

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE PROLETARIAN  
NOVELS OF ALAN SILLITOE

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NOVELS OF ALAN SILLITOE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Since October, 1958, when Saturday Night and Sunday Morning first appeared, Alan Sillitoe has been hailed as the most powerful working-class novelist to come out of England since D. H. Lawrence. Sillitoe's literary popularity came suddenly, and the ninety pounds paid him by W. H. Allen--his publisher at the time--rescued the struggling writer from near-poverty. Having occasionally slept on suitcases for lack of furniture and written on dustjackets of books for lack of paper, he had already produced--and thrown away--seven complete novels during the previous nine years. But the enthusiastic critics' reviews, resulting in the Author's Club prize for the best English first novel of 1958, placed Sillitoe firmly among critics' lists of writers to watch.

Born on March 4, 1928, into the same drab Nottingham slums portrayed in his early novels, Alan Sillitoe is thoroughly familiar with the poverty of the thirties and the deceptive prosperity of the following war years. His father, a laborer in a tannery, was Christopher Sillitoe; his mother was Sylvina Burton. In 1942, at the age of fourteen, young Sillitoe reluctantly gave up all hopes of

continuing his education and took a job. He recalls that "there were always night classes, yet they seemed a shabby alternative that bright boys were fobbed off with, as opposed to the right of continued full-time schooling. I preferred to give up ideas of education altogether."<sup>1</sup> Working first in the Raleigh Bicycle Factory (which at the time was apparently manufacturing war munitions), Sillitoe came into contact with the impersonal side of industrialized society that he so often decries in his works. He describes his first job as piece-work, chipping brass burrs from ammunition shellcases, for which he was paid one shilling and twopence a hundred. Soon he was upgraded to using a drill; but whereas he had been earning over thirty shillings a week, he suddenly found that his new position netted him less than twenty a week. Frustrated, he finally gave notice that he would look elsewhere for a job, but he was quickly warned that he would first have to apply for a "release" from the Ministry of Labour. Though he agreed to submit to this bureaucratic entanglement, he confesses that "In the days before confirmation of it came through I worked a skilfull 'go slow,' holding up production on some days even though I appeared to be doing my best. This cut my wages to fifteen shillings. I also agitated among the other boys and got several to apply (successfully, because I filled in

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<sup>1</sup>"Drilling and Burring," Spectator, CCXII (January 3, 1964), 11.

their forms) for their 'releases' at the same time."<sup>2</sup>  
 (Significantly, it was this same factory, nearly twenty years later, that provided part of the setting for Arthur Seaton's frustration in the movie version of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning.) Sillitoe moved next to working in a plywood mill and finally to another factory as a capstan-lathe operator before he was drafted for military service in the Royal Air Force following the war.

During his military service, Sillitoe worked for two years as a radio operator in Malaya. Having contracted tuberculosis during that time, however, he was discharged, hospitalized, and given an RAF sickness pension. (For the cure of his disease, he optimistically credits a strict diet of rice and vegetables.<sup>3</sup>) It was during this period of illness that he really began to familiarize himself with various works of great literature. He relates in The Times of London that the initial authors to interest him were "Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides--all the really old boys."<sup>4</sup> He later recounts in the same newspaper how his growing literary interest increased at age twenty-one: ". . . I discovered Lawrence and Dostoevsky, swallowed them at a gulp (it took me several books to stop writing whole

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>R. J. Clements, "European Literary Scene," Saturday Review, LI (January 6, 1968), 29.

<sup>4</sup>"Silver Quill for New Novelist," April 23, 1959, p. 9.

chapters which were little more than pastiches), and decided that I was going to be a writer."<sup>5</sup>

Sometime during this period of recovery in England, Sillitoe met and married Ruth Esther Fainlight, an American who was teaching in Nottingham. Having always wanted to travel, he and his wife decided to live abroad. They moved first to the French Riviera and then to Majorca, where they stayed five years. There they were able to live inexpensively while he began his career as a writer. With the income from his RAF pension and his wife's English lessons, they were able to rent a furnished house for a pound a week and to pay other living costs. The problem with such a secluded existence, however, was that there was almost no reading matter--other than his many volumes of Anthony Trollope's works--to stimulate his mind. He describes it as a "terrible printless country."<sup>6</sup> He was stimulated in his work while there by the friendship and encouragement of the poet Robert Graves, also then a resident of Majorca. Regarding the following years, Sillitoe seems to have spent a large portion of them in England, though Saturday Review records that in 1968 he was residing in Tangier, Morocco, most likely concluding his trilogy, which is set partially in that general area.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>"Alan Sillitoe," February 6, 1964, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup>"Silver Quill for New Novelist," p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>Clements, p. 29.

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, among Sillitoe's early Nottingham works, was adapted to the movie screen and made into a cinematic success with the adept acting of Albert Finney as Arthur Seaton. (Portions of it were even filmed in the old home where Sillitoe once lived.) The following year the same pattern was followed with the success of Sillitoe's collection of Nottingham-centered short stories--The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner. The book was a critical and financial success; Sillitoe was awarded the Hawthornden Prize for Literature in 1959; and movie director Tony Richardson made the title novella into an almost equally praised motion picture, starring Tom Courtney as the rebellious Smith and Michael Redgrave as the Borstal Governor.

Sillitoe's next book, The General (1960), did not meet with such acclaim. He completely broke with his Nottingham working-class tradition in this political wartime allegory set in an unnamed country. Though a few critics liked the work, most did not. Nevertheless, Hollywood saw fit to make it into a movie (perhaps owing to the book's novel approach to a war story, though maybe also, ironically, because of the mediocrity of the book). The Hollywood version, not surprisingly, had as main characters those two great warriors of the screen, Charlton Heston and Maximilian Schell; the plot was "spiced up" by adding a female role (filled by Kathryn Hays) to the originally all-male novel; and the title was changed to Counterpoint. Needless to say, the movie is



hardly remembered today. Sillitoe's next work was a highly autobiographical novel entitled Key to the Door (1961). In it the author returns to his native slums but expands his settings by having part of the action occur in Malaya. Though met with mixed criticism, the book offers an accurate portrait of British poverty in the thirties in contrast with exotic pictures of lush, green Malaya. In 1963 Sillitoe published another collection of Nottingham working-class short stories, The Ragman's Daughter; criticism of this volume has been mixed, though generally favorable. The Death of William Posters (1965) and A Tree on Fire (1967) are the first two parts of a trilogy tracing the wanderings of Frank Dawley from England to Algeria and back. Although generally critical of the first volume, most reviewers seem now to be withholding their final analyses until the trilogy is complete.

Sillitoe has occasionally tried his pen in other areas, but with little success. In 1957, evidently before he had returned to England, Outposts Publications issued a volume of his poetry, Without Beer or Bread. Sillitoe must regret having published it, however; for besides there being no critical commentary available, it is rarely mentioned among his works. It is even excluded from the flyleaf credits in his publications. Three other volumes of poetry--which he does acknowledge--have appeared since then: "The Rats" and Other Poems (1960), "A Falling Out of Love" and Other

Poems (1964), and "Love in the Environs of Voronezh" and Other Poems (1968). Though this poetic exercise no doubt aids Sillitoe in maintaining his usual compact phraseology in his novels, the critical consensus is that it is just as well that he does not base his reputation on his verse. In the field of drama, he has had two further failures. He helped supervise a stage production of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning in 1966, which--when compared to the original novel and following movie version--The Times of London saw as "a crude and infantile piece of work."<sup>8</sup> The following year Sillitoe and his wife produced Citizens Are Soldiers, an updated adaptation of Lope de Vega's Fuente Ovejuna. The Times again censured the writing as being undistinguished, with drab rhetoric between strained colloquialisms.<sup>9</sup> Among his other literary endeavors, Sillitoe has written a travel book about Russia, Road to Volgograd (1964); a children's book, The City Adventures of Marmalade Jim (1967); and an uncollected short story, "Ximbombas."<sup>10</sup> More recently, he is reported to have contributed an account of his personal experiences of evacuation during the second world war to a planned book, The Evacuees, by B. S. Johnson.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>"A Pop Theatre Crib from Pop Religion," February 2, 1966, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup>John Peter, "Clumsy Echo of an Old Play," June 20, 1967, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup>New Statesman, LXII (December 22, 1961), 954.

<sup>11</sup>"Evacuees Look Back," Times (London), November 4, 1967, p. 8.

Sillitoe's writing is a continuation of the tradition begun in the fifties by England's group of writers commonly known as the "angry young men."<sup>12</sup> Unlike the complacent American youth whom Leslie A. Fiedler described in the January 1958 Encounter as "The Un-Angry Young Men," the postwar generation of British writers were seething with a multiplicity of bitter reproofs against their environment. In considering a few of the major difficulties of this environment, Kenneth Allsop recalls:

Being autobiographical for a moment, when I glance back I see down my thirty-seven years the symbols of disruption set close as a picket fence, individual memories starting with a child's view of the General Strike, the cold grey shadow that the Depression threw into even a 'disengaged' suburban household, the fear that was communicated to a disinterested teenager by the flickering menace of Hitler and Mussolini in the newsreels, the first physical encounter with real suffering when, as a junior reporter, I met hunger marchers trudging up from the coalfields, the friends who were killed in Spain, then the major black-out of the war and its epilogue of dreary years, and the dawning of the H-bomb era.<sup>13</sup>

In deciding just who these angry young writers are and what characterizes them, one must keep in mind that no two of them are really alike and that all would no doubt reject being placed into such a general category. Sillitoe, in fact, says that if he had published one of his now discarded earlier novels, "it might have meant I was less easy to push into a pigeon-hole with Kingsley Amis and John Wain and

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<sup>12</sup>Kenneth Allsop, The Angry Decade (New York, 1958), p. 7.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

John Osborne (of whom, living abroad and being cut off completely from the intellectual weeklies and so on, I had hardly heard at the time).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, these new British writers do have certain things in common: They are at least vaguely familiar with the Depression of the thirties (and often strongly influenced by it through oral heritage); they know the physical and psychological discomforts of war, either directly or indirectly through their experiences during or immediately following World War II; they see the dehumanization created by a highly complex industrial society in a class-structured welfare state; they are all fully aware of the constant threat of nuclear annihilation; and, most importantly, in their separate fashions they all rebel against these things.

But Sillitoe's rebellion, unlike most of his contemporaries', began to take a positive, more constructive tack after his first few works. Allsop criticizes the angry young British writers who lack the initiative to go beyond simple rejection to actively work for a better social order. Similar to Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, "a tough dead-end kid intellectual hunched like a killer spider in the middle of his emotional web,"<sup>15</sup> many of these new writers, Allsop implies, are content merely to stand to the side and shout execrations at the world. For if this

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<sup>14</sup>"Alan Sillitoe," p. 15.

<sup>15</sup>Allsop, p. 12.

kind of writer "deviates or carries his opinion through to rejection, it is like stepping off a warm, well-lit stage . . . into the outer darkness."<sup>16</sup> Although Sillitoe stayed within the warmth of this "well-lit stage" through his first three novels, the fourth, Key to the Door, represents the beginning of a significant break with his past policy of inaction. Critics soon began to recategorize him as a writer who offered something new in place of the old, as a writer of the literary New Left in England.<sup>17</sup> And by the time A Tree on Fire was published, there was no doubt remaining that Sillitoe was denouncing the old social order and actively searching for a new one.

Since the present period is often felt to be "one of history's big traffic jams, with all the combined turbulence of new forces of philosophy, religion, politics and science boiling up against the banks of hardened obsolete thinking, of prejudice, fear and mistrust,"<sup>18</sup> Sillitoe is naturally concerned with revolutionary new ideas to replace the more familiar but tired old ones. In an article in the Times Literary Supplement, Sillitoe observes that whereas scientific technology continues to increase at a rapid pace, social progress lags far behind, hindered by many of society's old beliefs. The result is that .

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>17</sup>Martin Green, "Advertisements for Himself," New York Herald Tribune Book Week, August 22, 1965, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup>Allsop, p. 207.

Today that time-lag is greater than in any other age, therefore a writer--with television, atomic power, and even space-travel on the one hand, and judicial flogging, war, and ignorance on the other--should seek to bring the rate of development of ethical ideas closer to that of the scientific. At the moment they are too far apart, and there is a risk that when they do come level we shall find ourselves in a land of 1984, instead of a humanistic society to which technology should entitle us.<sup>19</sup>

Scientific advances, he maintains, should be diverted from the support of exhausted ideas--such as patriotism--which only cause continued hardship for mankind and could very likely terminate all human life. Physical and ideological boundaries are out of date in an age when men are exploring outer space. Today there should be "a spiritual opening of both ideological and national boundaries under a universal government of technology set to contend with nature."<sup>20</sup> Thus, if man would turn his energies from defending worn out value systems to accepting more humanistic ones, he could provide the spoils of scientific advances to all humans rather than only to those who possess political and economic superiority.

What a socially conscious writer should do in this age of conformity to old standards, Sillitoe says, is to be a man of the political Left. But to do so usually relegates the author to an uncomfortable financial position far below that of the writer of the Right. He explains:

The most lauded and popular authors are those whose writing extols the society they live in, or who accept

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<sup>19</sup>"Both Sides of the Street," July 8, 1960, p. 435.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

it without any criticism: these are the literary servants of the mass media. On the other hand, a truly creative writer is likely to become less read (or employed) than he is at the moment. Unwilling and unable to work for television and radio, advertising agencies or the popular press, the writer of good books is going to be on the outside.<sup>21</sup>

As a writer of the Left, then, Sillitoe works toward bettering the position of those who are unrepresented by the mass media. He asserts that all social groups

should have their writers, not only those who live in opulent mansions and mediocre villas but also those who inhabit black and dingy streets. These last, many of whom work in factories, are nearly always referred to as "the masses"; once the blind instrument of revolution, but now no longer so. They are being neutralized by the message of good living, on the supposition that they will stay content as long as enough earthly bread is being given out. It is also recognized that bread and circuses are not enough, but instead of the accompanying and necessary heavenly bread they are being given propaganda regarding the merits of the bread itself, and not about the dignity that goes along with the eating of it.<sup>22</sup>

The workingman must be given some means of self-identification that will restore in him a sense of dignity and provide him with a feeling of individuality. Those of the proletariat who are not afraid to read books suffer from a problem uncommon to any other social class. They find that they are not represented in novels or, if they are, that the novels they read were written by authors of the Right who simply pass on the old values because they are not familiar enough with the workingman to know the real attitudes of the proletariat. Consequently, Sillitoe--with his own working-class

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

background--intends to create a body of literature that accurately conveys the workers' way of life from a worker's point of view.

This study seeks to analyze each of Sillitoe's proletarian novels (including his novella, The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner) as a separate artistic endeavor, to study each in terms of its critical reception, plot, theme, characterization, setting, and style. Except for The General and Sillitoe's trilogy, a separate work will be examined in each chapter of this study, and the various chapters will be arranged chronologically according to the date of publication of the work discussed therein. The General represents a departure from Sillitoe's proletarian tradition and is a political allegory exemplifying the absurdity of war. But since it is out of the mainstream of his writing, it will not be dealt with in this study. Also, since A Tree on Fire (the second novel in Sillitoe's planned trilogy) represents a continuation of the narrative in The Death of William Posters (the first volume of the trilogy), the two will be examined together. Finally, the last chapter of this study will attempt to assess Sillitoe's achievements thus far as a novelist.



## CHAPTER II

### SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING

The critical reception which Saturday Night and Sunday Morning received established Sillitoe as a serious novelist and gave some indication of his ability as a writer. Anthony West of New Yorker magazine went so far as to declare, "even if he never writes anything more, he has assured himself a place in the history of the English novel."<sup>1</sup> That Sillitoe was already assured of some distinction is indicated by his being awarded the Author's Club prize (a silver-mounted quill) for the most promising first novel by an English novelist in 1958. Other criticism, though less enthusiastic, did suggest that Sillitoe had a talent worthy of further consideration. Malcolm Bradbury in the New York Times Book Review concluded that Sillitoe's first effort produced "A fine novel";<sup>2</sup> Martin Price in Yale Review similarly decided that Saturday Night "is a distinguished novel."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most perceptive critical assessment of the book came from Commonweal, which noted, "The great merit of this

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<sup>1</sup>"Books: On the Inside Looking In," XXXV (September 5, 1959), 99.

<sup>2</sup>"Beating the World to the Punch," August 16, 1959, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>"Six Recent Novels," XLIX (September 1959), 129.

book is its demonstration of the inadequacy of merely material gains."<sup>4</sup> Though a few reviewers declined to comment any further than a nod of approval or a shudder of distaste at the novel's frankly presented subject matter, most agreed that Saturday Night was an impressive novel, indicative of the author's literary capabilities.

As the "Saturday Night" half of the book opens, Sillitoe introduces the protagonist, twenty-one-year-old Arthur Seaton, who operates a capstan lathe in a Nottingham bicycle factory. The work is monotonous and dirty, but he compensates for this by scattering most of his fourteen-pound weekly earnings over as many bars as possible on Friday and Saturday nights and by spending Sundays fishing in the tranquil solitude of the country. The remaining money--except for three pounds paid to his mother as his share of the rent--is likely to be spent on additions to his expensively vulgar wardrobe, and the remaining weekend evenings are customarily spent in the beds of the unfaithful wives of various acquaintances. As the novel begins, Arthur is having an affair with Brenda, whose husband, Jack, is what Arthur describes as a "slow husband." Brenda soon becomes pregnant, and Arthur gets advice from his Aunt Ada--who has had fourteen children--on how to effect an abortion. The unusual ritual for an abortion--drinking a pint of gin while taking a steaming bath--is scheduled and carried out with the help of Brenda's

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<sup>4</sup>Thomas F. Curly, "A Disturbing Look at British Life," LXX (September 4, 1959), 479.

slightly retarded friend Em'ler. After witnessing the ordeal, Arthur starts home. But, stopping to have a drink, he accidentally meets Winnie, Brenda's sister, and begins a second affair. Unfortunately, Winnie's husband, Bill, is not as trusting as Brenda's husband; and while on leave from the army, he soon becomes aware of local gossip about a young man whom Winnie has been seeing.

A third, but less obliging, woman is eventually added to Arthur's collection. He meets and begins seeing Doreen Greatton, though he is not as comfortable with her, since she is unmarried and unwilling to share her bed as readily as Brenda and Winnie are. Though Arthur dexterously handles all three, events begin spiraling toward an ultimate collision. It comes at the annual Goose Fair, to which Arthur has managed to escort Brenda and Winnie at the same time. While there, he is recognized by Doreen, and he narrowly escapes the wrath of Jack and Bill, who have confirmed the rumors of his escapades and are seeking revenge. The escape is not lasting, however, and a few weeks later Arthur is brutally beaten by Bill and an army companion. Vanquished in both body and spirit, Arthur stays in bed for over a week before he feels able to crawl back into the world. Soon Christmas is celebrated at Aunt Ada's by a two-day feast in which the Seaton family and all the relatives participate. Arthur somehow feels reborn during this familial celebration, and he decides to become "Doreen's

young man" and enjoy some of the "sweet and agreeable things of life."<sup>5</sup>

Arthur's decision to marry lessens the conflict in the plot of Saturday Night. The elements which are in conflict are, quite simply, Arthur and his environment; and, in view of these conflicting elements, Arthur is typical of the numerous angry young protagonists of the last decade. One of the dominant characteristics of these "angry young men" who began writing in the fifties, and an important factor in their anger, is their constant battle with society. They appear as "outsiders," railing against and often challenging the established order. The plot of Saturday Night illustrates the battles or conflicts which an angry young man must face in his attempts to challenge the legitimacy of his surroundings. Arthur Seaton is involved in a rebellious conflict with the established social mores, a conflict in which his careless actions precipitate violent reactions. The basis of this conflict involves Arthur's affairs with Brenda and Winnie, for it is with their husbands that Arthur's careless nature clashes. Arthur feels no sympathy for the cuckolded husbands: He categorizes husbands as "slow" or "careful," and slow husbands deserve what they get. Having arrived at such a black-and-white vision while

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<sup>5</sup>Alan Sillitoe, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (New York, 1958), p. 176. All subsequent references to this book will be noted in the body of the text.

still young, "Arthur had been lucky in love, and had his fun accordingly, making hay while the sun shone, growing-up from the age of seventeen with the idea that married women were certainly the best women to know. He had no pity for a 'slow' husband" (p. 38). Arthur's conflict with Jack is complicated even more when Brenda becomes pregnant by Arthur, for now he must arrange an abortion and prevent anyone from learning of it. But Em'ler, a mentally retarded friend of Brenda, is the only witness to the hot-gin-and-bath scene, and she unwittingly thinks the undesired child is Jack's. So Arthur regains control over the complication and remains temporarily safe from social censure. The local gossip, Mrs. Bull, represents another complication of Arthur's love-conflict. Since she has spread rumors about his seeing married women, Arthur shoots her with a pellet gun, causing her to be more careful about the future subjects of her gossip.

Although the involvement of the plot through various complications of the central conflict begins slowly, the complications become increasingly frequent until the time of the Goose Fair, when the climax of the action is reached. At this point Arthur dares to escort both Brenda and Winnie to the annual event. But while there, he is recognized by Doreen and is almost caught by the jealous Bill and Jack (for Arthur cannot forever evade retribution for his conjugal trespassing). Though his punishment is delayed for

another chapter, it is in this climactic scene that Arthur's fate becomes clearly apparent. Up to this point he could easily have avoided the vengeful husbands, but now it is too late. At the Goose Fair, Arthur rightfully feels himself to be king of the frenzied, orgiastic revelry; but the hands that give him the helping shove down the carnival's Helter Skelter slide foreshadow the dangerous hands waiting at the bottom, those that will soon beat Arthur to the ground and force him into his own bed for over a week to recuperate from his physical and spiritual degradation.

The denouement is represented by Arthur's beating at the hands of the two "swaddies," his physical renewal in bed, and his spiritual rebirth at his Aunt Ada's Christmas celebration. It is during this "Sunday Morning" half of the novel that Doreen's role in his life is significantly enlarged, and Arthur begins to feel that perhaps he might have been wrong in his former conception of women, having thought of them as

warm wonderful creatures that needed and deserved to be looked after, requiring all the attention a man could give, certainly more than the man's work and a man's own pleasure. . . . Then on the other hand there were women who wouldn't let you be nice to them, women with battleship faces and hearts as tough as nails who rattle a big fist at you and roar: "Do this, do that, do the other, or else"--and you could try all you liked to be kind to them, but they wouldn't have any of it. It'd been better if they had been born men. (p. 38)

Arthur begins to appreciate the measure of security which he had noticed just after he had begun seeing Doreen: "he liked

walking by her side with no fear of being chased by two big swaddies for his trouble" (p. 135). And after the Christmas party, he decides to become "Doreen's young man," leaving little doubt that the two will soon be married.

Because of Sillitoe's method of presenting the story-- in third person but limited to Arthur's point of view--there are no subplots in Saturday Night. There might have been an interesting subplot developed around Brenda's and Jack's relationship, but none was. It is just as well, though, since to do so would have required an awkward shift in point of view and, considering the brevity of the novel, would probably have seriously detracted from the central plot. As a result, the reader's attention is constantly focused on Arthur. However, the reviewer in Saturday Review said that seeing Arthur in third person is one of the shortcomings of the book, preventing Sillitoe from ever really identifying with his protagonist.<sup>6</sup> But since Saturday Night is a novel and not an autobiography, the reviewer's criticism must surely be discounted. Despite certain intimations of autobiography (the Nottingham setting and factory where Sillitoe lived and worked, the parity of the author's and protagonist's initials, and the choice of Arthur--which sounds a great deal like author--for the central character's name), Sillitoe

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<sup>6</sup>James Yaffe, "Many Moods Have These Europeans: England," XLIII (September 5, 1959), 17.

denied any conscious intent at autobiography when he said in an interview in The Times of London, "In a way nothing's fact and nothing's fiction. . . . It all gets minced up and you hardly know what's coming out."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the use of the third person rather than the first gives the themes of the novel a far wider applicability than just to Arthur. For this novel, like Sillitoe's others, reveals an omnipresent concern with the general spiritual vacuum created by a materialistic society.

On the simplest level, the theme of Saturday Night involves an initiation which a youth must undergo to learn a lesson about himself and life. Young Arthur has a rather romantic understanding of people throughout much of the "Saturday Night" portion of the book. Husbands are either slow or careful in handling their wives; women are warm, delicate, lovable little creatures that need and deserve all the attention men can give, or they are cold, domineering brutes with icicle hearts and drill-sergeant personalities. Arthur's initiation--his beating--and the subsequent physical recovery in bed and spiritual recovery at the Christmas party serve to change many of his former attitudes. He becomes more realistic in "weighing-up" both himself and others. Because Doreen has both human strengths and weaknesses,

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<sup>7</sup>"Silver Quill for New Novelist," April 23, 1959, p. 9.



Arthur begins to realize that all women, and men, are more complicated than he had thought. He even is able to pity the husbands who choose or are forced into the slow category. When he later recognizes Bill in a bar, he does not think of the revenge he had planned, but buys Bill a drink instead, thinking, "If he worn't a sowjer he'd be on my side . . . ." (p. 181).

But Arthur gains more than an awareness of the complexity of life through his initiation; he also learns that even after marriage he can still retain his own natural inclination toward rebellion. For "if he was not pursuing his rebellion against the rules of love, or distilling them with rules of war, there was still the vast crushing power of government against which to lean his white-skinned bony shoulder, a thousand of its laws to be ignored and therefore broken" (p. 176). But what is the purpose of his rebelliousness? J. R. Osgerby relates that an Evening Standard reporter quoted Sillitoe as having said of Saturday Night, "It is the story of a man . . . who has his earthly bread but not his spiritual bread. He has no spiritual values because the conditions he lives in do not allow him to have any."<sup>8</sup> Arthur, then, is a kind of "hollow man": He has material possessions, but can find no meaning in life;

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<sup>8</sup>"Alan Sillitoe's Saturday Night and Sunday Morning," Renaissance and Modern Essays, ed. G. R. Hibbard (New York, 1966), XLVIII, 216.

he has an outlet for his physical energies, but none for his intellectual energies. Consequently, he wants more than tangible benefits from life, saying that one day "Blokes with suits and bowler hats will say: 'These chaps have got their television sets, enough to live on, council houses, beer and pools--some have even got cars. We've made them happy. What's wrong? Is that a machine-gun I hear starting up . . . ?'" (p. 176).

Arthur's disgust with his futile position is symbolically reflected in the incident in which a lonely little man throws a beer mug through the window of a funeral parlor in an inebriated effort to obtain a flower vase and headstone for his wife's grave. The window, like the television sets and seductive advertisements which Sillitoe so often decries, holds out glamorized things of beauty or value for potential consumers who, as in the case of the working class, cannot either afford the items or find any real need for them. So, in a frustrated display of impotent desire, the little man smashes the window. Such an action implies that all the "hollow men" must do to rectify their spiritual imbalance is to smash all the images of their class-ridden society, for Arthur advises the man, "There are bigger and better winders ter smash downtown" (p. 96). This theme of social revolution is a persistent one in Sillitoe's works; it takes on even larger proportions in his later novels. One suggestion of what should replace the old order or society is

hinted at in chapter fifteen, as Arthur reminisces about his grandfather's small estate where "you had drawn your own water from a well, dug your own potatoes out of a garden, taken eggs from the chicken run to fry with bacon off your own side of pig hanging salted from a hook in the pantry" (p. 177). This image is symbolically reflected again later as Arthur and Doreen gaze into a stream:

Their faces could not be seen in the water, but were united with the shadows of the fish that flitted among upright reeds and spreading lilies, drawn to water as if they belonged there, as if the fang-like claws of the world would come unstuck from their flesh if they descended into its imaginary depths, as if they had known it before as a refuge and wanted to return to it, their ghosts already there, treading the calm unfurrowed depths and beckoning them to follow. (p. 179)

Such a way of life would give man back his individuality, dignity, and free will to govern his own life; such a way of life is for Sillitoe a kind of freedom that is precluded in the milieu of the English proletariat today.

Largely because of the point of view from which the novel is related, Arthur Seaton is the only fully developed character in Saturday Night. Though a few other characters are relevant to the plot, only a couple of them are even slightly more than flat in their development. While Bill, Brenda, and Winnie remain more or less stock figures, Jack and Doreen occasionally seem to have personalities of their own. Compared with Doreen, however, Jack is a bit more interesting and often appears as Arthur's foil. In fact, Arthur unconsciously notes some of the differences between himself

and Jack: "Jack was timid in many ways, a self-contained man who did not give much of himself away. He chipped-in with his share of the talking, yet never shouted or swore or boozed like a fish, or even got mad no matter how much the gaffers got on his nerves . . . " (p. 37). Jack represents everything that Arthur is afraid of becoming, most notably a "slow" husband. But what Arthur does not realize is that Jack--though he is a cuckold--is a far more humane person than Arthur is. Despite Jack's conjugal flaw, he is friend enough to warn Arthur that "two big swaddies Bill and his army friend] are after you. They're going to bash you up, so don't say I didn't warn you, though God knows, you don't deserve to be warned after what you've done" (p. 86). Though Jack abhors violence, he later recognizes a need to punish Arthur when their encounter at the Goose Fair confirms rumors that Arthur has been seeing Brenda. And, in view of this need, he accepts the burden of instigating that punishment by informing Bill of the name of the bar which Arthur frequents after work. The beating which Jack brings about is, ironically, another act of friendship, since it is Arthur's beating that provides the impetus for his later change in attitude. Sillitoe, then, uses Jack initially as a character foil for Arthur, and eventually as the stimulus of Arthur's reevaluated view of life.

Among the personae who are flat and unchanging, though well done, are Bill, Brenda, and Winnie. Bill is a

two-dimensional character and is evidently only intended as a symbolic representation of the "raw edge of fang-and-claw on which all laws are based" (p. 155). Similarly, Brenda and Winnie are flat, static characters who are used to <sup>symbolize</sup> ~~represent~~ the typical neglected wives who seek sexual satisfaction in the only way left to them: by taking lovers. Doreen also is typical, but in the manner of a young working girl whose friends are all either married or engaged. That is, she wants a young man of her own. But it is her honesty that saves her from being ~~totally~~ two-dimensional and that finally binds Arthur to her. She is sexually honest with him, not allowing their love to be consummated until she is sure that he really loves her. She is not prudish in delaying him, merely careful. While Arthur is still in bed recovering from his beating, Doreen visits him; and he tries to persuade her to get into bed with him:

"Come in, duck," he whispered, feeling the passion she put into the kiss.

"Later, Arthur, later."

Monday when he would see her at the theater was not far off, and perhaps time would pass quickly.  
(p. 162)

Her sexual honesty begins to effect a change in Arthur's attitudes. Eventually he sees there can be excitement and rebellion even in marriage, for during an argument she threatens him:

"My God," she said, "if we weren't in a pub I'd crack you one, a good one as well."

"I bet you would, Doreen Greatton, I'd like that too. But I'd crack you one back. You know that don't you?" (p. 180)

Altogether, Doreen is not actually a round character, but her honesty saves her from complete flatness, just as it saves Arthur from a portion of his former spiritual vacuum.

The characterization of Arthur Seaton is well done, and in spite of Sillitoe's third-person approach to the novel, Arthur assumes the three-dimensional qualities of life. Perhaps it is actually this verisimilitude that caused one critic to conclude indignantly, "Arthur is a jerk."<sup>9</sup> For until the time that Arthur becomes "Doreen's young man," he certainly is a "jerk." A review of the first scene in the book leaves no doubt about Sillitoe's intended interpretation. Arthur tumbles drunkenly down a flight of stairs after winning a drinking bout. Regaining some control over his anesthetized brain and body, he makes his way to the bar, where he orders another pint of ale. He cannot imagine himself drunk enough to have actually fallen down the stairs, and he feels that he needs another pint to calm the strange roaring noise within his cavernous skull. He finishes the twelfth pint of the night and shouts for another, but half-way through the thirteenth he suddenly feels an urge to be sick. Yet it is too late by this time, and he vomits on the first man who cannot move in time. Unable to believe what has just occurred, Arthur simply stares, dumbfounded by the

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<sup>9</sup>Joan McKinney, "Review of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning," San Francisco Chronicle, November 29, 1959, p. 29.

execrations of the bespattered man's wife, who is demanding an apology. But while Arthur is facing her in his stupefied trance, "the beast inside Arthur's stomach gripped him again, and suddenly, mercilessly, before he could stop it or move out of the way, or warn anybody that it was coming, it leapt out of his mouth with an appalling growl" (p. 14). Finally escaping to Brenda's house, where he is able to spend a blissful night while Jack is away, "he made the curious experiment of speaking out loud to see whether or not he could hear his own voice. 'Couldn't care less, couldn't care less, couldn't care less'--in answer to questions that came into his mind regarding sleeping with a woman who had a husband and two kids, getting blind drunk on seven gins and umpteen pints, falling down a flight of stairs, and being sick over a man and a woman" (p. 14). But it is precisely because Arthur is such a "jerk" that he is a little bit like other men of the modern age.

Arthur is similar to the types of protagonists who today are frequently called anti-heroes, non-heroes, or absurd heroes. He is, as are all modern men, a victim of forces beyond his control. He is (as are all Sillitoe's protagonists in one way or another) what Northrop Frye refers to as a hero of the "ironic mode,"<sup>10</sup> being inferior to the reader because he is a kind of prisoner to "bondage, frustration, or absurdity."

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<sup>10</sup>Anatomy of Criticism (New York, 1967), p. 34.

Thus, Arthur philosophizes about his life:

trouble for me it'll be, fighting every day until I die. Why do they make soldiers out of us when we're fighting up to the hilt as it is? Fighting with mothers and wives, landlords and gaffers, coppers, army, government. . . . There's bound to be trouble in store for me every day of my life, because trouble it's always been and always will be. Born drunk and married blind, misbegotten into a strange and crazy world, dragged-up through the dole and into the war with a gas-mask on your clock, and the sirens rattling into you every night while you rot with scabies in an air-raid shelter. Slung into khaki at eighteen, and when they let you out, you sweat again in a factory, grabbing for an extra pint, doing women at the weekend and getting to know whose husbands are on the night-shift, working with rotten guts and an aching spine, and nothing for it but money to drag you back there every Monday morning. (pp. 189-90)

Yet, he is able to accept this as his fate and, like Camus' Sisyphus, can ironically conquer it not only by enduring it but also by getting some degree of joy from it. For Arthur concludes, "Well, it's a good life and a good world, all said and done, if you don't weaken" (p. 190).

From the same anti-heroic standpoint, Arthur's social transgressions appear to be the result not of immorality but of either amorality or a personal code of his own. Before he goes to summer camp, Brenda says to him:

"You don't know the difference between right and wrong."  
 "No, I don't. And I don't want anybody to start teaching me either." (p. 119)

And when Jack advises Arthur that he should not have gone out with Brenda, he replies, "You don't need to tell me what's right and what ain't right. Whatever I do is right, and what people do to me is right. And what I do to you is right



as well" (p. 163). Such candid honesty is further evidenced by Arthur's silent pledge to give Brenda back if Jack ever found out about their affair (p. 38) and by his inexplicable refusal to run away from the swaddies to avoid his forthcoming beating (p. 151). This strong personal honesty, or code, is not fully explained by Sillitoe until he takes up the matter and gives a complete explanation of it in his novella, The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner. Though the code may appear amoral or even immoral by established social conventions, it is for Arthur simply another small kind of rebellion to overthrow the dishonesty inherent in his present society. And although he undergoes a change by giving up Brenda and Winnie, it is not a change in personality. He simply aims his rebellion at a more meaningful goal, at the bureaucratic heart of the body politic.

Just as the skillful character development lends an air of realism to the book, the handling of the setting is one of the major strong points of Saturday Night. The working classes in postwar, welfare-state England are convincingly depicted in their grimy, factory-owned tenements. The older generation of laborers at last begin to feel contentment after years of struggle. Arthur's father, Harold Seaton,

was happy at last, anyway, and he deserved to be happy, after all the years before the war on the dole, five kids, and the big miserying that went with no money and no way of getting any. And now he had a sit-down job at the factory, all the Woodbines he could smoke, money for a pint if he wanted one, though he didn't as a rule drink, a holiday somewhere, a jaunt on the firm's trip to Blackpool, and a television-set to look into

at home. The difference between before the war and after the war didn't bear thinking about. (p. 22)

But Arthur is somehow aware of the deceptiveness of such a life and comes, as a result, to represent a large segment of the proletariat. He feels that "it was no use saving your money year after year. A mug's game, since the value of it got less and less and in any case you never knew when the Yanks were going to do something daft like dropping the H-bomb on Moscow. And if they did then you could say ta-ta to everybody, burn your football coupons and betting slips, and ring-up Billy Graham. If you believe in God, which I don't . . ." (p. 23). Such anxiety typifies the British working class's attitude toward their environment in the fifties. Though they have finally achieved some security, it is, they are aware, a false security and can be removed at any time, leaving them in the hopeless despair of the Depression.

To characterize this despairing anxiety, Sillitoe consistently employs jungle imagery, especially through such recurring words as "beast," "animal," "tigress," "monstrous being," "jungle," "fangs," "claws," and so on. And when Arthur and his brother are taking a walk one evening, the nightmarish events which they experience lead Arthur to declare, "You might as well live in a jungle with wild animals. You'd be better off, in fact. Fang-and-claw in the army was better than this. At least you knew you had to be on your guard. You could always fend for yourself there" (p. 99).

This jungle atmosphere reaches its peak, of course, at the Goose Fair where Arthur comes face to face with those other beasts who are stalking him in search of blood. Afterwards, he muses over his earlier, deceptive sense of security:

No place existed in all the world that could be called safe, and he knew for the first time in his life that there had never been any such thing as safety, and never would be, the difference being that now he knew it as a fact, whereas before it was a natural unconscious state. If you lived in a cave in the middle of a dark wood you weren't safe, not by a long way, he thought, and you had to sleep always with one eye open and a pile of sharp stones by your side, within easy reach of your fist. (pp. 157-58)

The only hope for momentarily escaping this jungle, Arthur finds, lies in identification with the family unit.

The vitality in Sillitoe's pictures of working-class family life is where his chief strength in the description of setting lies. (In fact, the family becomes an overpowering, unifying aspect of his later novels.) In the approximately three-year period of Arthur's life that the story covers, Arthur always appears to find his greatest strength and happiness in some family group. The descriptions of such familial scenes are--as are all other scenes--done sparingly, giving an accurate sense of location without slowing the narrative flow. The scene depicting the morning of the second day of Christmas celebration at Aunt Ada's house illustrates the vigorous setting:

Sam [the African soldier spending Christmas with Ada's family] was awakened by curses from Bert and Dave as they fought to pull the bedclothes from each other. Children were running barefoot about the corridors, and sun shone through the windows. Sam was left to

dress in privacy, and the smell of fried bacon became stronger as Arthur, Bert, and Dave descended to the kitchen. Jane and Jim were talking in their bedroom, and Ralph turned over with a snore behind his closed door. They washed one by one at the scullery sink. Sitting down to breakfast Bert joked about Sam: "Hey, mam, there's a Zulu in my room." Ada told him not to be daft and to leave Sam in peace. When Sam came down he was served with three eggs, and the girls grumbled and said this wasn't fair. But Ada showed them her fist and told them to shut-up. They sat in the parlour after breakfast, roasting themselves before the fire. A wire from the kitchen radio was run through to a speaker, and the whole house was shaken by the chosen blasts of Family Favourites. . . . (p. 170)

Sillitoe is equally skilled in succinct descriptions of locale. He paints portions of Doreen's mother's house as

a kitchen smelling of stale gas and washed clothes. The living room was untidy. . . . A line of dirty washing hung diagonally across the room, and both dresser and shelf were crowded with recumbent Christmas cards, snapshots standing against hair-brushes, clocks with no hands, and cigarette packets. A twenty-year-old radio crackling from a dresser was switched off by Doreen's mother as they [Arthur and Doreen] came in. The table was set for supper: teapot and cups, sugar, a tin of milk, bread, cheese, and some knives and forks. (p. 182)

And the bicycle factory where Arthur and his father work is aptly depicted: "Generators whined all night, and during the day giant milling-machines working away on cranks and pedals in the turnery gave to the terrace a sensation of living within breathing distance of some monstrous being that suffered from a disease of the stomach. Disinfectant-suds, grease, and newly-cut steel permeated the air over the suburb" (pp. 22-23). Such carefully selected items to include in the description of setting--without actually

describing everything in sight--add to the pace of the action in Saturday Night. And this conciseness gives the setting immediacy and reality without the naturalistic clumsiness of too much detail and without the moralizing digressions which might tend toward sentimentality.

Stylistically, Sillitoe is unavoidably connected with the "angry" writers of the fifties, those displaying a strong inclination toward literary realism. Saturday Night's first scene (of Arthur's drunkenness) points up the intended realism that is to follow. Arthur's intoxication is not romanticized and excused, nor is it moralized and condemned. It is simply an indication of the empty, anesthetized state of the British workingman. In such scenes as this Sillitoe is never less than adequate--and is sometimes brilliant--in creating the illusion of reality. However, when his "anger" overcomes him (which is an ever-present problem in all his novels), he is apt to become self-indulgent with his imagery. For instance, he describes the evening as having "dug a slit-trench in his brain," (p. 81) and at army camp later, the lightning "ploughed a furrow through the depths of his mind into which entered the second broad wink of lightning" (p. 121). Occasionally, Sillitoe's imagery even borders (unconsciously apparently) on a grotesque humor: The houses of Nottingham have "digital chimneys like pigs' tits on the rooftops," and the "Stars hid like snipers, taking aim now and again when clouds gave them

a loophole" (p. 144). Such careless writing is rare though.

On the other hand, Sillitoe's manipulation of the Nottinghamshire dialect is far more adroitly done. Without being so exact as to be unreadable, he captures the flavor of the industrial Midlands' oral heritage. When Harold Seaton returns from work he says to his wife:

"I can see yer've mashed, Vera," Seaton said fussily. "It's paynight yer know!"  
 "Why," she said, "you cheeky sod. I mash every night for you. I know yer'd go mad without yer cup o' tea." (p. 54)

On the same evening, the family is visited by Arthur's sister, Margaret, and her five-year-old son, William, to whom Arthur begins to tell a ghost story:

"Now then yer little bogger, let me tell yer a story. . . . Once upon a time--sit still then or I wain't tell yer. Tek yer fingers out o' my tea--there was a bad man who lived in a dark wood, in a gret big castle, wi' water drippin' down the walls, and spider-webs as big as eiderdowns in every corner, winders that creaked and trapdoors everywhere that swallowed people up if they made a false move. . . ."  
 Margaret interrupted him. "All right then, our Arthur, you'll frighten the poor little bogger to death." (pp. 54-55)

As Arthur temptingly waves a five-pound note over William's head a few moments later, he says, "Look at the young bogger, . . . peein' !issen to see it" (p. 56). The style of Saturday Night, then, is a product of the realism that is inherent in the "angry" writers of the fifties and helps to reflect, as a result, the author's distaste for the social shortcomings of his culture. But that style is not so realistic as to duplicate every nuance of the pronunciation found

in Nottinghamshire, thereby becoming a burden to the flow of the book. The style is, as one critic notes, "actually highly stylized, mannered, 'created'--in short a literary language"<sup>11</sup> that does not weigh the reader down with unnecessary local jargon.

Saturday Night was both a popular and a critical success; the praise lavished upon it and the prize awarded it are well-deserved. Though criticized for the author's choice of third-person point of view, the choice does not really cause Sillitoe to be so detached from Arthur Seaton that Arthur loses his believability. This authorial identification with Arthur is, in fact, what led several critics to view the work as autobiography. But it clearly is not. Further, though one critic has seen Arthur as a "jerk," this characterization is intentional; for, as another critic has observed, "Arthur Seaton may be a young punk with an overdose of resentment but he is not unrepresentative."<sup>12</sup> Arthur represents an entire generation of "jerks" with "overdoses of resentment," a generation of "hollow men" which Sillitoe is trying to analyze in an effort to help them reestablish their sense of identity and purpose in their present meaningless lives. The only criticism which seems valid--though it is

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<sup>11</sup>Saul Maloff, "The Eccentricity of Alan Sillitoe," Contemporary British Fiction, ed. Charles Shapiro (Carbondale, Illinois, 1965), p. 106.

<sup>12</sup>Curly, p. 479.

small--regards Sillitoe's occasional self-indulgence in bombastic language. But these few instances do not endanger the quality of the novel, which is an artistic literary portrait of the age it depicts and of the social class in which it is set.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER

The appearance of The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner renewed the critical praise that was lavished on Sillitoe after Saturday Night and Sunday Morning was published. Saturday Review, although previously somewhat reserved in its praise, conceded that "With his robust sense of life and the authority with which he can evoke the working-class scene, Sillitoe gives promise of becoming an important writer."<sup>1</sup> Even the critic who had condemned Arthur Seaton as a "jerk" felt that with the publication of Loneliness, Sillitoe "is no 'one book' writer, and is indeed a contender for the ranks of major contemporary authors."<sup>2</sup> Finally, Malcolm Bradbury added the most generous criticism of all. Loneliness, he stated "confirms the impression of some of us who think that Mr. Sillitoe is one of the best English writers of the day."<sup>3</sup> He concludes that "Alan Sillitoe is certainly, on this reading, a major writer who

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<sup>1</sup>David Boroff, "Glimpses of a Shabby Gaiety," XLIII (April 16, 1960), 27.

<sup>2</sup>Joan McKinney, "Review of The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," San Francisco Chronicle, May 1, 1960, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>"Beneath the Veneer, Pure Animal Life," New York Times Book Review, April 10, 1960, p. 50.

ought to be read." Needless to say, all the reviews of Loneliness were not so complimentary, but few failed to acknowledge its artistry.

The first of the three sections into which Loneliness is divided introduces Smith, the adolescent protagonist (though he is unnamed until several pages further into the story). Smith is seventeen and already a veteran criminal and Remand Home alumnus; he is, in fact, now serving a term in an Essex Borstal for robbing a Nottingham bakery. The governor of the reformatory has Smith busy practicing cross-country running three mornings a week in hopes of winning the "Borstal Blue Ribbon Prize Cup For Long-Distance Cross-Country Running (All England)"<sup>4</sup> to add to his office's proud collection of trophies won by his wards. But Smith vows to himself not to win the race, for to do so would be to play "their" game, to subscribe to the brand of honesty practiced by "In-law blokes like you and them, all on the watch for Out-law blokes like me and us" (p. 9). Smith does enjoy the running, however, since it gives him time to think and to speculate upon his and the governor's meanings of honesty. He also gains a sense of freedom and self-fulfillment in his early-morning jaunts through the icy winter woods, despite the class battle that is raging in his mind.

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<sup>4</sup>Alan Sillitoe, The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner (New York, 1959), p. 11. All subsequent references to this book will be noted in the body of the text.

Section two is a flashback which explains how Smith came to be involved in his current battle of the class war. His father died from cancer, and the family received 500 pounds in insurance and benefits; but, unfortunately, the money was soon gone--spent on new clothes, a "twenty-one-inch telly," a new carpet (since the old one was ruined by the blood from his father's dying), bags of groceries, and a new fur coat and bed to impress his mother's "fancy-men" (pp. 18-19). Having grown accustomed to such luxuries, Smith and his friend Mike set out to find or steal more money. In their search they notice an open upstairs window of a bakery and climb in, take the cash box, and leave. They net seventy-eight pounds, fifteen and fourpence ha'penny each on their first big criminal effort. Aware that a sudden, unexplainable rise in financial standing will arouse suspicion, they decide to roll the paper money into a bundle and stick it up the drainpipe outside Smith's backdoor--not a very clever hiding place as it turns out. An investigating detective, unable even after repeated questionings and searches to find any evidence to incriminate Smith, makes one of his many visits on a rainy morning. As Smith begins another series of evasive answers, the detective notices several bills floating from the drainpipe ten inches from his leg. Smith suddenly knows that he is bound for Borstal.

In the final section, the reader is returned to the Borstal where it is summer and the cross-country race is about to begin.

Smith still pledges to himself to lose the race, knowing that the "pop-eyed potbellied" governor and his "pop-eyed potbellied" friends will bet on him. During the five-mile race, Smith is again able to think about honesty, and he concludes that his father's death was symbolic of true honesty. For, despite his terminal cancer, his father had refused to enter a hospital--"like a bleeding guinea-pig, he raved at them" (p. 43)--and would accept no strong drugs to avoid the pain. As the climax of the race (and of the story) is reached, Smith rips a piece of bark from a tree and, stuffing it into his mouth, begins to cry. As he does so, he deliberately slows down so that the runner behind him can pass. When Smith is certain that he has lost and has been seen by the governor, he trots up to the finish line and collapses without ever crossing it. As punishment, the governor fills the remainder of Smith's six months with the dirtiest and most debasing jobs he can find. But Smith does not regret his actions; in fact, the race and the governor's punishment cause him to develop pleurisy, which happily serves to keep him out of the army but does not prevent him from succeeding in his profession as a criminal.

The plot of Loneliness represents a continual movement of Smith's mind from an unconscious to a conscious awareness of the class war that is his social inheritance. When he first enters Borstal, Smith is aware through previous social conditioning that there is a powerful and malevolent force of

which he must beware. His previous few contacts with "their" law confirmed his ingrained suspicions about "them" and their power, and at Borstal he becomes fully cognizant of the threat which they pose for him; for, "when the governor kept saying how 'we' wanted you to do this, and 'we' wanted you to do that, I kept looking round for the other blokes, wondering how many of them there was. Of course, I know there were thousands of them, but as far as I knew only one was in the room. And there are thousands of them, all over the pexeaten country, in shops, offices, railway stations, cars, houses, pubs . . . " (p. 9). Smith now knows the force with which he is in conflict: the seemingly omnipotent and omnipresent "they" who have the money and power to retain the "whip-hand" over the rest of society, making it "dance as they desire / With jail and gallows and hell-fire"<sup>5</sup> if it does not follow "their" rules. As he ponders this relationship between himself and his natural enemy during his long-distance running, Smith decides that the only honest way for him to fight this enemy while still its captive is simply to lose the race. As he says, "I only want a bit of my own back on the In-laws and Potbellies by letting them sit up there on their big posh seats and watch me lose this race" (p. 39). And as he proceeds to lose the race, his "straight-forward adolescent rebellion and loss of moral bearings [are]

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<sup>5</sup>A. E. Housman, "The Laws of God, the Laws of Man," Complete Poems (New York, 1959), p. 111.

dislodged by positive moral polarization and fidelity to new-found 'honesty.'"<sup>6</sup> Smith's conflict with society has by this time clearly evolved from mere rebellion against the bourgeois "them" to class identification with the socially deprived "us."

The climax of the evolution of Smith's class identification comes during the race, as his mind inexplicably recalls the death of his father. When Smith first imagines that he sees his "bloody dad behind each grass-blade in my barmy runner-brain" (p. 41), the grass takes on the symbolic role of the working class. Then he recalls his father's "honest" death--his refusing to be uselessly hospitalized or to take any drugs except "the pain-killer that mam and I got from a herb-seller in the next street" (p. 43). (It is, perhaps, not insignificant that his father's cancer struck at the throat, thereby implying that he has been strangled by his environment.) So, like his father's having remained "honest" to his class loyalties, Smith realizes that he must lose the race and prove his "honesty" also. But such a realization is a painful experience:

I rip a piece of tree-bark with my fingers and stuff it in my mouth, chewing wood and dust and maybe maggots as I run until I'm nearly sick, yet swallowing what I can of it just the same because a little birdie whistled to me that I've got to go on living for at least a bloody sight longer yet but that for six months I'm not going to smell that grass or taste that dusty bark or trot this lovely path. I hate to have to say this but something bloody-well made me cry, and crying is a thing I haven't bloody-well done since I was a kid of two or three.  
(pp. 43-44)

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<sup>6</sup>N. Denny, "The Achievement of the Long-Distance Runner," Theoria, no. 24 (1965), p. 4.

Exactly for what he is crying, he does not readily know. But on a metaphoric level, his tears represent "lost innocence, his fated parents, the squalid death of his father, his father's courage, the sickness of society, the murderous rage of 'Them' at his chosen outlawry, the loneliness of the long-distance runner."<sup>7</sup>

Though there was formerly little doubt that Smith would follow through with his plan to lose the race and embarrass the governor, there is no question of it after his climactic recognition of his class allegiance. Perhaps the reason for this lack of doubt that he would or could change his mind about losing the race lies in the situation or "trap" in which he appears. The Borstal "trap" is only the superficial and more tangible one; the more basic one in which Smith finds himself inextricably caught is his environment--his class-ridden, bourgeois-ruled society. And because Sillitoe makes Smith the focus of interest and chooses to have him relate the story in the first person, there are no subplots. There would hardly have been space for any anyway, considering the brevity of the story. One reviewer sees Sillitoe's point-of-view choice as the downfall of the novella. Carrying this criticism further, he feels that "The 'honesty' and the depth of the rejection here carry no conviction and the attempt to jazz it up leads Mr. Sillitoe where we would expect it to lead

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

him--to bluster and sentimentality."<sup>8</sup> Yet what better vehicle than first person, I-as-major-character, could a writer choose to get into a protagonist's mind? Indeed, J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye has much in common with Loneliness in this respect, and Salinger's choice of first-person point of view can hardly be said to weaken the novel. The "bluster and sentimentality," furthermore, are--if they are there at all--characteristic of an adolescent's mind and should cause the reviewer to commend rather than condemn Sillitoe's ability to portray the working of a teen-ager's mind.

Since Loneliness is not intended to be a fully developed novel, it is not required to conform completely to novelistic structural decorum. Its denouement, in fact, covers less than three pages. Smith is assigned to carting dustbins, spreading slops, and scrubbing floors, "miles and miles of them" (p. 46). But the pleurisy which he develops as a result of his Borstal experiences ironically works in his favor by saving him from the army.

The conclusion of the plot is the most frequently criticized part of Loneliness. Smith reveals, "I'm going to give this story to a pal of mine and tell him that if I do get captured again by the coppers he can try and get it into a book or something. . . . he's my pal. That I do know" (pp. 46-47). Such a conclusion seems ambiguous and untidy,

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<sup>8</sup>"Borstal and Cambridge," Times Literary Supplement, October 2, 1959, p. 557.



for it leaves the reader wondering whether Smith has been caught again, or whether his "pal" has given him away by publishing the story anyway. Is Smith's rebellion futile? Is his class loyalty useless? Both guesses are probably wrong since Sillitoe is careful earlier in the story to indicate Smith's awareness that man is never safe from anything and must always be on his guard:

the long-distance run of an early morning makes me think that every run like this is a life--a little life, I know--but a life as full of misery and happiness and things happening as you can ever get really around yourself--and I remember that after a lot of these runs I thought that it didn't need much know-how to tell how a life was going to end once it had got well started. But as usual I was wrong, caught first by the cops and then by my own bad brain, I could never trust myself to fly scot-free over these traps, was always tripped up sooner or later no matter how many I got over to the good without even knowing it. (p. 17)

It is the reader, then, who has been caught off guard by allowing himself to believe that Smith will not be apprehended again, but this does not in any way imply that Smith's rebellion is a failure or that his class loyalty is useless. On the contrary, such confrontations help Smith to survey his enemy and to plan future strategy.

Like many of Sillitoe's works, the thematic base of Loneliness is the protagonist's expanding awareness of his environment. Smith's awareness, as a matter of fact, is quite similar to Arthur Seaton's in that both come as a result of conditioned attitudes, much thinking, and a bitter initiation into maturity. Smith's attitudes, like Arthur's,

are the result of his social class; his thinking and initiation, however, are results of his long-distance running while in Borstal. What his thinking and initiation lead Smith to be aware of is the constant existential struggle between "them" and "us."

Before he is sent to Borstal, he was frequently questioned by a detective, who, Smith noticed, always said "'We' 'We,' never 'I' 'I'--as if they feel braver and righter knowing there's a lot of them against only one" (p. 28). After he is sent to Borstal, Smith illustrates his newly-learned knowledge of "their" strength:

They've got other things as well [as Borstal], like prison and, in the end, the rope. It's like me rushing up to thump a man and snatch the coat off his back when, suddenly, I pull up because he whips out a knife and lifts it to stick me like a pig if I come too close. That knife is Borstal, clink, the rope. But once you've seen the knife you learn a bit of unarmed combat. You have to, because you'll never get that sort of knife in your own hands, and this unarmed combat doesn't amount to much. . . .

You see, by sending me to Borstal they've shown me the knife, and from now on I know something that I didn't know before: that it's war between me and them. (pp. 14-15)

From this recognition of class conflict, Smith is able to derive a personal philosophy of honesty, a code which orders and sustains his life despite his social deprivation. While in Borstal, he recalls an incident in which he and three cousins, upon finding some other youths having a picnic, scatter the picnickers and steal their food. From this experience he concludes, "Well, I'll always feel during every

bit of my life like those daft kids should have felt before we broke them up. But they never dreamed that what happened was going to happen just like the governor of this Borstal who spouts to us about honesty and all that wappy stuff don't know a bloody thing, while I know every minute of my life that a big boot is always likely to smash any picnic I might be dishonest enough to make for myself" (p. 16). Such a concern for the definition of honesty leads Smith unconsciously to develop a rudimentary code of class loyalty. During the race, he speculates on what winning--rather than losing as he has planned--would be like. He decides that it would mean "running right into their gloved wall-barred hands and grinning mugs and staying there for the rest of my natural long life . . . ." (pp. 38-39). So, after deciding that "I am honest, that I've never been anything else but honest, and that I'll always be honest" (p. 13), Smith determines that he will not conform to society's expectations and will lose the race, thereby showing the governor "what honesty means if it's the last thing I do, though I'm sure he'll never understand because if he and all them like him did it'd mean they'd be on my side which is impossible. By God I'll stick this out like my dad stuck out his pain and kicked them doctors down the stairs: if he had the guts for that then I've got the guts for this" (p. 44). This code of honesty which Smith has evolved is, then, a stern loyalty to family and class; it is, furthermore, a straightforward and unhypocritical form of

honesty based upon true feelings rather than arbitrary social or legal expectations.

In the framework of class conflict, Smith--known only by his representative last name--comes to stand as a symbol of all English workingmen who are at the mercy of their society. Borstal, likewise, becomes a microcosm for that society, perhaps even literally for the entire British isle. By means of this extended symbolism, "Loneliness" becomes a metaphoric attack upon "the regimen fondly devised by British society for . . . the 'good citizen,' who can be relied upon to do nothing to upset the status quo. Borstal stands, only slightly exaggerated, for all those agencies--the church, the law, the schools, the successfully castrated 'community'--delegated by an authoritarian society . . . to force a dead, travestied way of life on the weak and underprivileged."<sup>9</sup> Standing in revolt against this "authoritarian society" is Smith, representative of the "weak and underprivileged" in whose spirits may be observed the vigorous life force so desperately lacking in the bourgeois "them."

After "a few hundred miles of long-distance running," Smith is able to deduce, "At the moment it's dead blokes like him as have the whip-hand over blokes like me, and I'm almost dead sure it'll always be like that, but even so, by Christ, I'd rather be like I am . . . than have the whip-hand over somebody else and be dead from the toenails up. Maybe

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<sup>9</sup>Denny, p. 7.

as soon as you get the whip-hand over somebody you do go dead" (p. 13). Consequently, Smith existentially chooses to stay "alive," even though it means a more difficult life for him. For, being a long-distance runner in life and accepting the intrinsic loneliness of such a demanding existence is, he realizes, the only honest and real way of life to be had. He explains:

all I knew was that you had to run, run, run, without knowing why you were running, but on you went through fields you didn't understand and into woods that made you afraid, over hills without knowing you'd been up and down, and shooting across streams that would have cut the heart out of you had you fallen into them. And the winning post was no end to it, even though crowds might be cheering you in, because on you had to go before you got your breath back, and the only time you stopped really was when you tripped over a tree trunk and broke your neck or fell into a disused well and stayed dead in the darkness forever. (pp. 37-38)

This long-distance running in life is Smith's way of retaining a bit of freedom and personal identity against the ubiquitous "them," those emasculated "dead" men of the middle class who always seem to have the whip-hand and who endlessly seek to mold "us" to fit "their" pattern. But Smith's choice, though harsh, is the more artistically rewarding of the two. Unlike those in power, he is able to engage life on an elemental basis, which provides him with the freedom and awareness of reality necessary for being human and alive. The inherent loneliness of this honest and real way of life is often indicated when Smith begins to feel like the first or last man on earth. Feeling

like the first man is a good feeling; it is as if he senses some hope for his fellow wretches of the lower class, as if there is a means of escape from their degradation. But it is when he feels like the last man on earth that he becomes depressed and fears that there is no possibility for emancipation. He says of this feeling, "when I look out into the bushes and frozen ponds I have the feeling that it's going to get colder and colder until everything I can see, meaning my red arms as well, is going to be covered with a thousand miles of ice, all the earth, right up to the sky and over every bit of land and sea" (p. 9). So he tries to rid himself of this feeling and to regain the first-man feeling that gives him a sense of optimism "to face the odds / Of man's bedevilment."<sup>10</sup>

Since Loneliness is principally concerned with defining the state of mind, or code, of the British proletariat in their dealings with the world outside their frame of reference, the story has no fully developed characters. Smith, in his anti-heroic fashion, comes closest to being three-dimensional. But even he fails truly to surprise the reader, and accordingly remains slightly less than flesh and blood by E. M. Forster's definition of a round character.<sup>11</sup> For, in the symbolic framework of the tale, Smith takes on an almost allegorical significance and comes to stand for the entire body of British

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<sup>10</sup>Housman, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup>Aspects of the Novel (New York, 1954), p. 78.

workingmen beset by the unwanted laws and morality of the dominant middle class. Furthermore, because it is made clear from the beginning that Smith intends to lose the race, there is little opportunity for him to vacillate and thereby surprise the reader with any complexity of his mind in grappling with a dilemma. Finally, Smith does almost nothing but run and think in the actual story, and little is said of his physical appearance except "I was long and skinny for my age" (p. 7). Smith's overall characterization, then, is not complete enough to qualify him as round by E. M. Forster's standards.

But he is a completely believable creation. For if Sillitoe's choice of viewpoints discourages an objective look at Smith and if there are no surprises in the short span of the story, there certainly is a more than adequate psychological portrait of a social delinquent. In fact, one critic points out the numerous environmental factors influencing Smith's actions:

He is the classic delinquent or problem child of the new age, the expendable jetsam of industrial 'affluence'. All the ingredients are there, sufficient to satisfy the sternest Encounter sociologist: the unfortunate home background (working-class insecurity, slum life, unemployment, periodic want); the unsettling parental factor (ambiguous relationship with the father, parental violence and--in sociologists' terms--neglect, maternal promiscuity, orphanhood); the moral vacuum (born of environmental confusion of priorities--itself a product of the age--contempt for authority, casual criminality). The drabness, the moral torpor, the uncomprehended restlessness--the brutalized nature of the background--and with it its extraordinary vitality, its cheerful stoicism and warmth, are deftly evoked and completely

convincing at every point. Yet it is a brooding background as well, heavy with a sense of hopeless inevitability.<sup>12</sup>

Sillitoe's portrayal of the central character, therefore, is obviously a reliable rendering of a social outcast and rebel. However, with such an atmosphere of "hopeless inevitability," it is evident that Smith's actions are not simply part of an isolated case study but are, instead, symptomatic of a much greater and more pervasive illness plaguing England's social structure. As a result, Smith should be seen as merely one of many British working-class youths who find it impossible to cope legally with the unpalatable role which a more prosperous segment of society has relegated them to.

The minor characters in Loneliness are no more than flat, but the presentation of two of them suggests Sillitoe's maturing skill at creating memorable flat characters. Smith describes his robbery companion, Mike, as "a nipper compared to me, but underneath the scruffy draught-board jersey he wore were muscles as hard as iron, and you wouldn't think to see him walking down the street with glasses on and hands in pockets that he'd harm a fly, but I never liked to get on the wrong side of him in a fight . . ." (p. 22). As a novice at robbery, Mike soon reveals a bit of his personality as well, as Smith says to him,

"Hang on," I said, pulling the door to, "we're in no hurry."  
 "Not much we aren't," he says over his shoulder.

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<sup>12</sup>Denny, p. 3.



"We've got months to splash the lolly," I whispered as we crossed the yard, "only don't let that gate creak too much or you'll have the narks tuning-in."

"You think I'm barmy?" he said, creaking the gate so that the whole street heard. (p. 24)

Sillitoe's other memorable minor character in Loneliness, though not as well-described as Mike, is the detective who periodically questions Smith about the robbery. Unfortunately, he lacks even the slight character development given to Mike, but he is unforgettable as a type. Smith sees him as "Borstal Bernard in nicky-hat, Remand Home Ronald in rowing-boat boots, Probation Pete in a pit-prop mackintosh, three months clink in collar and tie . . . a 'tec who never had as much in his pockets as that drainpipe had up its jackses. He was like Hitler in the face, right down to the paint-brush tash, except that being six-foot tall made him seem worse" (p. 27). But, even though Smith despises policemen as enforcers of repugnant laws, he respects their honesty. As a result, Smith sees the detective as "honester than the governor, because he at any rate had had it in for me and I for him, and when my case was coming up in court a copper knocked at our front door at four o'clock in the morning and got my mother out of bed when she was paralytic tired, reminding her she had to be in court at dead on half past nine. It was the finest bit of spite I've ever heard of, but I would call it honest" (p. 37). It should be reiterated, however, that neither Mike nor the detective may be considered as more than flat, two-dimensional characters since the story

belongs solely to Smith and since most of the action occurs in Smith's mind. Consequently, all the minor characters play roles which are only peripheral to the turmoil of Smith's mind.

The setting for Smith's mental turmoil in Loneliness is an Essex Borstal, presumably during the 1950's. But, other than lending an atmosphere of "hopeless inevitability," the setting functions only as the symbolic background for Smith's social and spiritual imprisonment. In fact, there is virtually no effort expended on describing the reformatory or any of its prisoners. Smith explains that since he has no particular complaints about life in Borstal other than the obvious one of having to stay there at all, "I don't have to describe what they gave us to eat, what the dorms were like, or how they treated us" (p. 14). Therefore, Borstal is tantamount to the repressive, regimented society against which Smith feels obliged to rebel. Smith, then, sees Borstal--or Britain, on a more symbolic level--as being similar to military conscription. Living in Borstal and being in the army are essentially the same: "what's the difference between the army and this place I'm in now? They can't kid me, the bastards. I've seen the barracks near where I live, and if there weren't swaddies on guard outside with rifles you wouldn't know the difference between their high walls and the place I'm in now" (p. 11). For, Borstal is, after all, not what "they" say it is, Smith concludes. Although "they

called it a progressive and modern place, . . . they can't kid me. . . . Borstal's Borstal no matter what they do" (p. 11).

Though the description of Borstal lacks the detail to give it the individuality necessary to be pictured in the mind, the flashback represented by section two of the novella reveals Sillitoe's already-familiar skill at giving just enough detail to establish a working-class atmosphere. Smith describes the euphoric luxury which his dead father's insurance money bought: "Night after night we sat in front of the telly with a ham sandwich in one hand, a bar of chocolate in the other, and a bottle of lemonade between our boots, while mam was with some fancy-man upstairs on the new bed she'd ordered" (pp. 18-19). Smith later describes the evening of the robbery, as he and Mike look for something to steal:

So on this foggy night we tore ourselves away from the telly and slammed the front door behind us, setting off up our wide street like slow tugs on a river that'd broken their hooters, for we didn't know where the housefronts began what with the perishing cold mist all around. . . . /Mike/ didn't twig it was foggy at first and cleaned his glasses every time I pulled him back from a lamp-post or car, but when he saw the lights on Alfreton Road looking like octopus eyes he put them in his pocket and didn't wear them again until we did the job. We hadn't got two ha-pennies between us, and though we weren't hungry we wished we'd got a bob or two when we passed the fish and chips shops because the delicious sniffs of salt and vinegar and frying fat made our mouths water. (p. 21)

Such description is rare, however, and Loneliness remains basically a story relying upon the general rather than the

particular for creating its atmosphere.

One of Sillitoe's most useful tools in establishing verisimilitude, despite the generality and lack of descriptive detail, is Smith's realistic colloquial narrative. Smith's mind races along with his body, and the reader is never allowed time to pause for breath. Inasmuch as Smith lives in a world in which things happen fast (sudden prosperity, loss of prosperity, imprisonment, and so on), he must be quick--physically and mentally--to keep up with the changes. As a result, his mental turmoil is never bogged down by mulling over some fine philosophical distinction; his conflicts, instead, are soon resolved and his code soon formulated without unnecessary delay. As Smith prepares for his morning trot through the woods, his mind follows the rhythm of his hurried movements:

So there I am, standing in the doorway in shimmy and shorts, not even a dry crust in my guts, looking out at frosty flowers on the ground. I suppose you think this is enough to make me cry? Not likely. Just because I feel like the first bloke in the world wouldn't make me bawl. . . . No, it's when I stand there feeling like the last man in the world that I don't feel so good. . . . So I try to kick this feeling out and act like I'm the first man on earth. And that makes me feel good, so as soon as I'm steamed up enough to get this feeling in me, I take a flying leap out of the doorway, and off I trot. (pp. 8-9)

Of this rapid, staccato narrative pace, one critic observes, "the long-distance runner speaks in a prose that jumps and slithers and races. To begin with it is curt, appropriately shivering. As his imagination (and body) warms it becomes hectic and breathless, struggling for articulacy. Finally,

having mastered his dreaming, off he trots, not just from the doorway, but into the next paragraph."<sup>13</sup>

The same critic feels that Sillitoe offers a stylistically fresh viewpoint which many of the older living writers lack, most notably C. P. Snow.<sup>14</sup> Such a viewpoint enables Sillitoe to create a character who abounds in vitality, outrage, and invective rather than in the delicately refined sensibilities of so many idealized protagonists. This vigorous style is obvious when Smith reveals why he has been trained at long-distance running:

They're training me up fine for the big sports day when all the pig-faced snotty-nosed dukes and ladies-- who can't add two and two together and would mess themselves like loonies if they didn't have slavies to beck-and-call--come and make speeches to us about sports being just the thing to get us leading an honest life and keep our itching finger-ends off them shop locks and safe handles and hairgrips to open gas meters. They give us a bit of blue ribbon and a cup for a prize after we've shagged ourselves out running or jumping, like race horses, only we don't get so well looked-after, that's the only thing. (p. 8)

It is this honest and realistic lack of refinement in Sillitoe's style that helps make Loneliness a success. Smith speaks and thinks exactly as a proletarian adolescent from the English Midlands might be expected to. Indeed, John Updike remarks of Sillitoe's style, "Mr. Sillitoe is a writer of great gifts,

<sup>13</sup>Philippa Moody, "In the Lavatory of the Athenaeum: Post-War English Novels," Melbourne Critical Review, no. 6 (1963), p. 86.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 85-87.

and Smith's inner stream of invective is often very beautiful."<sup>15</sup> Although the language of Loneliness is often filled with outrage, it is never quite as bombastic as the language of Saturday Night; Sillitoe gives the impression by the time of this second major prose work of having learned to control his fervor.

Loneliness, then, is a tale of a youth's growing awareness of his environment. During his running, Smith learns a valuable lesson about the terms of the class war which he had always suspected but had not been certain of until Borstal. Smith and Borstal come to represent, in the process of this discovery, all the beleaguered working class and all those of the middle class who have the "whip-hand." As a result of this metaphoric dimension, Smith is only one of many juvenile delinquents, symptomatic of Britain's class-conscious social illness. Smith's unrestrained outrage not only demonstrates Sillitoe's dexterity in handling the language of a proletarian Nottinghamshire adolescent, but also reveals Smith's tenacity in the face of an ultimately invincible foe who will always have the "whip-hand": "but even so, by Christ, I'd rather be like I am" (p. 13).

## CHAPTER IV

### KEY TO THE DOOR

Key to the Door, which appeared just a year after The General, did not receive the same amount of critical praise that was given to Saturday Night and Sunday Morning or to The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner. In fact, Hans Koningsberger in Saturday Review decided that Key "is bewilderingly boring and mediocre" and that it "reads very much like a first novel."<sup>1</sup> Most reactions to the book, however, were not quite so adverse. Another reviewer felt that it "has curiosity-value of the best kind. It is not a well-made novel . . . ; but it has the credibility of the accurately observed and recorded."<sup>2</sup> And Paul Pickrel in Harper's Magazine proclaimed it to be "the work of a writer with powerful feelings and the skill to express them in dramatic action. . . . [Sillitoe] has the look of a major writer and Key to the Door is a fine achievement."<sup>3</sup> Finally, in a more lengthy consideration of the book, a writer in

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<sup>1</sup>"Dropped Aitches in Malaya," XLV (March 24, 1962), 26.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Hynes, "A Quality of Honesty," Commonweal, LXXVI (April 6, 1962), 47.

<sup>3</sup>"The New Books: Two English Novels," CCXXIV (June 1962), 96.

Critique asserts, "Alan Sillitoe's Key to the Door seems to me a better performance than most reviewers have been willing to concede. . . . this book is more complex, more mature, and more interesting than anything he has yet done."<sup>4</sup> In spite of such divergent analyses, the most commonly agreed-upon criticism of Key is that it is poorly constructed and sometimes poorly written. But, on the other hand, most critics also agree that the carefully-drawn characters and settings make Key an outstanding sociological novel in a truly realistic vein.

In Key Sillitoe returns to the Seaton family of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning and introduces Arthur's oldest brother, Brian, as the protagonist. The first of the novel's four parts is a prologue which shows the poverty and misery of the Depression years from the time just before Harold Seaton and Vera Merton meet and marry until Brian is about five years old. During this period, Sillitoe is primarily involved with establishing the dismal setting and foreshadowing much of the future through several incidents: Vera's hesitancy about marrying the often moody and unemployed Harold; Brian's dreams of distant exotic paradises; and the demolition of condemned housing areas by airplane, causing Brian to imagine that one of the airplanes will crash. Section two, entitled "Nimrod," traces Brian's

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<sup>4</sup>Frederick P. W. McDowell, "Self and Society: Alan Sillitoe's Key to the Door," VI (Spring 1963), 116.



growth to early adolescence and uncovers the various hereditary and environmental forces which shape Brian's future way of thinking. Much of his time is spent with his grandparents at the Nook, where he witnesses his grandmother's superstitions and his grandfather's iron-fisted rule over his property--which, for him, also includes his sons and daughters. Much of Brian's other time is spent at home, listening to his parents' arguments about their lack of money, or reading secondhand romantic novels that he has bought with carefully saved pennies. At still other times, Brian rummages piles of rubbish at the "tips" (refuse dump) for salable items, or he searches for food or money with his cousins Bert and Dave Doddoe. In the remaining interspersed scenes of "Nimrod," Brian tries to avoid the ever-flailing hand of his school's headmaster, Mr. Jones.

As the third section, "The Ropewalk," begins, World War II has just ended and Brian--now nineteen, married, and a father--is serving in Malaya as a radio operator for the Royal Air Force. There, he spends his time sending and receiving wireless telegraphy messages; visiting his lover, Mimi, who works at the "Boston Lights taxi-dance hall";<sup>5</sup> and planning to climb a nearby, heavily-jungled mountain, Gunong Barat. Interspersed among the chapters of this Malayan section are other

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<sup>5</sup>Alan Sillitoe, Key to the Door (New York, 1962), p. 220. All subsequent references to this book will be noted in the body of the text.

Nottingham chapters, which, as flashbacks, serve to continue Brian's history where "Nimrod" left off. In them, the reader learns of Brian's various jobs after leaving school and of his passionate courtship of Pauline Mullinder. In the fourth section, "The Jungle," the same pattern of alternating settings is followed. In the interspersed Nottingham flashbacks, World War II ends, and Brian and Pauline are married after she reveals to him that she is pregnant. In the Malayan chapters, Brian and several of his friends climb Gunong Barat but fail to reach the summit. When they return to camp, they are told to prepare for an expected war with Communist guerillas, but the group is soon rushed back into the jungle to try to save any possible survivors of a recent airplane crash. While searching for the airplane, however, Brian encounters one of the guerillas but allows him to escape. And later, when the rescue party is unsuccessfully ambushed by a group of guerillas, Brian inconspicuously shoots at tree trunks rather than at his attackers. When the time for his discharge arrives, Brian decides to return to his family in England rather than to stay in Malaya with Mimi.

As in Sillitoe's previous proletarian novels, the elements in conflict in Key are the protagonist and his environment. Sillitoe goes to great lengths to illustrate the hereditary and social factors which influence Brian Seaton's rebellion against his environment. Indeed, over half of the

book is devoted to a twenty-year chronicle of Brian's past-- from before his conception to after his conscription. It is the extent of this chronicling, however, which makes the Nottingham portions of the work seem too sociological at times. Obviously, Sillitoe is trying to show what caused the many Arthur Seatons, Smiths, and Brian Seatons, and to reveal the conflicts which face a working-class child even before he is born and which eventually make him into a social rebel. To this end, the Nottingham sequences are superb; but as part of a novel, they are too bulky in their wealth of detail. Many of the sequences are subtly related to each other by artistic devices, such as the train whistle which Brian hears when a mad horse is killed (p. 140) and when a pig is slaughtered (p. 183), both times recalling the death of Merton's hunting dog, Gyp, that was killed by a train. But other incidents, though well-written, do not actually seem to be necessary. Sillitoe spends several paragraphs, for example, revealing that Harold Seaton occasionally does not go to work after oversleeping (pp. 188-89). Again, such explanation may aid in understanding certain attitudes of the British proletariat, but it does not seem necessarily related to Brian's conflict. As a result of such seemingly indiscriminate detail, the Nottingham chapters, especially those in the first two sections of the novel, are only indirectly related to the plot. Although these chapters are intended to show the rising action, the real action of Key

does not begin until Brian is in Malaya.

The structural crisis of Key is reached when Brian, while in the RAF in Malaya, allows himself to be talked into shooting a stray dog. Afterwards, he senses the useless cruelty of his action and is reminded of the similarly pointless death of his grandfather's hunting dog. He reproaches himself for having killed the stray dog and declares, "In fact, it's the last thing I shoot at all" (p. 305). Roughly from this point forward, Brian recognizes a need for a brotherhood of mankind, a mutual recognition among men of the value of life. The irony which results from this recognition--that his ties to the British establishment, which he is supposedly defending, are not as binding as those to his fellow man--is underscored when the climax of the novel is reached. While on a rescue mission in the jungle, he is attacked by a Communist guerilla; but as Brian overpowers his attacker and picks up his rifle, he is suddenly aware of the mechanical noise of slotting a bullet into the barrel, "retrieving a picture of a dog by his DF hut lying like a length of rag and floorcloth with a hole in its head" (p. 409). So, Brian lets him escape: "'I let him go because he was a comrade! I didn't kill him because he was a man!'" (pp. 410-11). Just what Brian learns from his encounter is not completely defined because of Key's brief denouement. Since the plot has no loose ends

to connect at the end, a long denouement is not actually needed; but a span of less than thirty pages to cover Merton's death and Brian's farewell to Mimi and departure from Malaya leaves Sillitoe with too little room to include a thorough explanation of the "key" which Brian has found in his jungle encounter.

In addition to his hurried denouement, Sillitoe has difficulty with his frequent shifts in time and occasional shifts in point of view. When Mimi is introduced to the reader, Sillitoe makes a smooth time shift as Brian, standing outside her room, recalls his first impressions of her at the Boston Lights nightclub and later on a ferry (pp. 222-24); but the shift back to the present is too abrupt and leaves the reader wondering where he is:

The lights of Kota Libis were large, and they /Brian and Mimi/ saw people moving about and waiting as the boat did a half-turn ready for the approach. His spent fag dropped into the water. "Where shall I meet you?" sliding an arm around her.

"At seven, outside the camera shop. In the village."

The lizard hadn't moved for ten seconds. What sort of view did it have of her, upside down on the ceiling? (p. 224)

Sillitoe also has trouble with shifts in point of view. There are various viewpoints presented--Vera's, Merton's, Harold's, and Brian's--but Brian's is predominant. Yet, the movement from one point of view to another is occasionally confusing and awkward. In fact, Sillitoe falsely appears not to shift viewpoints from Brian to the omniscient author on

one occasion: "I wish I'd realized what I was doing when I let that bloke go. I'd still have made him scoot; but if only I'd done it cold and intentionally. He felt as if he'd been tricked and laughed at, not knowing how the trick worked . . ." (p. 427). Despite the switch in subject pronouns, Brian is the only person whose viewpoint is presented. And the "he" in the third sentence does not refer to "him" in the preceding sentence. Such careless writing, unfortunately, led one critic to say of Key, "Mr. Sillitoe may even now be . . . regretting that he has published its draft version, or what many readers are likely to regard as its draft version."<sup>6</sup>

Although a "draft version" appearance mars much of the technical side of Key, the theme is clear enough: As a result of his Malayan initiation into maturity, Brian discovers the "key to the door" and becomes aware of his inescapable social ties. When he is conscripted and asked to list his overseas assignment preference, he does not fill in the attached sheet "which asked you to state any reason why you might not want to be sent overseas. I'm a nut case, he thought. Maybe I could stay in England, being married and Pauline about to have a kid. But for some unfathomable reason he had left it blank, never knowing what had induced him to do so, neither questioning nor regretting it . . ." (pp. 394-95). Representative of his romantic compulsion,

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<sup>6</sup>"Scenes from Provincial Life," Times Literary Supplement, October 20, 1961, p. 749.

Malaya becomes a hazy, unreal fantasy for Brian. It is a limbo in which he loses touch with reality: "In the enervating damp heat of Malaya, both thought and action took place in a kind of haze, and he sensed strongly that his mind could be far deeper and sharper than it was" (p. 292). While there, Brian plans an expedition to climb Gunong Barat in the anxious hope of fulfilling his romantic childhood dreams of actually seeing lush tropical jungles. But prior to the trip, he has a premonition:

A thought he considered stupid and out of place came to him: "I don't want to go up to Gunong Barat. The only place I want to be is Nottingham." It slid the earth from under him, like the trick when someone flicks the cloth from beneath a tableful of pots without disturbing them, the difference being they are nearer the reality of true-grained wood. With the ground insecure, he knew he would still go to Gunong Barat. . . . In any case, Gunong Barat meant the jungle, a luring and mysterious word that had haunted him all his life from books and comics and cinema, an unknown flimsy world meaning something else, so that it would teach him perhaps whether or not he wanted to enter the real world it sometimes appeared to be screening. Without the expedition there would be no future, only a present. . . . (p. 296)

Although he is unable to reach the summit of Gunong Barat--a symbol of his romantic aspirations--his later excursions into the jungle and subsequent encounter with the guerilla make Brian want to leave his dreamworld and return to England. He deduces, "Malaya was a battlefield whose values had no part of reality, wasn't life to him any more, and he had to get away by taking a slow boat to England" (p. 426).

Though he is a romantic, Brian has at least gained a realistically perspective view of his life. For "The first

time he realized that he had a past, and had not evolved out of a dream. . . . In a week he would be on that boat [to England], going back in a way to join himself up with this past. . . . Nevertheless, little of the past was yet visible; and neither had he much vision of the future, but at least he knew that both existed" (p. 430). The past of which Brian now is able to feel himself a part consists of years of poverty in a rigidly stratified society, one in which the only means of survival was a strong reliance upon the family unit. And the future which he glimpses is embodied in the guerilla whom he encountered in the jungle. Brian classifies himself as a socialist (p. 205), but he feels that the Communists have "an up-and-coming vision that our side can never have any more" (p. 426). More important than his political vision, however, is simply his growing ability to think in a humane--if still a bit romantic--fashion. For he now feels that "all men were brothers and that the wealth of the world should be pooled and divided fairly among those who worked, doctors and labourers, architects and mechanics. . . . At least, my eyes have been opened. All I've got to do now is learn to see with them, and when one person sees, maybe the next one will as well" (p. 432). So, in the end, "Looking back, and looking forward, he somehow felt he had the key to the door . . . ." (p. 439).



On a deeper level, Key may be read as an illustration of existential commitment. Brian despises the regimentation which the RAF forces upon his life; so he wears civilian clothes on duty, avoids drills, and refrains from saying "Sir" to officers whenever possible. In fact, he is completely disillusioned with the reactionary government which he has been conscripted to defend. While Brian is filling sandbags to keep out the guerillas, Sillitoe observes that "Brian had no confidence in what they were being made to fortify, believing that sooner or later, even if they built a stone wall ten yards high, the whole lot would crumble" (p. 430). Consequently, life is essentially meaningless to Brian, faced with the absurdity of defending a decrepit system which he would rather overthrow. But, since this absurdity removes all meaning from life, he is able to impose his own personal system of values upon the meaningless old system according to Jean-Paul Sartre's familiar formula: "Existence precedes essence." That is, by Brian's act of giving freedom to the guerilla whom he has captured, he achieves a freedom of his own. He has made an existential commitment by breaking away from the accepted behavior of his society and asserting his individuality, thereby gaining freedom from social conformity. Still young, and still rather romantically inclined, Brian is now aware of the need for personal commitment to open the door to which he has found the key.

As a young romantic with an ingrained bent for rebellion, Brian Seaton is the best developed character in Key. While in Malaya, he reads an RAF description of himself as, "Air-craftsman Second Class Brian Seaton, nineteen, five feet nine, medium build and blue eyes. No distinguishing marks" (pp. 204-5). He feels that a more nearly complete dossier should say:

Politics: Socialist; used to read Soviet Weekly.  
 Sex-Life: Plenty until he fell foul of the authorities and received his two years. Five-fingered widow now.

Complexes: Mother, father, and inferiority.

Patriotism: Nil. Wants watching.

Favorite film star: Jeanne Crain.

Anything worthwhile: Good at wireless-operating and earns his six bob a day. Works sixty hours a week--so we won't let him go yet.

Discipline: None. Even wears civvies on duty. (p. 205)

As important a part of his personality as this rebelliousness, however, is his tendency toward romanticism. As a child, he once asked his mother to take him to another, better wading pool which he thought lay on the other side of the river. Although she explained that no such pool existed, "he still, on standing in the common yard of a comparatively quiet afternoon, thought he heard--even without putting hands to his ears--the sound of a thousand children joyfully playing by some sunlit story-book river that would need a long bus ride to get to" (p. 5). Shortly afterwards, while visiting his grandparents, his romantic imagination is again aroused by a verse underneath a painting: "If you love me as I love you, / Nothing will ever part us two--" (p. 61). He chants

the lines so often that they become inextricably imbedded in his mind. And over a decade later, as he prepares to leave Malaya, he again recalls them, "which, pleurably brooding on his living with Pauline, was how he felt about her" (p. 421).

Brian's romantic tendencies are also stimulated by his choice of literature and music. At school he is thrilled by Treasure Island, and later he buys two other books for himself: The Count of Monte Cristo and Les Misérables. The unjustly persecuted protagonists of the latter two become his secret heroes. In fact, when operating his transmitter one night in Malaya, he identifies himself to a French operator in Saigon as Jean Valjean (p. 211). At other times at his transmitter, he sends out passages from "Kubla Khan" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." And on still another occasion during his late-night duties in the radio hut, Brian is reminded of the music from Bizet's L' Arlésienne Suite. Though he had first heard it about six years ago,

The sad melody had haunted him ever since, bringing sharply before his eyes the vision of a sun going down over the flat grey land of the Camargue, where the air is cool and still to the insane cry of someone dying of love.

When the first hearing of the music finished, he was in tears, a shameless desecration of his working manhood. (pp. 291-92)

Brian's romanticism, then, provides him with an "instinctive sense that a nobler life, apart from industrialism, is possible in rural surroundings."<sup>7</sup> He seeks this "nobler life" symbolically

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<sup>7</sup>McDowell, p. 120.

in his Malayan dreamworld by climbing Gunong Barat and in his world of reality--Nottingham--by visits to his grandfather's small, rural estate.

Brian's grandfather, Merton, is the best delineated and most nearly three-dimensional of the lesser characters in Key. He is "a Lawrentian figure in his vitality, violence and closeness to the earth."<sup>8</sup> Generally, he resembles a kind of wrathful, Old Testament god--omnipotent, full of vengeance, and capable only of a gruff form of love. In the prologue, Sillitoe discusses Vera's coming home late one evening: "It was bad luck for Vera--the last of Merton's brood young enough to be disciplined in this way [with a stick]--because she shared his anger with the dogs now barking in the yard, was the wall to his violent and frequent upstarts of passion, which usually--though not always--coincided with signs of defiance in what animals or humans happened to be under his control . . ." (p. 17). Despite his willful disposition, Merton is capable of a crude, primitive sort of affection toward certain people, especially toward Brian. When Brian helps him in the garden, Merton muses over his grandson's inexplicable combination of interests: "He smiled widely at Brian, who did not know he was observed, admiring him for a good worker, a quality that made him fond of anyone. Yet he recollected him in the

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<sup>8</sup>Walter Allen, "In the World of the Bottom Dogs," New York Times Book Review, March 25, 1962, p. 5.

kitchen at evenings, head down over a book or pencilling an imaginary map, pastimes he couldn't reconcile with the good sense of toil exhibited by the Brian now before him. It was an amusing combination that did no harm" (p. 133). Despite his enormous vitality, Merton is eventually defeated by the spread of industrialization. As a new age of increased factory dependence arrives, his small estate is sold to provide space for rows of factory-owned housing. Having been forced to move into town, he decides to visit the site of his old home. But he finds it deserted and the new houses only half completed: "a wilderness. . . . 'Didn't expect this bleddy lot,' he muttered, stooping as he walked, coat collar pulled up, though his shoulders and legs were already wet" (p. 422). The resulting chill develops into pneumonia, from which he is apparently unable or unwilling to recover, thereby symbolically marking the line between past and future in Brian's mind.

Sillitoe's growing ability at creating realistic minor characters is further evidenced by his depictions of Harold and Vera. Harold--moody, illiterate, and baffled by an incomprehensible world--is an industrious worker whenever work is available. But unskilled labor is too plentiful in the thirties, and Harold must depend on the dole for what little money he can get. As a result, his moodiness is intensified and reveals Vera's inability even to cope with small problems: "Seaton was born with his black temper

and would die of it, and Vera had never been able to express and defend herself, first against her father, then against her husband. The only thing she could do with any thoroughness was worry, which probably sprang from thinking she hadn't had the best out of life and never would. If there was nothing tangible to worry about she was bored, so there was always something to be harrassed into a problem" (pp. 185-86).

Harold's moody obstinacy and Vera's puerile romanticism (even to the point of considering suicide to end her petty problems) are well pictured, showing the obvious source of many of Brian's character traits. Among the other personae who influence Brian are Pauline and Mimi, but they are more nearly two-dimensional. Pauline is an interesting enough character, but she seems to be a stock figure among Sillitoe's admirable females. She is "just below the stature that could have given her the label of a 'strapping girl'" (p. 280), and she is passionate and warmhearted. In short, she could be Ada Doddoe, Vera Seaton, or Doreen Greatton. But, even so, she is a more realistic figure than Mimi, who is a flat creation, a customary portrayal of an oriental nightclub hostess.

Although Pauline and Mimi are not well delineated, the settings of the respective countries which each represents are skillfully depicted. Indeed, the Nottingham and Malaya settings are among the most frequently praised aspects of Key. While raking through piles of rubbish on the desolate "tips" one day, Brian sees his cousin Bert. But to get to where Bert is standing, Brian must cross a morass of submerged

debris:

To meet him meant crossing the swamp by stepping stones of grassy islands, and tin drums that had rolled from high levels. Brian's feet were pushed well forward as he went through spongy grass towards the opposite ash bank, surprised that such a varicoloured collection of mildewed junk could meet in one place: half-submerged bedticks and 'steads, spokeless bicycle wheels without tyres sticking like rising suns out of black oily water, old boxes rotting away, a dented uninhabited birdcage in front like a buoy at sea. Farther in the canal direction lay a dog-carcass sprawled half out of the water, its scabby grey pelt smoothed down by wind and rain. I'll bet there's rats whizzing around here at night, he thought, big rats with red eyes, and maybe cats with green 'uns. The pervading stench was of rotting diesel oil, as if countless foul dish-rags were soaked in suffocation and held under the surface. (p. 73)

This atmosphere of rubble and debris is also reflected in Harold's and Vera's first apartment, which is partially furnished with Harold's gleanings from the "tips" (p. 31). Merton's home is never quite so desolate, however, and is more nearly typical of a simple, sometimes tawdry, working-class habitation. The kitchen has a "mixed pervading aroma of teas and spices, kindling wood and tobacco, baked bread and stew. Brass candlesticks towered on the shelf, with two black and white statue dogs, . . . and white pot ornaments were placed between seaside souvenirs of Cromer and Skegness, Cleethorpes and Lowestoft. A magnifying glass hung from a nail. . . . On the other side of the room was a glass-faced cupboard of tea-services, and rows of Merton's prize horseshoes" (pp. 195-96). The exotic atmosphere of Malaya's primeval jungles is also aptly depicted during Brian's expedition up Gunong Barat:

The watercourse no longer roared, was thinner and more rhythmic in its travelling the higher they climbed. To reach the escarpment top meant another spell among the trees. There were no paths and they kept by instinct to the stream. Brian chopped and hacked until his muscles turned as dead as the wood under his feet. Fallen trees, overgrown with shrubbery and blocking his way, often proved to be no more than hugh cylinders of purple soil held into shape by the tree's covering of bark, which took longer to decompose: he stepped on to what had once been a tree or log and sank into soft soil. The only sign of life came from a few ants scurrying busily over the leaves or one or two leeches looping towards them like pieces of bootlace. The whole place stank like a shithouse, Kirkby called on taking the lead. When they stood still there was no sound but the distant spate of water from the falls or the music of a few birds in the treetops. And when they moved there was only the crashing of six men imposing their momentary will on the primeval forest, a splitting of shrubbery soon lost down the empty valleys. In the flashpan sunlight of a sudden emergence to the stream, an iguana darted into hiding. (pp. 333-34)

The settings of Key, especially of its Malayan sections, are better and more elaborately drawn than those of any of Sillitoe's preceding novels. Of course, one reason for this improvement is his desire to show the effect of these environments upon Brian's way of thinking. But it should not be overlooked that this skill is evidence of Sillitoe's maturing talent.

Perhaps the most notable (and unfortunate) aspect of Sillitoe's style in Key is that his language appears to have regressed in some respects. The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner seemed to indicate a movement away from the bombastic imagery which was sometimes evident in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, but in Key his improbable imagery



is even more farfetched than ever before. Some of the most prominent of these images are: "A pair of streets joined hands . . ." (p. 9); "the sun like a drowned rat . . ." (p. 135); "the nipple of her small pointed breasts ready to embrace the roof" (p. 222); "White shirt flew on to him like a bird of peace . . ." (p. 277); "his rage at her temper went like the matter from a pimple back into his bloodstream and left him calm" (p. 309); and "The car rattled down the road, shook hands with a corner, and was out of sight" (p. 401). An equally turgid image is: "A long thick layer of cloud spearheading towards the Pennines was ghost-green on top and turning pink below, indicating a half-beaten-to-death sun lurking somewhere, licking its wounds after an agonizing Armageddon of autumn" (p. 23). All of Sillitoe's language, of course, is not so fustian; at his best, he is able to use terse, concrete language to convey the desired impression. For example, he describes Harold's walk to the dole-office: "Tar-smells of clear-skied summer or the lung-stinging frost of winter were all the same, pleasant to get out of the house into, from the walls of the house to farther-apart walls of roads and streets which had no roof and let the good sky in on you" (p. 122). Such succinctness of expression is probably more characteristic of Sillitoe's use of language than is his infrequent but disturbing self-indulgence. For, despite the novel's length (439 pages), its pace is generally swift

and smooth-flowing; and there is no diminution of reader interest.

Clearly, Key is a highly autobiographical novel, and it may be because of this that Sillitoe includes so much poorly-sifted detail. In addition to the overly long book which results from such indiscriminate selection, Sillitoe has problems with shifts in time and point of view and occasionally with bombastic language. But such shortcomings may be overlooked in view of the fact that they are the result of Sillitoe's attempt to expand his scope of writing to include more than one setting and viewpoint. In fact, the book, though not a complete success, is not a failure because it reveals his growing ability to create believable minor characters and because it illustrates in its realistic fashion the various influences which contribute to the creation of a social rebel. And, if for no other reason, it succeeds because it is a novel which captures, in an artistic manner, the reality of the frustration and poverty which constitute the social inheritance of the English working class.

## CHAPTER V

### THE DEATH OF WILLIAM POSTERS AND A TREE ON FIRE

Since Sillitoe's next two novels represent part of a projected trilogy, this chapter will consider them jointly. The first volume of this trilogy, The Death of William Posters, did not meet with the same success as did his preceding ones; it was viewed by many critics as a failure. John Davenport even went so far as to say that Death "is one of the most atrociously boring novels I have ever read. . . . I have never met, nor do I wish to meet, such a vapid, arrogant and essentially feeble brute [as the protagonist]. . . . This dumb and irresponsible character walks out on nothing into nowhere. The dullness of the novel is indescribable."<sup>1</sup> Many other reviewers, though less splenetic, still saw the book as a failure. Frank Kermode felt that it "is certainly, by any standards the author would accept, a failure";<sup>2</sup> and Martin Green decided that "though the book is interesting, it is not successful."<sup>3</sup> Relatively few reviewers had more than slight praise for the novel; but of the author, Eric Moon

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<sup>1</sup>"Zentimental Journey," Spectator, CCXIV (May 14, 1965), 640.

<sup>2</sup>"Rammel," New Statesman, LXIX (May 14, 1965), 765.

<sup>3</sup>"Advertisements for Himself," New York Herald Tribune Book Week, August 22, 1965, p. 4.

concluded, "With all his agonizing, I like him fine the way he is."<sup>4</sup> And Hilary Corke contended that despite its flaws, Death "is still a good novel."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps much of the unfavorable criticism that Death received was the result of the publisher's failure to note that it is the first installment of a trilogy. And, as such, parts of the book may appear irrelevant or underdeveloped. Most of these parts are made clear, however, in the trilogy's second volume, A Tree on Fire; and its critical reception was therefore less adverse than was Death's. Though one reviewer saw Tree as "an atrociously silly, immature and humourless novel"<sup>6</sup> and another thought it to be a major failure,<sup>7</sup> most critics declined to make a final judgment of the book, apparently waiting for the publication of the trilogy's final volume. Nevertheless, Robert Taubman perceptively noted that "the second novel of his [Sillitoe's] trilogy is no more orderly than the first . . . ; but like Norman Mailer he makes even such a progress through disorder worth watching."<sup>8</sup> Yet, most

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<sup>4</sup>"Against the Establishment," Saturday Review, XLVIII (August 21, 1965), 27.

<sup>5</sup>"Stories and Symbols," The Listener, LXXIII (May 27, 1965), 797.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Seymour-Smith, "Thinking Pink," Spectator, CCXX (January 1968), 43.

<sup>7</sup>Julian Jebb, "Rant Before Passion," Times (London), November 11, 1967, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup>"Empty England," The Listener, LXXVIII (November 9, 1967), 610.

present criticism should remain tentative until the publication of the final volume of the trilogy.

It appears that Sillitoe's trilogy will have two plots: one involving Frank Dawley, and another involving Albert Handley. However, the plot developing around Frank is most frequently the focus of the author's attention, especially in Death. Frank Dawley, a twenty-seven-year-old Nottingham factory worker in the late 1950's has just left his job and family because he can no longer bear the treadmill that his life has become. While roaming around England and living off his half of the 400 pounds received from the sale of his automobile, he meets and begins an affair with a middle-class Lincolnshire midwife, Pat Shipley. Pat, it turns out, has also left her husband--an advertising copywriter--to avoid marital monotony and to give some meaning to her life. Frank spends a comfortable winter reading and making love, but Pat's husband, Keith, visits them in the spring and tries to blackmail her into returning to their home. Frank loses his temper and begins a fight--something which Pat loathes. Therefore, after beating Keith, Frank sets out again on his wanderings. He then spends a period of time in London where he works as a parking lot attendant until he earns enough money to quit and spend his days reading again. Soon he encounters Albert Handley, a painter whom he had met in Lincolnshire. And at one of Albert's showings, Frank meets Myra Bassingfield, a middle-class housewife, and

tries to persuade her to leave her surveyor husband and join in Frank's wanderings across Europe. Since she also is bored with the monotony of life, she agrees to go. As they leave her house, however, her husband tries to kill them with his car; but he kills himself instead, by missing them and hitting a wall. Frank and Myra (now pregnant with Frank's child) go first to Majorca, then to Granada and Tangier, where Shelley Jones--an American revolutionary whom Frank met on the ship to Majorca--asks him to help drive a load of supplies across the border into Algeria for the FLN (National Liberation Front) who are fighting for independence from France. Frank agrees to the mission; but while in the desert they are forced unexpectedly to kill a patrol of French soldiers. As a result, Frank takes command of the group, and--rather than leave the supplies and start back toward Morocco--he decides to aid the cause even more by joining the FLN in the desert, "the only place where he would find something."<sup>9</sup> While in the desert, Frank experiences the life of a guerilla fighter: He is bombed; he attacks two airports; his friend Shelley dies of gangrene; and he approaches insanity from the heat and strain of desert fighting. Later, John Handley, Albert's brother, comes to Algeria to find Frank, who is now in another hospital after being wounded during his trek through

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<sup>9</sup>Alan Sillitoe, The Death of William Posters (London, 1965), p. 318. All subsequent references to this book will be noted in the body of the text.

the desert; and together they begin their journey back to England. Finally out of Algeria, Frank takes an airplane from Gibraltar to England in his hurry to see his wife and Myra; but John is afraid to fly, so he travels by train. He kills himself, however, just before reaching England. Frank finds Albert's family living with Myra, and he decides to join their commune, hoping also to persuade his wife and children to move in.

The second plot, involving Albert Handley, is developed mostly in A Tree on Fire. Albert's artistic talent, accidentally discovered by Keith Shipley, has made him wealthy and famous. But prosperity and fame are a nuisance for him, and lead Ralph Spilsby (Mandy's boyfriend) to steal one of his prized paintings. In addition, Mandy repeatedly begs Albert to buy her "a new red Mini,"<sup>10</sup> to which he finally agrees if she will persuade Ralph to return the stolen painting. Although there is a hole cut out of its center when the painting is brought back, Mandy gets her car anyway, and she spends three weeks driving it up and down the super highway that connects London and Lincolnshire. In fact, until the car breaks down, she makes the highway her home, racing every other car she can find and sending home illustrated postcards of rest stations and intricate entrances

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<sup>10</sup>Alan Sillitoe, A Tree on Fire (New York, 1968), p. 280. All subsequent references to this book will be noted in the body of the text.

and exits. Later, there is a family celebration during a visit by Myra, who is now back in England with Frank's child. During the dinner, Uncle John--having regained most of his sanity--announces that he plans to go to Algeria and either help Frank or bring him back to England. And in the middle of the night, he burns the Handley house down and sets off for Algeria. Finally, after Frank has been helped back to England by John, he joins Albert's family in another celebration, during which Albert's oldest son, Cuthbert, suddenly returns home--after giving up studying for the priesthood--and becomes a part of their revolutionary community.

The basic conflict in Death and Tree is the same one with which most of Sillitoe's works are concerned: man against his social environment. There is, however, a notable shift in the conflict, for Sillitoe now involves classes other than the proletariat in the struggle. Pat Shipley and Myra Bassingfield are both middle-class housewives who rebel against the empty monotony of their familial ties, trying to give some meaningful direction to their aimless lives in the process. Albert Handley, as a painter, is classless: "Prejudices went to pieces against the barbs of Handley's classlessness, which disconcerted most of the English he bumped into" (Tree, p. 135). The primary battle in which the two protagonists, Frank and Albert, are involved, then, is their struggle to overthrow "the eternal mean categorisation of the rattled elite, and dead bourgeoisie, and the people who knew their place because



they had taken into their systems the poison from centuries of this so-called élite, and into their bodies the serf-bones of degradation" (Tree, p. 419).

Frank's and Albert's conflicts have individual characteristics in addition to their common one. Frank's is a spiritual conflict in which he must discard his old way of life and seek a new one. He spiritually dies along with his symbol of working-class persecution, William Posters (taken from the familiar sign, "Bill Posters Will Be Prosecuted"), and is reborn only after he comes near to insanity and death in the desert. He comes to feel that one must, "To understand people, go into the desert, and do not come out until you understand yourself. . . . Thirty years had taught him nothing except that life was good but limited (the innerlife anyway that the society he'd been brought up in told him existed)" (Death, p. 271). From his spiritual regeneration he expects to learn that "The new man of the world must work and live as if he weren't going to be alive the next day. This would make him more careful and tender to others, not less. . . . We must love more than just each other" (Death, p. 272).

Albert's personal conflict involves his artistic integrity after he has been discovered by the critics, for he is now in debt to almost every shop nearby. He tells Myra, "Money is a bloody curse, when you think about it. They say that a fool and his money's soon parted, but I wouldn't regard him as a fool--though I'm learning to hang on to mine just the

same. I used to think that what an indigent artist needed was money, until I'd got some, when I thought that all he wanted was to be indigent!" (Tree, p. 22). Furthermore, now that his skill has been recognized, he is periodically annoyed by inept critics. He is not yet inured to their irritating presence and declares, "What man could stand up to it? They hit you with vilification, thumped you with praise, and any day you might die of heart bruise" (Tree, p. 48).

From these two conflicts, the dual plots of the projected trilogy develop until they reach their climax in Tree. From the time of the structural crisis, when he makes his commitment to aid the Algerian Nationalists, Frank Dawley has no choice but to fulfill that commitment and, at the same time, to allow his old self to be replaced by a new, more vigorous one: "Something in him was going to be reconstituted, and he, by his own effort and actions, had put himself into the position to achieve it. His life had to be filled from the cruel ash of his own heart. The ovenwinds would send him grey" (Death, p. 318). Frank is like the Algerian trees which, though burned with napalm from French airplanes, are never totally destroyed; for "such wilderness trees always grew again, unless their roots had been absolutely blasted from the earth. . . . Its leaves would grow greener than before, trunks less beautiful, but branches stronger" (Tree, p. 220). Consequently, as the

climax is reached, Frank's body begins symbolically to burn: "The heat of his shirt, which did not normally bother him, now began to torment as if it were actually on fire, inflicting his whole body with an intolerable fever" (Tree, p. 249). And from this burning, purifying fever, he is able to begin life anew since "he no longer felt any emotion or loss when he speculated on people who formed a great part of his life. The rope that held him to them was burned free" (Tree, pp. 249-50). The climax of Albert Handley's conflicts is reached when Uncle John recognizes the increasing pride which threatens Albert and his entire family. So, on the night that he sets off for Algeria, John burns the Handley house down. He realizes that "'To lose all . . . is to become free. When you own nothing then you can live. Your eyes only open when you have nothing. Your spirit will flower. Ever after, you can share the fulness of your heart with others'" (Tree, p. 393).

With their former lives burned away, Frank and Albert now have the "Energy, Imagination and Intelligence . . . to replace the autocratic triumvirate of Inertia, Stagnation and Reaction" (Tree, p. 416). And with these new qualities about to be put into practice, both protagonists intend to form a community of revolutionaries. As Frank says to Myra, "We'll become a literate community in spite of ourselves, a hotbed of books and conspiracy. Richard Albert's son has many other ingenious plans, all sorts of stunts and tricks of

sabotage. The Handleys are so mad and wild that no one would suspect them of intelligent planning!" (Tree, p. 441). This Lincolnshire commune of social dissidents is apparently what the final volume of the trilogy will deal with.

There is, thus far, an underdevelopment of subplots in the trilogy. Death has no significant subplots, and Tree has only one that is partially independent of the main plot. Although the omniscient point of view from which both novels are told allows Sillitoe to shift the center of interest from one character to another at will, the only subplot to develop from such authorial omniscience involves Ralph Spilsby's conflict with his intransigent parents. Little is made of this conflict, however. Perhaps it will be of more importance in the trilogy's final volume, considering that Ralph--now married to Mandy--has unwillingly become a resident of Frank's and Albert's revolutionary community.

The most consistent theme so far developed in the trilogy is one of rebirth or regeneration. In a society which continually looks to the past for its inspiration, there is little hope for the future. Both the individual and the society must regain some of their lost energy and plan for changes in their decadent, spiritually involuted society. Aware of this need, Frank states, "It's no use harping back to poaching rights and cottage industries. We've got to forget all that and come to terms with cities and machines and moon landings. We're going to become new

men, whether we like it or not, and I know I'm going to like it'" (Death, p. 259). Frank's emptiness is the result of a growing disillusionment with his society, a disillusionment which leads him to leave his job, home, and family to search for something which will give meaning to his life. He wanders about England, and has an affair with Pat Shipley, whose job as midwife makes her symbolically Frank's deliverer from his intellectually starved working-class world. In fact, the womb imagery surrounding Frank's intellectual growth while staying in Pat's snowbound cottage further indicates that Frank is somehow undergoing a change as the result of this experience. He says of Pat, "She had become a midwife indeed, getting him out into some new lit-up world still beyond the touch of his hand and brain to reach" (Death, p. 79). Frank's freedom from the ties of the past is achieved as he leaves England and enters the desert of Algeria, where the William Posters image which continually haunted him now dies, leaving him free to become a new man for a new age:

But he was dead now, like the past. Bill Posters my vanishing brother, my colossus amigo turning to stone and sinking in quicksand, the multiple dream-deaths that a hero deserves; maybe caught by swarming napalm in the final barbaric ritual of Promethean fire, or edged out by old age after a lifetime of work and wisdom. Who is to say, and who is to care? There was nothing left except the brown paper of himself filling up out of the fertile desert. (Death, pp. 312-13)

And while in the desert, Frank is symbolically purged in the purifying fire of the new age, a fire which becomes a revolutionary beacon and rallying point for the new men. This

purifying light is symbolically represented in the desert by the burning trees and back in England by Albert's house. Frank says of the napalm used to burn the trees, "Those who look on it as an antidote to the upsurging ant-spilling poor of the world can brew it to their heart's content, but wherever it falls another tree goes up in flames and spreads its light for the so-far unconvinced to witness, to stop wavering and join" (Tree, p. 199). Albert's house, with its constantly burning lights, represents another revolutionary beacon: "There was a uniting family passion for light when the world around them was dark. . . . The lit up house was visible from far and wide, planted firmly on a high ridge backing against the sky" (Tree, p. 75).

To support the basic theme of regeneration, there appears to be developing a considerable body of religious symbolism. Frank sees Albert's painting, "Christ the Lincolnshire Poacher," and thinks, "Maybe that man flexed on the cross isn't Christ, but none other than my old friend William Posters, not dead yet, but surely dying, hanging as a warning for all to see" (Death, p. 119). In other words, Frank is hoping that the William Posters inferiority complex can be expunged from the minds of the overly docile working class, thereby freeing them to rebel against their persecutors. Moreover, the central image of the second book of the trilogy is a tree (suggesting a cross); and Frank once even thinks he sees a man dying on one of the burning trees (Tree, p. 150).

Surrounding this basic religious symbolism are various other allusions to Christ's crucifixion. Among them are: Myra's reference to a last supper (Death, p. 237); a cock's crowing (Death, p. 149; Tree, p. 359); and John's ironic prayer before committing suicide--"Forgive me, Lord; I know what I am doing" (Tree, p. 421). Finally, there is another biblical allusion to the redemption of persecuted people when Frank thinks in the desert, "One day maybe I'll tell Myra what the Israelites felt on their way out of Egypt. They, too, had to fight before taking over the promised land" (Tree, p. 168). As a new man at the beginning of a new age, therefore, Frank might appropriately wonder, as W. B. Yeats did, "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"<sup>11</sup>

On a deeper thematic level, Death and Tree are concerned with an existential view of man's situation. The increasing necessity for conformity in the twentieth century's technological society has aroused a tendency toward nonconformity among those who fear the impending stagnation and dehumanization in society. As one of those who reject conformity, Frank Dawley embodies an existential sense of revulsion toward socially accepted interpretations of love:

The love all knew about was zither strings on which  
your enemy played, the love of evil that they got you

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<sup>11</sup>"The Second Coming," Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, (New York, 1956), p. 185.

to stave off by the way you spent your money, the whole sticktwisted righthanded idealism of love me and nothing more, love your father, mother, sweetheart, wife, children, country, king and soil, the sky turned blind when it laughed behind your back, a black patch over the H-bomb mushroom exploding while you groped in the dark and called it love, romantic semantic schizoid psychic platonic tectonic bucolic rancid fervid fetid bubonic love, the love that locks you deep in the dungeon of your putrescent silted soul. (Tree, pp. 363-64.)

Thus, Frank seeks personal freedom, an exemption from the noxious conformity of society. But freedom does not bring happiness and bliss; rather, it brings anguish, uncertainty, loneliness, and responsibility. Frank realizes, "In this life there is no hope, no luck, only meticulous plotting and the certainty of what had already happened" (Tree, p. 151). And he later says to Shelley Jones, "'This is the world, the only one and I'm glad it is. I wouldn't like another one moaning around, because this bugger we're on takes all I've got'" (Tree, p. 170). The life of a free man, therefore, is difficult because to remain free one must see to it that the world is, as Albert says, "'continually attacked, raided, sabotaged, marauded, plundered, insulted and spat on'" (Tree, p. 446). Finally, these criteria for true freedom lead Frank to make the personal commitment which brings him close to death and paradoxically instills in him a concern for the increasing anonymity of twentieth-century man. For, while in the desert, Frank looks "on his commitment as the great oceanic end of the line for him, the wide spaces of the world that he must allow himself to be swallowed up by if he was to do any good in it" (Tree, p. 153).



As revolutionary existentialists, Frank Dawley and Albert Handley are the best drawn characters in Death and Tree, although they are seen largely from their own viewpoints. The only exterior view of Frank shows him as being

just above middle height, with grey eyes, and darkish hair that gave a sallow and tough appearance to his face. A fairly high forehead when he thought to brush his hair back denoted intelligence, though not the assurance of using it properly every time it was called for. A short white fishbone scar had stayed above the left eye after a pop bottle burst there as a kid. It was the face in which a smile would be giving too much away, betraying the deadpan working-man exterior consciously maintained. Stern, it was fenced up to stop things coming in and going out, often with little success due to an exuberance over which he had little control. (Death, pp. 10-11)

And one of the few objective portraits of Albert reveals him to be

a tall, spruce-looking man with short dark greying hair, the sort you could comb without a mirror. He seemed about forty, had brown eyes, a reddish face, and a small dark moustache. There was something intelligent, considerate and ruthless about his face, as if he'd left the army as an NCO not long ago to have regained the easygoing appearance of a working man of the world who hadn't done much work because he thought himself a bit above it. He didn't seem like a farm-labourer, nor a farmer, nor even one of those men from the council houses who took the bus from Scunthorpe steelworks every morning. It was hard to say what he did though from what he said, he did nothing. . . . (Death, p. 107)

Like many of Sillitoe's protagonists, Frank represents the thinking workingman, "born bred and spiritually nullified" (Death, p. 16) by a static society which nostalgically dreams of past glory. Although this spiritual nullification ironically brings him to life by prompting his spiritual

journey, Frank remains an "interior" character, presented more by what he thinks and does than by what other characters think or say about him. Such a presentation--while limiting an objective view of him--nonetheless makes him symbolic of all workingmen. So, while Frank may not always seem three-dimensional, he is realistic as representing one of many such English proletarians. Similarly, Albert Handley is rarely objectively presented. In fact, he acts not unlike one might expect an artist to act: He rages against reporters, reviewers, and agents; he is unmannered, proud, and defiant; and he lives and loves with a passion and vitality beyond that of the common man. But, as with Frank, Albert does somehow come to life, and he gives the impression of reality, at the same time representing the difficulty of the artist's position in an age of conformity. Perhaps, as one critic suggested, Frank's and Albert's situations "have something to do with an attempt by Sillitoe to work out his own position as both political animal and writer."<sup>12</sup>

Sillitoe's facility for creating lifelike major characters does not apply quite as much to women as to men. Pat Shipley and Myra Bassingfield are perhaps physically different enough, but otherwise they are quite similar to each other and even to other women in the two novels. Pat is "tall, had ginger

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<sup>12</sup>Stephen Wall, "Come the Revolution," The Observer Review, November 12, 1967, p. 28.

hair and flowerblue eyes, thin lips," (Death, p. 30) and has "a rather round plainish face, if it weren't for her eyes and long ponytail of red hair" (Death, p. 40). Myra is described as "Well-built and tall, she had small breasts and full hips. . . . She wore glasses, kept her hair short because whenever it grew long she looked too much part of trees and landscape . . . ." (Death, p. 155). Both women have certain physical similarities: Both are tall, generally well built with full hips and small bosoms, and somewhat ordinary looking. But they are even more similar in another respect. Like many of the female characters in the two books, they are dissatisfied with their husbands. In fact, almost none of the women in Death and Tree is happy in her marriage. Pat and Myra clearly are not; Nancy, Frank's wife, reveals that she is not; Pamela and Joanna (Myra's sister and friend) certainly appear not to be; Joan Mallinson seems not to be, since she and Albert are having an affair, only one of many for her; and Mandy marries "the world's most genuine zombie" (Tree, p. 430). It is obvious that Sillitoe is criticizing today's marital arrangements, and it is clear that many women today actually are displeased with their marriages; but for a writer to choose as his examples only those which show his particular opinion suggests a lack of artistic objectivity.

Sillitoe seems to lose all of his objectivity in presenting his minor male characters. Again, it is obvious that he is criticizing the hollowness and inertia of society

today; but, as with his marital criticism, he loses his objectivity in the process. The result is a group of oversimplified dolts. Keith Shipley is seen as an oversensitive, puerile egotist and a regular patient of his psychoanalyst. George Bassingfield is shown to be the clichéd bourgeois Englishman, retiring every evening to his study to smoke his pipe and read. Teddy Greensleaves represents a not unusual artist's agent: fat, rich, and possibly homosexual. Russell Jones is criticized by Albert as being merely one of many arrogant writers for the "toffee-nosed posh papers" (Tree, p. 47). And Shelley Jones has the appearance of "a Hollywood-type American soldier of fortune, who speaks like Steve McQueen, carries a bottle of wine and a book of verse in his knapsack, and runs guns and kills bad guys because he too believes in Freedom."<sup>13</sup> Though such caricatures may have been created intentionally, they are rather disappointing when compared with the minor characters in Key to the Door. For they suggest a possible naïveté on Sillitoe's part concerning people outside the working class.

If Sillitoe's characterizations are not as well done as might be expected, his settings are. His descriptions of the snow-covered fields of Lincolnshire and the barren deserts of Algeria create the desired atmosphere for the action and convey a sharp sense of locale. He depicts the

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<sup>13</sup>Derek Morgan, "Desert of Freedom," The Reporter, XXXIII (September 23, 1965), 59.

frozen fields of Lincolnshire as Frank walks across them:

Furrow lines refused to break as he walked over them. Frost made the earth hard as steel, coated the ridges that bent the arches of his feet. A copse on the opposite hill was bare, sky visible through upright posts. A dead bird seemed a piece of hoar-shaded soil until he was right up to it. There was no wind: winter had brought a biting lacquer of frost that numbed his face and half-closed eyes. At two in the afternoon the land was silent, all doors locked against it. (Death, p. 80)

He later describes Frank's reaction to the Algerian desert:

He had been frightened by Algeria before getting used to it. The excess of space had no limits, as much because he was unfamiliar with the geography, as that it was really vast. At dusk, the sun went down as if setting into a sea, with the far-off humps of camels drowning in it, or the shipwreck of some oasis foundering at an inexplicable low tide by a mirage of mountains. In dangerous areas, during the weeks of great walks they had done, they marched by night, following a pocket compass, sometimes an Arab guide. The silence made them afraid to talk, and after some hours, it seemed as if it had destroyed their voices, Frank being resigned to never talking again and thinking it wouldn't be so hard an affliction as long as he could hear and see. (Tree, p. 152)

Finally, the picture of the seemingly haphazard arrangement of the Handley property suggests the fundamental vitality and revolutionary preparedness of the inhabitants of "The Gallery":

Two caravans stood in the large front garden, forming a sharp angle pointing away from the house like a scarp designed on Vauban's defence system. Across the path, amid a marshalling-yard of tracks and rut-marks stood a Land-Rover and a well polished Ford Rambler. A newly built kennel beside the front door stored a bulldog that, when standing belligerently out, looked like a miniature iron bedstead about to leap. Behind the house was a long newly-erected wooden hut used as a children's playroom, and a solarium had been built nearby, as well as a new fuel store. (Tree, pp. 28-29)

The settings of Death and Tree, then, are generally quite well done and create the desired atmosphere to complement the action.

Like his depiction of setting, Sillitoe's style of writing is more polished and sophisticated in Death and Tree than in his earlier works. He seems to have overcome most of the awkwardness when shifting in time or point of view which was so evident in Key to the Door. And the imagery which he employs in the trilogy is not as frequently bombastic as that in the previous novel. For instance, Sillitoe uses uncivilized cave imagery to describe the fight between Frank Dawley and Keith Shipley:

There was no stopping or facing each other except by attack. Frank wasn't conscious of thought, or even of seeing Keith's upright body helpless against the wall before the violence of his opponent left him a shell unable to dwell on how he had come to begin this spiritual carnage. The room was a lighted cave, purple corners, greying walls, blue floor underfoot seen from scarlet eyes that alone had strength left to know what had been done. (Death, pp. 147-48)

However, the two books are not completely free of fustian imagery. As Frank walks across Lincolnshire, "Grey cloud corrugated the sky and deadened the sound of his feet on the metalled road" (Death, p. 9). When Pat Shipley hears that Frank will leave her, she sees "the sky full of menace, crossed by long-tailed rockets that exploded on meeting . . ." (Death, p. 130). And during Frank's and Keith's fight, a blow is described as being "like a piece of ice over the eye-face, an engulfing polar cap" (Death, p. 147). But even more

preposterous is a description of Myra's orgasm: "Flames from all her limbs leapt to the middle of her as if to greet the guest that slid so ceremoniously in . . ." (Death, p. 275). Such pomposity, though, is relatively infrequent in Death and rare in Tree.

There are various times in the two novels when Sillitoe's style elicits feelings of discomfort as a result of his uncontrolled fervor or awkward handling of dialect. In revealing Frank's thoughts about his enemies, Sillitoe's prose sometimes tends toward grandiloquent propaganda: "The art of retreat is foreign to them, skill and cunning far away. Their intelligence is sealed off, the limits of their humanity inexorably narrow, and the seeds of their own annihilation gradually emerge from the vile fungus of reaction into which they sank when faced with newly-moving forces of the earth" (Tree, pp. 199-200). Altogether, however, Sillitoe's style is not as turgid or uncomfortable as this examples might suggest; Death and Tree, in fact, are far more sophisticated stylistically than any of Sillitoe's previous works and, as such, represent his maturing talent as a novelist.

The first two novels of Sillitoe's trilogy represent a continuation of his literary struggle to penetrate the problems of the working-class milieu. Frank Dawley and Albert Handley have analyzed the British proletariat's situation in a stagnant and class-ridden society, have been purged of

their former weaknesses, and are ready to act by committing themselves to overthrowing the decadent social elite, seen as "That fat staggering pigeon safe on a lion's head" (Death, p. 238). In their revolutionary activities, Frank and Albert are well depicted, while the women and minor characters lack the individuality to make them completely realistic. However, the setting for this subversive activity and Sillitoe's style in writing about it indicate the author's growing literary skill. Yet what remains as the most serious flaw in Death and Tree is Sillitoe's loss of objectivity, which caused one critic to say, "Mr. Sillitoe resembles . . . 'a simple-minded Red.'"<sup>14</sup> Whether he will be able to regain artistic objectivity in the final volume may decide the merit of the trilogy and, to some degree, Sillitoe's future reputation as a novelist.

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<sup>14</sup>Seymour-Smith, p. 43.



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Many critics today view Sillitoe as a talented novelist and a leading voice in contemporary fiction. Others, however, feel as Eric Moon does in Saturday Review: "After some half-dozen works of fiction, one must conclude that Sillitoe is not a very profound novelist nor yet a 'fine' writer in a stylistic sense. But this is not to say that he is not an important writer. His honesty, his authenticity, his identification make him a unique voice in British fiction."<sup>1</sup> But it should be added that Sillitoe is not primarily concerned with the more technical aspects of writing. In fact, Stephen Spender points out that many British novelists writing today "do not worry about form. The more proletarian their origins and their material, the less they seem worried. Thus Alan Sillitoe . . . is very little preoccupied with problems of form and style."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, what Sillitoe is preoccupied with is creating a body of realistic literature for and about the British working class. And with his proletarian background, he is able to do so from

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<sup>1</sup>"Against the Establishment," XLVIII (August 21, 1965), 27.

<sup>2</sup>"Is There No More Need to Experiment?" New York Times Book Review, January 26, 1964, p. 1.

the workingman's own point of view. The socially deprived need, Sillitoe says, "a literature that will not only allow them to see themselves as they are but one which will give them the feeling of individual dignity. . . ."3

The plots which Sillitoe uses in his literary attempts to restore a sense of individuality to the workingman are not particularly original or diverse. In general, his conflicts are all based on a struggle between a working-class protagonist and his repressive, outdated environment. This struggle usually reaches its climax late in the novel, when the protagonist gains a new perspective of his life. In addition, Sillitoe always relates the story basically from the protagonist's point of view, although his later novels reveal a growing skill in manipulating other characters' viewpoints as well. Finally, Sillitoe makes almost no use of subplot in his novels; the focus of his attention is almost continually the main character.

Sillitoe's themes, like his plots, are consistently standard and similar to one another. The common theme that may be found in all of his novels involves a protagonist's expanding awareness of the complexity of his social situation. And this awareness is usually dramatized by what is frequently called an "initiation into maturity," in which the protagonist

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<sup>3</sup>"Both Sides of the Street," Times Literary Supplement, July 8, 1960, p. 435.

undergoes what may be considered a formalized or ritualized ceremony, such as Arthur Seaton's beating in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning or Brian Seaton's refusal to kill in Key to the Door. In addition to this thematic base, there is frequently an existential theme that may be discerned in Sillitoe's works. Most of his protagonists, especially those in his later works, are forced to make some sort of commitment in their absurd environments: Frank Dawley, for example, commits himself to aiding Algerian independence in The Death of William Posters. All of Sillitoe's characters, at any rate, exist in a seemingly meaningless and hostile environment against which they must struggle in a united effort to avoid the spiritual stagnation which plagues their economic superiors.

Although Sillitoe's themes lack diversity, his characters do not. At times, they are the redeeming factors of his works, as in Key to the Door. The vitality of such figures as Merton, Harold Seaton, and Ada Doddie and her family reveal Sillitoe's thorough knowledge of their social milieu and ability to create lifelike characters when he stays within the working class. However, when he ventures out of that class, his characters tend to become caricatures, all too obviously manipulated in their actions. In A Tree on Fire, all the minor middle-class figures apparently represent various aspects of what Sillitoe sees wrong with British society. But, in doing so, they project a biased view of life outside

the proletariat, a view which suggests the author's lack of knowledge about other classes than his own. Sillitoe's protagonists are most often from his own class. In fact, they are frequently similar to one another and are reminiscent of Sillitoe himself. For they are usually factory workers who are unsatisfied with their monotonous lives and seek escape in one fashion or another (sometimes, like Sillitoe, through books). They are, furthermore, rarely seen from any point of view than their own, making them "interior" figures who are characterized largely by what they think and say rather than by what others think or say about them.

Like his characterization, Sillitoe's settings are well done and reveal a thorough knowledge of the working-class environment. Indeed, his descriptions of the interiors of factory-owned apartments are exact representations of the scenes described by Richard Hoggart in his revealing study of British working-class life, The Uses of Literacy. Furthermore, Sillitoe's delineation of locale is always accurate, and it usually complements the action, most notably in the exotic jungles of Key to the Door and the burning desert of A Tree on Fire.

Sillitoe's style of writing has become more complex and sophisticated since he wrote Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, but it is not always more polished. In Key to the Door he expands his use of shifts in time and point of view;

but the shifts are not always successful, and they occasionally cause unnecessary confusion. In the following two novels, however, he seems to have avoided most of these weaknesses. Sillitoe's style also suffers from a too-frequent use of bombastic imagery. Though some works are relatively free from such exaggerated writing, most are not. Perhaps a more careful job of revising and rewriting before publishing would alleviate many of these problems, but it does not seem likely that Sillitoe will do this since, as he says, "Saturday Night I wrote seven or eight times, but now I would not write so many drafts."<sup>4</sup> Despite a growing maturity in most aspects of his style, it seems that Sillitoe's self-indulgence will be a continuing weakness of his novels.

In spite of the limited nature of some of Sillitoe's works, they may be viewed as "episodes in a single immense fiction that gains in intensity and comprehensiveness what it lacks in scope and variety."<sup>5</sup> A constant concern with the problems of the workingman pervades his novels as Sillitoe tries to provide the proletariat with some means of escape from their hopeless drudgery. And his novels, taken as a whole, work toward that means of escape. They are concerned with workers who recognize the treadmill on which they are imprisoned and who learn a lesson regarding

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<sup>4</sup>"Alan Sillitoe," Times (London), February 6, 1964, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup>Saul Maloff, "The Eccentricity of Alan Sillitoe," Contemporary British Fiction, ed. Charles Shapiro (Carbondale, Illinois, 1965), p. 95.

the need for group affiliation. Many of the protagonists, in fact, may be viewed as the same person. Except for slight differences, Frank Dawley could easily be an older Brian Seaton, who in turn could also be a slightly older Arthur Seaton. In this sense, one may trace a growing attitude of rebellion which finally overflows in Frank Dawley. Consequently, it may be inferred that revolution is Sillitoe's most conclusive answer so far expressed in the body of his proletarian novels for removing the proletariat from their degradation. But it is in the sense of viewing Sillitoe's works as "episodes in a single immense fiction" that he has achieved his goal of providing the British working class with a body of literature which presents them in a realistic manner and allows them a certain individual dignity heretofore withheld from them, while at the same time giving renewed vitality to British fiction.

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