wales, with mining

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communities in the North-East such as Chester-Le-Street and Durham (where Billy Elliot is set) being crippled. This meant many workers were forced to travel from these areas to “*surviving pits on the coast, some of which actually tunneled under the sea, at Seaham, Easington and Horden.*” (Gildea & Philips, 2022). It is the historical background of this film that pushes the main narrative for the film; to achieve the success, he desires from being a famous dancer, Billy must leave behind his family, friends, and everything he knows to access better training and opportunities in London, an area that was unaffected by the miners strikes due to their being no mining communities there. It could be argued that what makes Billy such a compelling and likeable character to the audience is his aspirations and resilience to be a dancer, no matter the oppression he faces around him from his community for taking part in a typically unorthodox activity for a male, however it is important to acknowledge that being against men dancing was a common opinion at the time, therefore Billy’s father and brother being against him dancing was not the harmful ideal that it would be considered in modern times.

Whilst this is typically positive that a working-class character is presented as likeable to the audience, the story clearly abides by the theory of the poverty of aspiration, the myth that working-class communities are stuck in their socioeconomic status because they lack the drive and passion to escape their situation; this drives the stereotypical narrative that working-class people are lazy and undeserving of sympathy or understanding, because they are the cause of their own downfall. This was a common attitude towards those who did not or could not work in the 80’s. Conservative Party member Norman Tebbit who came from a working-class background and worked as an RAF pilot had an unsympathetic outlook towards the unemployed; when talking about his upbringing and his father being out of work, he claimed that his father “got on his bike and looked for work, and he kept looking until he found it” (Tebbit, 1983), which further backs up the opinion that those who aren’t working are doing it out of choice. This is a particularly negative and untrue stereotype, as it disregards the fact that people are unable to work for a multitude of reasons; in the context of Billy Elliot, mining was sometimes the only occupation available in these communities, therefore there were no other convenient job opportunities for these men.

According to the 1 in 5 – Raising Awareness of Child Poverty Project, “*negative stereotypes about impoverished children based on deficit assumptions can perpetuate inequality*” (Cummings et al., 2012). Because Billy does not abide by these negative stereotypes and has ambitious dreams, he is presented as a likeable character because (unlike his community) he

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has the drive and determination to escape his situation and better his socioeconomic status. The notion of “a poverty of aspiration” has primarily been used by the conservative government as a way of targeting and not providing working-class students and communities with the same amount of support as those from more affluent backgrounds, stating that working-class people are at fault for their own social status, instead of acknowledging that they are responsible for failing these communities by not providing equal funding and support to them. Therefore, this shows the exploitation of Billy Elliot as he presents the rest of the characters in the film as lacking ambition and therefore falling victim to the poverty of aspiration.

Of the fourteen named characters in Billy Elliot, only three of them are women. The most prominent female character in the film is Billy’s dance teacher, Sandra Wilkinson who was portrayed by the iconic Julie Walters. Mrs. Wilkinson is tough yet firm, being harsh on Billy throughout his dance training because she sees genuine potential in his abilities and wants him to achieve as much as she believes he can. Apart from Billy’s best friend Michael, Mrs. Wilkinson is one of the only characters who truly supports Billy in his journey to become a dancer. This shows a clear divide between men and women in the film, with the women (Mrs. Wilkinson and even Billy’s dementia-ridden grandmother who once dreamt of being a dancer in her youth) choosing to support Billy’s ambitions, whereas the men (Billy’s father, brother, and the rest of the mining community) abide by the patriarchal stereotype that dancing is a girl’s activity, therefore to a modern audience, the men would be presented as closed-minded and backwards.

The difference in presentation of men and women in Billy Elliot is further backed up by the linguistic model of “Difference”, first championed by language theorist Deborah Tannen in the 1990’s. According to her theory, men and women’s interactions with each other are doomed to be characterized by miscommunication, because of the separate way they use language. According to Tannen, men use language as a way of giving themselves “status” by asserting dominance, whereas women use language as a means of “support”, to support other people’s language use. Tannen’s work is based on stereotypes, meaning her work is not taken as seriously in the 21st century as it was when she first published her theories, however, the way men and women are portrayed in films during the early 2000’s is to support this theory, as their interactions are usually filled with arguments and disagreements. One scene in particular show this theory clearly, in which Mrs. Wilkinson tries to convince Jackie and Tony to let Billy audition for the Royal Ballet school; Mrs. Wilkinson uses supportive language towards “It’s where they teach the ballet”, whereas

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Tony uses aggressive language towards Mrs. Wilkinson and his brother to assert dominance and show his status in the house, “you come ‘round here talkin’ shite, and you, fuckin’ ballet?”. This presents Tony as closed-minded and unsupportive of his brother’s ambitions, therefore enforcing the poverty of aspiration within the older male characters. On the other hand, this gives the women in *Billy Elliot* a far more positive representation, as they are the only ones who are supportive of Billy from the beginning, and therefore go against the poverty of aspiration.

Fish Tank is a 2009 British film that follows the story of 15-year-old named Mia (portrayed by Katie Jarvis) who lives on an East London council estate with her mother and younger sister, both of whom she has a strained relationship with. She is seen as a member of the “underclass,” which is defined as the lowest socioeconomic class, containing the poor and unemployed, although it is more harshly described as “the chav remnants of decaying working class” (Jones, 2011). She is seen as an outcast in society, on the verge of being expelled from school due to her behavioral issues and sent away to a secure unit, as well as being alienated from her friends, it seems like there is truly little hope for her. This is until her mother gets a new boyfriend, Conor (portrayed by Michael Fassbender) who shows her the first glimpse of love and affection she has ever really received; this causes the lines in their relationship to be blurred, with their interactions becoming increasingly flirtatious until they eventually sleep together. The most definite aspect of Mia’s character is her presentation as a victim; she is a victim of her socioeconomic status, the subject of her mother’s ridicule and eventually a victim of Conor’s manipulation, as he increasingly pushes the clear boundaries he should be abiding by, taking advantage of Mia’s desire to be loved for his own gain, before abandoning the family and making her feel like she is to blame, which he makes evident in the line “Mia, you’re fifteen years old”, showing that he’s aware what he’s done is wrong, but is trying to pass off the blame onto her for being too young.

Fish Tank is a clear story about child exploitation, which Mia is a victim of at the hands of Conor. According to the NSPCC, child exploitation is when children are “given things in exchange for sexual favours.... they may trust their abusers and not understand that they are being abused” (NSPCC, ND). It is a cycle of manipulation, with Conor showering Mia in love and attention initially, which causes her to become emotionally attached to him. When he leaves, he blames her age for not being able to be involved with her anymore, which causes her to blame herself, as he was the only real care and attention she has ever received. What deepens the situation is that Conor has a family, a nice house, and the comfort of living in a middle-class background; to him, becoming involved with Mia’s family

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is entertainment, it is something different to his everyday life. He does not care about the effect he is having on their family, or the attachments that both Mia and her mother now have to him. Whilst this is a fictional story, members of the middle class becoming involved with working-class people is not an uncommon occurrence, especially in universities where people from all socioeconomic backgrounds are mixed. This is apparent especially in Durham University, where only 7.8% of students are from the North-East, finding themselves being harassed and bullied as they are the minority. One way this is done is through an activity called “Rolling in the Muck” which, according to The Guardian, is where students and societies would make challenges out of sleeping with the Northern or working-class students (Parveen, 2020). Conor’s behavior in *Fish Tank* is scarily similar, whilst an explanation for his actions is never given, he clearly chooses to become involved with Mia’s family for his own personal gain, therefore beginning a cycle of exploitation for Mia, which is all too common in working-class communities. There are moments of joy in *Fish Tank* however, in the conclusion of the film when Mia is packing to leave her home and move to Cardiff, her mother, sister and herself share a tender moment in which they all dance together. Given that throughout the film, Mia’s one form of escapism from real life is dance, her mother and sister finally joining her in this before she leaves shows a final moment of understanding and acceptance between them; they have been unable to verbally show their love for each other, but through this one act of movement, they can convey everything they have not been able to say. *Fish Tank* overall shows the complexities of human nature, and that all people have positive and negative sides to their character.

Lady Chatterley's Lover is a unique style of film in its portrayal of the working-class, in that the character of Oliver Mellors interacts on a human level with the upper-class Connie Chatterley. In terms of societal expectations, Oliver has far more freedom than Connie, who is forced to abide by the expectations placed on her as the wife of a lord. In terms of social class however, Oliver is at the mercy of the Chatterley’s, relying on them for his occupation, and therefore, his livelihood. The film tells the story of Connie Chatterley’s passionate affair with her gamekeeper Oliver Mellors, due to her sexually unfulfilling and mundane life with her current husband Clifford, who after an injury in the war, no longer provides her with the affection and love she desires. Connie feels lonely and isolated, longing for the freedoms she had during unmarried life which leads her to take daily walks around the grounds of her estate. Oliver, in comparison to Connie, lives in solitude but also in freedom: like Clifford, he was in the war and returned to find that his wife had left him, but she refuses a divorce as she wants to continue benefiting from his war pension. He returns to work straight away, however the work he takes on as gamekeeper is seen as “below his station,” as he was a

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ranking lieutenant whilst in the army. The war was a unique time for the definition of social class, as for the first-time men from all backgrounds were working together for a common goal, to defeat their enemies; however, there were still some degree of class-expectations. For a man from a working-class background, Oliver achieving the rank of Lieutenant was unusual, as men from his socioeconomic background would not usually achieve this ranking, with Clifford even remarking “Do you honestly believe that a return to gamekeeping will be satisfying after your time as an officer?” This presents Clifford’s perception of the working class clearly, that he believes moving “down the social ladder” to be a demeaning prospect and he could not imagine losing his higher social status. Oliver is described as “a noble savage”, an oxymoronic description in that the very definition of a savage is of a brutal or vicious person, therefore the claim that he is a noble savage highlights the upper-class perspective of Oliver; he is deemed to be a savage because of his social class, but his polite and reserved nature sets him apart from other people of his social class meaning he is not viewed as negatively as them.

By the very nature of his occupation, Oliver’s sole purpose to the Chatterley’s is to be used; he is used by The Chatterley’s to complete jobs around the grounds, in one scene he is ordered by Clifford to push him up the hill when his motorized wheelchair stops working and despite being repeatedly insulted by Clifford, he obliges and does it anyway. His relationship with Connie is far more complicated, and whilst they grow to fall in love with each other, he is used by her as a means of fulfilling her sexual desires and need for intimacy. This aspect of their relationship is overlooked later in the film, but the recurring theme in their story is that Oliver has no real choice; it is obvious that their liaisons must be kept a secret, as for a relationship such as theirs to take place would cause scandal and outrage across the country. Oliver is at mercy to Connie, as she holds the power to expose them and manipulate the situation in her favour, to which she would be believed because of her higher social status than Oliver. This is a common theme within stories that contain both working-class and upper-class characters, in that working-class characters are powerless against the actions of upper-class characters. This is further evident later in the film when their relationship is exposed, Oliver is immediately fired and forced to move away from the area, concluding that working-class people are still forced to rely on the choices of those who are socioeconomically better off than themselves, as they make the choices that impact their whole lives. The dynamic portrayed in the film is easily reflected in real life, as shown in the way that ordinary people live by the rules and laws that are created by politicians and people in power, the majority of whom have come from areas of immense privilege and wealth, having been privately educated or had access to high-paying jobs, with

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around 29% of British MP's having gone to private school, which is four times higher than the population of Great Britain as a whole according to the 2021 Sutton Trust study. Those not in power are forced to abide by their rules, even when the rules are made by those who have no perception of the socioeconomic background that their constituents are from. Overall, Oliver is presented as an exception from how working-class men are perceived, which to the audience shows the humanity that they have despite the stereotypes and stigma that may follow them.

To conclude, this essay has demonstrated that whilst both positive and negative portrayals of working-class characters do exist, there is a common theme within their storylines in that the characters are used to facilitate the pleasure and enjoyment of middle-class characters, which is especially evident in both *Fish Tank* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, as both Mia and Oliver are used by their "social superiors" for their own personal gain, although Connie's intentions are clearly far purer than Conor's, there is still a definite power imbalance within their relationship. Billy Elliot is presented as a determined and hardworking character, which in combination with his young age, makes him a likeable character for the audience. However, his storyline in combination with the historical context behind the film means he is inadvertently used to push the right-wing rhetoric of the poverty of aspiration. The power dynamics presented in these films reflect the social climate in which modern-day Britain currently lives with politicians who have no idea how the working classes live. Whilst there are clear negatives found there are also moments of joy found in these films, which show the beauty that life can contain, no matter the socioeconomic background you come from.

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