

“You Dance to Disco and You Don’t Like Rock”: A Queer Close Reading of Pet Shop Boys Lyrics

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Though a vital part of the world of literary criticism, song lyrics are often overlooked when it comes to what qualifies as materials for academic analysis. They are treated not as their own category but something like poetry, or prose – a facsimile. I argue that they are a category of their own, and when treated as text to analyse independent of their poetic dimensions, can offer a wealth of interpretations.

In this thesis I take the tools of literary analysis, primarily close reading, to provide a queer reading of the lyrics of the synthpop duo Pet Shop Boys. I look for intertextual references and instances of subtext which I believe deepen what the text appears to be on surface level. This analysis is primarily focused on lyrics which I argue form cohesive narratives of queer history and homophobia.

To support my argumentation, I have used various multidisciplinary sources from areas such as history, sociology and theology to provide context for my interpretations of the lyrics.

I believe I sufficiently demonstrate that it is possible to form a cohesive and satisfying narrative experience from lyrics without leaning into their multimodality, and further assert that these findings indicate that there are merits to considering song lyrics as a part of the wider world of literary criticism.

Key words: lyrics, Pet Shop Boys, queer history, close reading, subtext, intertextuality, literary analysis, religion, homophobia

Table of contents

1	Introduction	4
2	Background	6
3	Methodology	7
4	Analysis	8
4.1	Unlawful and Immoral Love: Legal and Religious Homophobia in the Mid-to-Late 20th Century	8
4.1.1	“The law says I’m a criminal”: homosexuality and the law	10
4.1.2	“It’s a sin”: Catholicism and homophobia	12
4.2	HIV/AIDS and the Queer Community	14
4.2.1	“There are no more lovers left alive”: generational loss and grief	15
5	Conclusion	19
	References	20

1 Introduction

Song lyrics are a contentious topic when it comes to the world of literary analysis. Though they share some common characteristics with poetry, analysing them strictly through a poetic framework soon proves to be difficult. The modern listener likely encounters lyrics most commonly through an app like Spotify (where they are synced to the song, similar to karaoke), or a site like Genius, which displays all their lyrics in uniform style. Thus, unless printed out in a manner set by the writers or producers, there are no typographical elements to analyse. Compare this to a printed poem, where the reader can infer meaning from the placement of the text, its shapes, whether it is bolded or in italics, whether it has significant line breaks or not. Lyrics often have no clear classical metre, such as iambic, to tell us about its structure. Though verses could be comparable to stanzas, what of choruses, or bridges? In songs they serve distinct purposes – analysing them as simply separate stanzas diminishes their meaning and intention. If lyrics are not poetry, what are they? And how do we analyse them?

In conjunction with their nebulous categorisation, lyrics are easy to misrepresent as ‘lesser than’, especially in the case of pop music. Pop music is traditionally viewed as frivolous fluff, intended for mainstream success and tending towards simplistic themes. As Matt BaileyShea (2021, 1) sardonically asks in the introduction of *Lines and Lyrics*: “Why bother engaging in serious interpretation of the lyrics if they are no more than a vehicle for a catchy tune?” That is to say, the crucial part of a pop song is its commercial potential, and not its lyrical value. Though he cautions against this type of attitude, arguing that there is merit to be found within lyrics as a form of poetry, he then goes on to claim that song interpretation “requires skill and training in two different disciplines: poetic analysis and music analysis” (BaileyShea 2021, 5). David West (2019, 3) echoes these ideas when describing stylisticians (who occupy an area of applied linguistics) tendency “to focus exclusively on the lyrics and to ignore the sonic and visual context in which the lyrics are situated”. Where he and BaileyShea argue for a multimodal experience when it comes to understanding and interpreting songs, I argue that song lyrics can stand on their own when analysed independent of their musical aspects. They are not poetry, nor prose – they are their own category, the analysis of which is burgeoning field amidst literary analysis.

In this thesis I aim to do a close reading of select songs from the British synthpop duo Pet Shop Boys’ discography. In taking this literary analysis tool and applying it to song lyrics, I

want to demonstrate that it is possible to form a cohesive and satisfying narrative experience from lyrics regardless of whether one physically listens to them or not. Song lyrics need not be compared to poetry, wherein they may sound “unsatisfying and sometimes downright silly” (BaileyShea 2021, 6). As West (2019, 4) argues, song lyrics have value of their own and should be analysed by their own criteria. Where his and my arguments differ is with the rest of his statement, that the value of lyrics is “derived precisely from the fact that they are an integral component of a multimodal experience: they are sung and accompanied by music” (ibid.). Whilst multidisciplinary analysis can be and often is fruitful, there is room for focused, singular analysis as well. When it comes to literary analysis of song lyrics, there is a certain ‘lack’, which I hope to provide materials for with my thesis.

2 Background

Vocalist Neil Tennant and keyboardist Chris Lowe formed Pet Shop Boys in 1981 after having met at a hi-fi shop in London (Metzer 2008, 144). Their first album, *Please*, was released in March of 1986 to middling success, reaching a peak position of three on the UK charts (Official Charts) and a respective seven on the US Billboard 200 (Billboard). The duo has continued to produce music together ever since, the sum of which adds up to fifteen studio albums as of the day of writing this, with additional compilations and EPs. Their latest full-length album, *Nonetheless*, was described by Tennant as their first “queer album” (Ryan 2024) – which begs the question as to what the previous albums were by comparison. Though perhaps not always explicitly queer in the way *Nonetheless* is, they still contain a world of subtextual and inferred references to queer experiences. It is these instances that I wish to analyse in this thesis. How are literary tools, primarily subtext and intertextuality, used to build cohesive queer narratives across different songs and even albums?

I chose this specific band partially due to personal interest, but especially because I believe their long spanning discography provides ample material for analysis. I note here that unless otherwise specified, Tennant is the primary lyricist of the band. I sometimes reference biographical details from his life which have, I argue, contributed to the lyricism and subsequently influence the interpretation of a song.

3 Methodology

Close reading originates from the New Criticism movement of the early 20th century. This branch of literary criticism sprung from the wider formalist movement and was less a coherent ideological entity and more so a loose collection of ideas and approaches, united by the concept of a work of literature as an “autonomous” whole (Castle 2013, 59). Meaning, the interpretations of literary works are meant to be derived from the contents of the work itself, rather than its sociopolitical or biographical contexts (ibid.). For New Critics, the way to find these interpretations and meanings was to close read – that is, to carefully observe and dissect the work piece by piece.

Close reading has since been part of the wider changes in the world of literary criticism, itself an ever-evolving academic movement, and as of today does not have a “consensus definition” (Guillory 2025, 11). As such, close reading is not constrained by a clear theoretical framework. This prompts the question of what, then, it *is*. To offer one working definition: close reading is a form of literary analysis wherein one looks at a text in detail and offers an interpretation of it, backing this argumentation up with the elements in the text itself. A close reading “extends our understanding by reasoning from what is known to be the case—what we can all see in the text—to what is claimed to be the case—how we should understand what we see” (Sinykin 2025, 14). By looking beyond the surface level of a text, the reader can infer polysemantic interpretations of it.

In this thesis, I employ close reading to analyse, often on a line-by-line basis, the contents of various Pet Shop Boys song lyrics for queer meanings. I have chosen an exemplary line to be quoted in the title of this thesis. It is part of a couplet, which in full form goes: “She’s made you some kind of laughing stock / because you dance to disco and you don’t like rock” (“Can You Forgive Her?”, 1993). Read at surface level, it does not offer much beyond detailing the subject’s musical preferences. When analysed from a queer context, however, it is found to reference stereotypes of gay men as partial to disco – as ‘flamboyant’ – as opposed to heterosexual men, prone to listening ‘heavier’ music such as rock. Thus, the line, when decoded, is interpreted to mean she makes fun of him for being gay. It is this kind of close reading I do in my thesis.

4 Analysis

In this section I move from the theoretical background to the analysis portion of this thesis. I have sectioned the main body of this analysis into two sections. The first consists of the queer experience of the 20th century, mainly 1950s to 1970s, as understood through institutional homophobia from a legal and a religious perspective. The second section covers the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s. I will analyse various lyrics for their subtextual interpretations and intertextual references related to these topics.

The Pet Shop Boys catalogue is rife with references to various forms of media, owing in part to Tennant's own interest in history and literature – or as he puts it, his desire to “bring ideas and concepts from outside pop” to their music (Tennant 2018, xx). Intertextuality is used in their songs to varying degrees and with differing tones, for example, from satirical to dedicational, and can be useful in helping decipher deeper lyrical implications.

4.1 Unlawful and Immoral Love: Legal and Religious Homophobia in the Mid-to-Late 20th Century

The post-war era of the 1950s ushered in new discussions of homosexuality as a legal, medical, social and cultural identity as a part of “reconstructing gender relations, national identity and a modern state” (Bengry 2012, 169) after the horrors of global warfare. The press in Britain played an especially prominent role in bringing the ‘issue’ of queerness to the forefront of public consciousness during the first half of the decade – so much so that, in 1954, public interest demanded the government's attention on the matter (Bengry 2012, 174). This came about in the form of the Wolfenden Committee, set up “to review the law and practice relating to homosexual offences and prostitution” (Bengry 2012, 174-75). The committee's findings, though not entirely equivocal, concluded that when it comes to homosexuality, they “do not think that it is proper for the law to concern itself with what a man does in private” (Wolfenden Committee 1957, 21). Further down the line, these conclusions would work as the foundation of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which, as Brian Lewis (2016, 246) writes, established the legality of a “carefully demarcated private space in which the poor homosexual, who couldn't help himself, could behave deplorably with another consenting adult male, without fear of a policeman feeling his collar”. Queer relationships were banished behind closed doors, still ostensibly illegal should they be found “contrary to the public good” (Wolfenden Committee 1957, 21), and still something that the average

citizen should consider immoral. It is from this environment, and the more restrictive and conservative Thatcher Era in Britain, that many of the lyrics in the following section originate from.

To discuss the ways in which religion and homophobia show up in the lyricism of Pet Shop Boys, I must briefly introduce two major denominations and their influence on the sexual politics of England – the Church of England, and the Roman Catholic Church.

The Church of England is the largest Christian denomination in the country and thus wields significant influence. During the 1950's, the relationship between the secular and clerical response to homosexuality was a mirror image. The Wolfenden Report was supported by the Church, and in fact, a branch of it – The Moral Welfare Council (MWC) – “produced a number of key texts as evidence for the Committee in which they advocated for the decriminalisation of sex between men in private” (Jones 2013, 199). The Church's support for decriminalisation was not, however, an endorsement for queerness. When the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 came into being, so did the concept of a new social entity, the homosexual individual (Jones 2013, 208). This individual, the MWC concluded, “is a tragic figure endowed with desires on which he must not act” (Jones 2013, 208). The official recommendation on what to do with queer members of the public in contact with the Church was to “help homosexuals ‘face their condition and sublimate or transmute their homosexual drives through prayer and imagination into creative and socially acceptable service’ and in this manner find ‘personal fulfilment’” (Jones 2013, 211). This somewhat condescending view of queer people as helpless and in need of salvation can be summed up with the old adage: hate the sin, love the sinner.

The Catholic Church is a slightly smaller denomination in England by membership, but all the more relevant for biographical reasons. Tennant was brought up Catholic – an experience he describes as having left him “with a feeling for theatrical ritual and a subconscious store of religious liturgy and music” – and as a result of which “religious ideas or references have cropped up in the lyrics [he] write[s]” (Tennant 2018, xviii). The Catholic Church has a long and ingrained tradition of homophobia, which theologian Gerard Loughlin (2018, 188) describes as “fundamental” to its culture. Queer individuals are established, through matters “of culture, of discourse, of disseminated and learned dislike” as the Other – people to be excluded “from the family, from the communion, from – indeed – the human” (Loughlin 2018, 189). The same homosexual individual which the Church of England imagined as a

misguided being capable of receiving salvation, the Catholic Church conceived of as “a class of person that not only is oriented to sin, as with original sin, but is oriented to a particular sin, the sin against nature” (Loughlin 2018, 190). The Catholic preoccupation with sin will be of particular relevance in section 4.1.2 of this thesis.

4.1.1 “The law says I’m a criminal”: homosexuality and the law

The tenuous legal position of homosexuality and the ramifications of criminalising identities are best demonstrated in the song “Odd Man Out”, released in 2013 as part of the *Thursday* EP. The song is a condensed retelling of the 1961 film *Victim*, directed by Basil Dierden, about the plight of homosexuals facing persecution in England. *Victim* has been cited as the first British film “to deal openly with the need for legal reform concerning homosexuality” (Burton 2010, 75) and as such is an instrumental part of the history of queer media in Britain.

In the film, a character called Jack “Boy” Barrett hangs himself due to being blackmailed over a photograph of him and his ex-lover, Melville Farr. Farr begins to investigate the extortion ring, which leads him to a hairdresser, Henry, played by Charles Lloyd-Pack. An excerpt of his dialogue is quoted at the end of the song:

Nature played me a dirty trick. I’m going to see I get a few years peace and quiet in return. You’ve got a big position, they’d listen to you. You ought to be able to state our case. Tell them there’s no magic cure for how we are, certainly not behind prison bars, come to feel like a criminal, an outlaw. Do you know what I think, Mr Farr? I think Boy Barrett’s well out of it. (“Odd Man Out”, 2013)

Nature’s ‘dirty trick’ is a reference to Henry’s queerness. Whilst a negative descriptor of something that is unclean, the use of ‘nature’ delineates it as an inherent quality of his that is immovable, and by extension, incurable. This aligns with the relatively new idea of homosexuality as not a psychological illness, but as something which an individual is born with. Narrating from 1961, so after the Wolfenden Report but before the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, the speaker laments his helpless position: “The law says I’m a criminal / but I can’t help the way I am / Trying to find some kind of love / the only way I can” (“Odd Man Out”, 2013). At this point, homosexuality exists in an odd limbo where it is openly acknowledged, but still an illegal offence, even in private. The speaker has no space within which to exist and seek relationships; his mere existence is a prison in and of itself.

The titular ‘odd man out’ is a play on the phrase ‘odd one out’, referring to someone left over from the main group, someone that does not fit with the rest – in this case, the homosexuals

left outside the societal norms and public spaces. It is worth noting that ‘odd’ is a synonym for ‘queer’, referring to both something strange and the more contemporary definition of queer as gay. The narrator self-identifying as an “odd man out” reflects again the status of the homosexual individual, as previously discussed – as someone with an *identity*.

It is, however, a label which he needs to hide, stating that “discretion” is “guaranteed” as well as calling himself “an outlaw on the run” (“Odd Man Out”, 2013). The connotations of an outlaw bring to mind the Wild West and cowboy culture, itself a common ground for gay narratives (see, for example, Ang Lee’s 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain*). This image of the lone cowboy is immediately contradicted with the mention of there being “quite a few of us about” (“Odd Man Out”, 2013) – these lines next to each other highlight the loneliness of the individual queer existence, and yet the burgeoning queer community, struggling to find each other and make connections.

In the lyric, “I don’t scream and shout / but cut me and I’ll bleed” (“Odd Man Out”, 2013) there is likewise a juxtaposition, this being of presenting as unassuming and not drawing attention to one’s self, yet still asserting one’s personhood and vulnerability. “Cut me and I’ll bleed” is a reference to Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, where a Jewish character, Shylock, contends his personhood as something of equal value to the rest of society: “He hath disgraced me [...] and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? [...] If you prick us, do we not bleed?” (3.1.50–61). In both, the speaker is reinforcing their status as a person, a human being, and not an object – someone who, when harmed, feels the consequences of that hurt.

Similar themes to the ones in “Odd Man Out” are explored in the song “To Speak is a Sin”, which whilst ambiguous as to its year is most likely set after the Sexual Offences Act; the act of seeking connections (i.e. having queer relationships) has been (somewhat) legalised but only in the private sphere. There are no safe third spaces such as gay bars, which make signalling and recognising queerness a kind of coded game. It is a limbo like the legal status of homosexuality in “Odd Man Out”, a twilight zone characterised by the repeated phrases of “we’ve been around forever” and “ordering drinks at the bar” (“To Speak is a Sin”, 1993). The present and passive tenses, and use of repetition, work to create a scene out of time and space, forever stuck within the same bar doing the same things – a kind of purgatory. This molassy atmosphere gains a tense edge with the refrain each chorus starts with, that “to speak is a sin” (ibid.) – that is, to break this carefully maintained façade and betray one’s sexuality

and ‘true’ intentions is a criminal offence. Instead, there are non-verbal cues to imply one’s potential interest: “You look first, then stare / and once in a while / a smile, if you dare” (ibid.). The song is likely a reference to the poem “Two Loves” by Lord Alfred Douglas, probably best known for his relationship to and with Oscar Wilde. The poem’s last line, commonly associated with queer love, goes: “I am the love that dare not speak its name” (Douglas, 1894, n.p.). Queer love is silent, implied, and fearful; it is subjected to legal scrutiny for something as benign as speaking.

To close out this section, I will discuss one additional important aspect when it comes to the legal status of homosexuality: the question of the age of consent in Britain. The issue traces its root, as much of the mid-to-late 20th century queer debates do, to the Wolfenden Report. The Report had proposed for the male homosexual age of consent to be set at 21, “the general age of majority at the time the report was written and when legislation was passed” (Waites 1998, 30) – legislation here referring to the Sexual Offences Act of 1967. The age of majority was, however, lessened to 18 just two years later, “leaving the homosexual age of consent [...] as a clear anomaly” (ibid.) which aimed to discourage homosexual acts. Age differences and skirting the legal age of consent are themes which crop up somewhat frequently in the Boys’ discography. Notably, the very title of “Young Offender” alludes to this, and delves further into the topic with its playful couplet: “How graceful your movements, how bitter your scorn / I’ve been a teenager since before you were born” (“Young Offender”, 1993). The older gay man retains his youthful vigour, a sentiment which is echoed in “Gin and Jag”: “Yes, I had a few golden years / Times I won’t forget / But don’t write me off as an old has-been / It’s not all over yet” (“Gin and Jag”, 2009). This insistence on older age being equally important and valid can be related to the way many queer lives were cut short by the AIDS epidemic: something that is further explored in section 4.2.

4.1.2 “It’s a sin”: Catholicism and homophobia

As discussed in the introduction of 4.1, there are certain themes which are integral when it comes to examining the intersection of religion and queerness: namely, guilt and sin. Catholic schools are, by virtue of being institutions of the Church, places where children are taught the values and tenets of the religion. As Loughlin (2018, 189) writes in relation to the Church: “No child is born homophobic, but becomes so only as it grows into a sociality that establishes its identity against those it is not – that it cannot, must not be – in order to affirm itself.” When a queer child is subjected to this culture of institutional homophobia, they

internalise the stigma surrounding queerness as an identity, and can subsequently hold “negative attitudes that they harbor toward themselves and their own homosexual desires” (Herek, Gillis and Cogan 2009, 33). This “self-directed prejudice” (ibid.) is commonly referred to as internalised homophobia.

Religious internalised homophobia is often centred on ruminations around one’s sinful nature and guilt for being that way. If queerness is innately bad, yet not a learned behaviour – i.e., an inherent trait – this combination creates a vicious trap for the religious queer person. This deep sense of shame is illustrated in several Pet Shop Boys songs, most prominently when the speaker of “It’s a Sin” says, “When I look back upon my life / it’s always with a sense of shame” (“It’s a Sin”, 1987). This shame is then tethered directly to experiences of queer love as a source of it, such as love feeling “like shame” (“Can You Forgive Her?”, 1993) or being perceived with “confusion” (“This Must Be the Place I Waited Years to Leave”, 1990) by the rest of the religious society.

The subject of “Can You Forgive Her?” tries to repress his unwanted queer desires, but cannot. When finally able to sleep after anxiety-fuelled insomnia, he inevitably dreams of his youthful romance with a boy at school. Though it is not made textually clear whether this school was a religious one or not, the subject’s deep-rooted anxiety, shame and repression surrounding his queerness certainly points to that reading. This is supported as well by the dream, and thus the memories of the school, being called “strange” (“Can You Forgive Her?”, 1993), once again linking ‘strange’ to its synonym ‘queer’. Within these dreams – or, memories – the subject of the song is called on to remember his “youthful follies” and “changing teams” (ibid.). “Changing teams” or ‘batting for the other team’ are common euphemisms for being gay, and “youthful follies” anchors the relationship to the past – calling to mind homophobic ideas of queerness as a ‘phase’ that kids or teens might go through – as well as something foolish, an absurdism which the adult mind cannot comprehend or re-experience. But this attempt at emotional distancing is ineffective, for the subject will inevitably always “wake up and remember that [he] can’t forget” (ibid.). There is no running away from what cannot be changed.

Where there is shame, though, there is also resistance to the establishment. In “It’s a Sin”, despite the speaker being told all his life that “everything [he’s] ever done” (“It’s a Sin”, 1987) is sinful, he begins to argue against this. The bridge mimics the style of speech in a confessional, wherein the speaker ostensibly pleads for forgiveness, but admits that

“[w]hatever you taught me / I didn’t believe it” and furthermore that he “[doesn’t] understand” (ibid.) the supposed wrongness of his existence. Likewise, the speaker of “This Must Be the Place” equivocates the words of Catholic saints to those of “other ordinary men” (“This Must Be The Place I Waited Years to Leave”, 1990) – therefore questioning the elevated status of these saints, and why they are ‘worth’ listening to – and admits that he does not “want to belong” (ibid.) to the homophobic structure he is surrounded by. The Church inherently demands subservience to hierarchical structures, from the clergy to the Pope all the way to God. These moments of resistance serve as subversions of the narrative of a long-suffering, self-loathing queer individual; they are revolts against the tepid, love the sinner kind of homophobia exhibited by the Church of England as well as the more overt, culturally homophobic framework of the Catholic Church. They reinforce the assertion of personhood that was discussed in 4.1.1 – that a queer person is, fundamentally, a human being deserving of the same kinds of rights as other, non-marginalised identities.

4.2 HIV/AIDS and the Queer Community

The epidemic of HIV/AIDS, which affected queer communities in devastating ways and the consequences of which still reverberate to this day, began to spread in the United States during the early 1980s. It was initially believed to be an illness targeting queer men in particular, which led the press to coin it as a “Gay Related Immune Deficiency Syndrome” – or GRID, for short (Forstein 2013, 45). This term was eventually replaced by the more neutral HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome). Despite the substitution, the disease continued to be seen as a “modern plague, retribution from God for unseemly homosexual behavior” (Forstein 2013, 41) due to its high contagion rate amongst the homosexual population.

This reputation was a major contributing factor to the delayed, lacking response from official governing bodies. In the United States, then President Ronald Reagan did not publicly acknowledge AIDS until the end of 1985, and even then, “proposed further cuts in AIDS spending” (Padamsee 2009, 1005), leaving communities to fund and organise resistance by themselves. This pattern repeated in the UK, where “the government’s national intervention at the end of 1986 was both belated and inappropriate” (Watney 2000, 140), a factoid which, when combined with the public perception that gay men were the ones primarily associated with HIV/AIDS (Cook 2017, 51) and thus at blame and not deserving of help, led to skyrocketing fatalities without much governmental oversight. Due to the insular nature of gay

communities at the time, these losses meant that it was an increasingly common experience for queer people to be, quite literally, surrounded by death. As Tennant notes of his own songwriting during and after the peak of the epidemic, “death haunts many of our songs” (Tennant 2018, ix). Writing of his own experiences in detailing the epidemic, Simon Watney (2000, 217) notes: “Writing this article, and others, is for me a part of an ongoing process of mourning, and in turn part of the far wider attempt on the part of so many of my generation to ‘make sense’ of what has happened to us.” This kind of documentation of personal experiences is further examined in the following section.

4.2.1 “There are no more lovers left alive”: generational loss and grief

There are several songs within the Pet Shop Boys’ catalogue which discuss the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its aftermath. Though each of them has their own merits, I have chosen in this section to analyse a collection of three, which are loosely grouped by their status of being dedicated to friend of Tennant’s, who died from AIDS in the 1980’s. Though not discussed in depth, I want to mention here the song “Dreaming of the Queen” (1993) from which the quote at the title of this subsection is from. I found it to be an apt and powerful descriptor of the queer community in the aftermath of the HIV/AIDS crisis, both in how it acknowledges the impossible scale of the losses felt, as well as for its gentle, poetic characterisation of the oft-maligned queer people as simply lovers.

“It Couldn’t Happen Here” reflects the attitude amongst the UK queer community during the early stages of the epidemic. In Tennant’s own words, it is “a complacent conversation [...] with my best friend from Newcastle about early reports of AIDS in the USA and how he had read that it might not have the same deadly impact in the UK” (Tennant 2018, ix). Despite the long progress of the epidemic, the difference between before and after is delineated in the song as simply, “yesterday” (“It Couldn’t Happen Here”, 1987). This time compression works to emphasise the seeming suddenness of the crisis, and how tantalisingly close the previous, innocent times are. The relative ease of queerness pre-AIDS is looked upon with fond nostalgia. Forstein, whom I cited in the previous section, recounts a description from a patient which illustrates this division well:

It was as if we had all found a beautiful field where we could go and play, celebrating our bodies, having sex, and our affection for each other. A cloud appeared from nowhere, and as the thunder roared the lightning struck without warning, and around me lay friends dying and dead, while I stood unscathed. How do you begin to make sense of the capriciousness of it all and live your life? (Forstein 2013, 41)

This beautiful field, in Tennant's writing, is described through snapshots of everyday life as a queer man in Britain. The speaker and his friend lounge about, "in six-inch heels quoting magazines" ("It Couldn't Happen Here", 1987) and deflecting what is less so pointed homophobia and more a condemnation of perceived lazy youth. The first two choruses function as metaphors for the wider gay community in the 1970's, with its joyful partying and celebration of life. "We've drunk too much" and its parallel line "We've laughed too loud" both describe these times, but are immediately clouded by the following reminder, "and woke up everyone" (ibid.). This "waking up" can be read as referring to the general population, which have, as previously discussed, been exposed the queer community as a social and public entity in the post-war years. The increased scrutiny and attention in turn lead to the generally negative perception of queerness, and especially of queer AIDS patients. The psychological impact of this is described as a loss of "dignity" and "injured innocence" (ibid.). Where there used to be a sense of safety and community, there is now fear of both the epidemic as well as increased persecution.

This general timeline of going from carefree existence to a largescale crisis is also present in the second song of the dedicational trio, "Being Boring". The lyrics signpost specific decades in each verse, beginning from the 1920's and ending in the 1990's. The first verse is saturated with nostalgic longing for the past, with the speaker discovering a collection of old photographs and party invitations from the Roaring Twenties. This era is associated with youth and optimism, and the sheer number of possibilities that the imaginations of the minds of those times conjured up: "When you're young you find inspiration / in anyone who's ever gone / and opened up a closing door" ("Being Boring", 1990). The speaker, still timid, looks to others to lead the way to gay liberation – but as the timeline moves along to the 1970's, this closing door has now come within reach. They no longer have to idolise an abstract other to look up to but are themselves "looking forward" and "bolting through" (ibid.) – actionable descriptors that emphasise the forward trajectory of the queer community post-Stonewall.

This kind of hope for the future is echoed in the chorus, as well, but with a past tense that foreshadows the upcoming tragedy: "And we were never holding back or worried that / time would come to an end / We were always hoping that, looking back / you could always rely on a friend" ("Being Boring", 1990). The phrase "time coming to an end" functions here as a metaphor not only for the lives lost during the AIDS crisis, but also for the loss of that previous carefree life and innocence. "Relying on friends" – in other words, communal support – became a lifeline for queer communities but was hindered by the lacking

governmental response and the number of HIV/AIDS related deaths. In this way it is also a lamentation for friends lost. The resulting silence of grief is well described in the final verse of the song:

Now I sit with different faces / in rented rooms and foreign places / All the people I was kissing / some are here and some are missing / in the nineteen-nineties / I never dreamt that I would get to be / the creature that I always meant to be / but I thought in spite of dreams / you'd be sitting somewhere here with me. ("Being Boring", 1990)

The transient nature of queer lives comes across not only in the changing faces, but in the way the speaker is removed from home, likely travelling to attend various funeral services across the country. Though there is a sense of personal liberation and realisation of the self as a beautiful, fully formed individual, it has come with the cost of friends and lovers lost.

This theme of mourning carries over to the final song of the trio, "Your Funny Uncle", which describes the funeral of Tennant's friend. The song deals with the disconnect and at times even conflict many friends and lovers of AIDS victims had with those victims' biological families, who sometimes felt such discomfort and shame surrounding their children's sexuality that they denied them funerary services, to avoid "publically acknowledging the cause of death" as AIDS (Forstein 2013, 46). This left funeral services to be largely organised by the queer community, and due to the sheer number of funerals, these services evolved to be distinctly different from traditional religious ones. They became "though solemn [...] also celebrations of achievement and joy, at which the histories of gay life [were] told by friends and ex-lovers" (Watney 2000, 163) – biographies shared through readings and music. In contrast, the services organised by homophobic relatives seemed "designed to exclude any mention of precisely the qualities we love and will miss in our now departed gay friends" (Watney 2000, 165), implying a severe emotional disconnect between the deceased and their biological families, who by time of death, perhaps did not truly even know their child at all.

This familial shunning is portrayed in the song through the friend's parents, primarily his father: "One mother's son / his father's distant gaze regretting / where they went wrong / He always found it too upsetting" ("Your Funny Uncle", 1995). The enjambed line completes the father's regret to relate to the upbringing of their son, which implies being gay as something 'wrong' which he thinks he could have 'fixed' if not for it being "too upsetting" – the grief of death is displaced into upset over the son's sexuality. This emotional distancing and lack of familial support is mirrored in the second verse, where friends, as a found family, take over the role of celebrating the deceased's life and achievements, as described in the previous

paragraph. The adjectives used are all positive, describing the friend's life having been lived "completely", "with strength and pride", and "in spite of everything [...] swimming against the tide" (ibid.) – the latter of which calls to mind the pioneering queer activists depicted in "Being Boring". These positive enforcements give the eulogy a sense of hope and defiance.

The titular funny uncle enters the song in the final verse, "staring / at all your friends with military bearing" ("Your Funny Uncle", 1995). The ambiguous phrasing allows for a dual interpretation of the military bearing either referring to the potential literal military service of the uncle, or the metaphorical bearing of the friend group, ready to defend their friend against potential attack. It is noteworthy that in the UK, 'funny' can be used to mean someone strange, so it is possible to read the uncle as also having been queer himself. To support this reading, the following lines describe the uncle's behaviour with the friend group as supportive: "And stopped to stand / to smile and speak of you directly / 'Goodbye', shake hands / like you did everything correctly" (ibid.). Where the father was distant, ashamed and regretful, the uncle acts as a foil to all of these, being direct, warm and proud. The narrative nearness of the mention of military bearing in combination with the "correctness" of the nephew gives the procession the atmosphere of a military funeral, used to celebrate the achievements of brave combatants – which is, ultimately, what many queer AIDS victims came to be seen as.

5 Conclusion

At the start of this thesis, I set out to examine the capacity for meaningful literary analysis I argue is inherent in song lyrics without needing to include multimodal analysis of its musical elements. To do this I conducted a close reading analysis of the lyrics of Pet Shop Boys that I argue have queer subtext or intertextual references to queer media and history, which build to form cohesive narratives of criminalisation, religious guilt and oppression, community and a shared history. I have done this by viewing Pet Shop Boys lyrics through these various thematic lenses, supporting my analysis with various multidisciplinary contexts, but without referring the audiovisual dimensions of these songs, such as vocals, instrumentals, or music videos. I believe I have sufficiently demonstrated that, as I argued in section 1, it is possible to form a cohesive and satisfying narrative experience from lyrics regardless of whether one physically listens to them or not.

I assert that these findings indicate that there are merits to considering song lyrics a vital part of the wider world of literary criticism, and that in turn, literary analysis can be used to interpret songs to a satisfactory degree without having to treat them as either poetry-esque or prose-like. Song lyrics they can, and should, stand in a category of their own. By treating them as a distinct entity, we open the potential for interesting and meaningful analysis that is not trapped within the boundaries of what it 'should' look for, and how.

Future research in this area could, broadly, focus on other artists or bands; in regard to the more specific scope of my thesis, I propose that Pet Shop Boys lyrics could be analysed from a different thematic perspective entirely. The latter would be particularly fruitful in demonstrating the multifaceted nature of close reading lyrics: it is an inherent quality of creative texts to be readable in differing ways. There is also potential to further expand on the themes which I have introduced here. The Boys' discography certainly contains additional examples of queer love and history which deserve their time in the spotlight, too.

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