

# ***How “Big A Little A” Alludes to Britain’s Instability During the 1980’s***

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WR 121, Fall 2019

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Punk rock saw a rise in popularity in Britain during the 1980’s, as a direct result of social and political unrest. Britain’s economy was unstable, and its government unpopular. The British people were upset, concerned, and unsure about what was going on around them (Kavanagh). As a result, many British citizens began looking for new ways to express their dissatisfaction. One of the more notable methods of expression was punk rock. In fact, political and social commentary were exercised by many 1980’s punk rock bands and their audiences. The origin of this phenomenon can be traced back all the way to the 1960’s.

In his article Dennis Kavanagh described how in the 1960’s and 70’s, after their victory in the second world war, Britain was facing economic decline. Kavanagh explained how Britain had faced restrictive working practices, amateur management, a loss of market, a rise in competition, and a failure to increase industry (Kavanagh). He also detailed how the British people were becoming irritated by these poor economic conditions, stating that, “There was a growing awareness that Britain was at the wrong end of figures regarding strikes, productivity, inflation, economic growth and rising living

standards.” Britain’s economy was in a fragile state, and the British people were becoming well aware of that. They were desperate for a solution, and this meant opportunity for political campaigns. The person who ended up finding success through this unrest was a woman named Margret Thatcher (Kavanagh).

Margret Thatcher was Britain's first female prime minister and was in office from 1979 to 1990 (British Heritage Travel). Thatcher was responsible for the implementation of Thatcherism. Thatcherism replaced the more worker-centric government and can be comparable to “Reaganomics” in the United States, being that it was a conservative system that focused heavily on a less regulated market and higher taxes in order to accomplish economic stability (British Heritage Travel). With such a dramatic shift in administrative ideology, there was bound to be some sort of push-back from the British people and, while Thatcherism was successful in improving Britain’s economy, it didn’t necessarily sit well with some in the population. A notable chunk of these people (particularly in the younger generations) wanted to share their concerns, and punk rock was their medium.

Crass, a British punk rock band of the era, released their album *Christ - The Album* in 1982, only a few years after Margret Thatcher’s election as prime minister (Discog). On it, was the track “Big A Little A” (Discog). The general message of “Big A Little A” was that the people of Britain needed to push back against their government and established authority. They make claims that the ruling classes are actively trying to oppress the people, and that they have been brainwashing them into following their status quo. They state that the people need to find any way possible to fight back, whether it be through

individualism, or full on anarchist revolution. In order to accomplish this, Crass implements a series of tactics throughout “Big A Little A.”

The first tactic Crass uses is a very high high tempo. “Big A Little A” has a very frantic and high tempo rhythm that installs a sense of urgency in the audience. The lyrics and sharp stings of the guitars come out at a pace that is almost too frenzied to understand. It is obvious by the strain that Crass are putting on themselves in this song that they are very passionate about their views on the establishment. And, as a listener, it can be difficult not to experience an emboldened feeling of second hand paranoia, urgency, and chaos. This, in turn, is exactly what Crass were trying to accomplish when composing “Big A Little A.” They wanted their audience to feel how urgent they thought their concerns were and to open their minds to the concepts of anarchism and revolution. However, urgency, paranoia, and chaos weren’t the only tactics Crass used.

As the song continues, Crass goes on to mock and insult several authority figures. They insult Margret Thatcher, the Queen, and even God himself. Crass paints all three of these authority figures as tyrants who are against the best interest of the people, mockingly saying things such as, “My prisons and mental homes have ever open doors, for those amongst my subjects who dare to ask for more” (2:14). Here is just one example of how Crass alluded to the British government taking control over the people. They mockingly suggest that the Queen of England imprisons or institutionalizes anyone who speaks out against the status quo of the time. Crass felt that the people of Britain were under attack by the ruling classes, and they wanted them to know it. Crass were desperate for action and dramatic change, and weren’t afraid to hide their opinion. To

them, there was only one course of action that would yield the changes they wanted.

This course of action? Complete anarchist revolution.

For most, at first glance, anarchism sounds like the worst possible solution for social and political instability. After all, how could chaos be the solution to instability? As it turns out, Crass, and many other punk rock bands of the time, viewed anarchism as a transitional stage. Anarchism is generally viewed as a very black and white matter when, in reality, it is a spectrum of wildly varying ideologies (Fiala). While some anarchists did want a world completely void of an organized government or set of laws, others saw anarchism as a means to an end (Fiala). When Crass claims, “If you don’t like the rules they make, refuse to play their game, If you don’t want to be a number, refuse to give them your name,” (4:55), they aren’t calling for a permanent collapse of civilized society. What they really want is for all laws to be ignored only momentarily. This way, the established authority could be taken down forcefully by the people, and a new system could be created to replace it. Despite how drastic this course of action may sound, it was gaining popularity amongst fans of punk rock. Somewhat ironically, anarchism was uniting and organizing people under a shared interest.

Crass were hardly unique in their extremist views. Many other bands, such as The Sex Pistols and The Clash, were screaming anarchist slogans in between their verses (Swanson). People were getting tired of the way things were and, as a result, once taboo ideologies were now gaining traction. Enough traction to where these ideas were evolving to the point of becoming social movements. In fact, some claim that the surge of

punk rock music and culture of the 1980's and late 70's helped to bring the British people together.

Jon Savage, a writer who is known for his work with punk rock artists, said, "Britain is a class-ridden society, but punk provided an arena where the classes could meet on something like equal terms. In the heat of the moment, it wasn't where you were from, but what you could bring to the table." Here we can see Savage reminiscing back to the peak of British punk rock's popularity and to what the atmosphere was like at the time. Savage describes how punk rock concerts were a place for everyone, regardless of background, to voice their opinions. They were places to explore controversial ideologies and to discuss how they might be applicable to current real world issues. People were actually coming together for the first time in Britain's recent history and, in a manner of speaking, this was the whole point of why "Big A Little A", Crass, and even punk rock in general were conceived in the first place.

"Big A Little A" by Crass highlights the broader themes of British punk rock. At that time, Britain was in a state of general uncertainty. This can largely be attributed to Thatcherism and the more conservative leadership. The people of Britain were unsure of the social and political climate, and what it meant for their futures. In response to this, punk rock began to skyrocket in popularity. Despite Crass's claims of anarchism and antiestablishmentarianism, many in their fanbase, and the fanbases of the bands around them, were uniting against what they felt was wrong. And, in the end, this was the exact reason "Big A Little A" was written in the first place. It was meant to alert the British people, and move them into action. Whether they knew it or not, Crass had allowed

people a chance to push back against the establishment, even if it was only through freedom of expression. This phenomenon is far from being isolated to “Big A Little A” or even Crass themselves. Punk rock went from being an underground niche genre, to a full on social movement whose impact can still be seen throughout the world even to this day.

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### **Author Bio**

Bo Moskal is a freshman at Western Oregon University. He enjoys reading and writing and plans to major in English with a focus on writing. Once he graduates, Bo plans to begin a career in editing while pursuing creative writing in his spare time.