

## THEME OF REBELLION IN SILLITOE'S NOVELLA "THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER"

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### ABSTRACT

*Alan Sillitoe (1928- 2010) an English novelist, poet, short story writer, children's book writer, playwright and a social critic, was born in Nottingham ,a birth place that he shares with DH Lawrence. Grouped among the Angry Young Men of the 1950's and a famous working-class novelist, he shattered the sentimental portrayal of working-class life through his major works **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, Key to the Door, The Ragman's Daughter, The Flame of Life, A Start in Life** and many others. But his fame rests on two of his major works, **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning** novel and **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner**, (novella) the title story of a collection of short fiction. Sillitoe is at his best in the portrayal of working-class life that struggle for identity and above all the theme of rebellion and isolation that dominate his work. In many of his novels and short stories, he presents his heroes, who with few exceptions are member of the labouring class, rebelling against those mainstays of proletarian literature of the 1930's oppressive management and conservative politicians. While the equalitarian society which Sillitoe desires, is far from becoming an actuality, the theme of rebellion is at best somewhat muddled for a "working-class" novelist, as Sillitoe is in a country with the Socialist Labour government, during a time of comparative prosperity. The conflict however can be clearly defined once again by a writer of Sillitoe's predilections if he places his characters in physical bondage. For this reason **The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner** has proved to be one of the most successful explorations of the theme of rebellion.*

Classed among the **Angry Young Men** of the 1950's<sup>(1)(2)(3)</sup>, **Alan Sillitoe**(4March-1928---25 April 2010)<sup>(4)(5)</sup>, was one of the most prolific writers of Britain, whose brash and angry accounts of working class life injected a new vigour into the Post-World War II British Fiction and was responsible for a new realism in it. This working-class novelist fame rests on his major works of fiction, novels and short stories but is best known for his debut novel **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning** and his short story collection **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner**, which made him win the **Authors' Club First Novel Award** and **Hawthorden Prize** respectively.

Sillitoe's characters are aware of their class identity who are clearly in opposition and anti-establishment,not defensively or apologetically, but defiantly and directly. Since Sillitoe himself was of working class origin, the nonconformist heroes of his works are usually drawn from his own personal experiences. Class conflict has been an inherent part of his childhood. No doubt his life was hard but the bonds of his loyalty for the labouring class were inextricably tied.Sillitoe himself admitted: **"I will always carry around a bit of Nottingham in my boots."**<sup>(6)</sup>

**The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner**, the title story of his first collection of short fiction became one of the most widely read stories of modern time and a bestseller too. The **theme of rebellion and isolation** dominate the title story. Its basic theme that one must be true to one's instincts and beliefs, despite intense social pressure to go against them, is echoed in many of his best known stories including, **On Saturday Afternoon, The Ragman's Daughter, The Good Women and Pit Strike**. His heroes, who with few exceptions, are members of the labouring class, rebelling against those mainstays of proletarian literature of the 1930's oppressive management and conservative politicians. The conflict however can be clearly defined by a writer of Sillitoe's predilections if he places his characters in physical bondage. For this reason **The Loneliness of the long Distance Runner has proved to be one of those most successful exploration of the theme of rebellion.**

The central character **Colin Smith** in this story, is a 17 year old boy who has been put in Borstal, a reform school, for theft, from a Baker's shop. He is a magnificent runner and has been chosen by the governor or warden, to represent the Borstal in a competition for the All-England Championship. The governor of the Borstal wants him to win the race and he wants to win it himself but when he considers the situation, he rejects the warden's platitudes ("if you ball with us, we'll play ball with you") as he has seen through the hypocrisy of his promises as well. He recognises the difference between his own brand of honesty which allows him to be true to his own instincts and the wardens which rejects the needs of the individual in favour of social expediency. As he sees it, the warden is "dead from the toenails up" living as he does in fear of social disapproval and manipulating the inmates of his Borstal, to gain social prestige. Smith however resolves to fight against the authority, becoming swallowed up in social convention, to be true to his own concept of honesty. He understands "that its war between '**me** and **them**' and hence decides to lose the race which is the result of pure defiance.

Throughout the story we see a clear streak of defiance against the authorities. When the day of the marathon against Ranleigh arrives, Smith quickly sizes up who the school's best runner is and who he must beat. With the proud Governor looking at Smith, the gun is fired. Smith soon overtakes Ranleigh's star runner and has a comfortable lead with a sure win but a series of jarring images run through his mind, flashes of his life at home and his mothers neglect and infidelity, his father's dead body, stern lectures from detectives, police, the governor, the hopelessness of the near future, the hypocrisy of the authority, make him change his mind. These flashbacks reveal the complex motivation for Smith's decision and justifies his rebellious behaviour to lose the race. The deliberate decision to lose the "**big race**" reflects Smith's antagonism for the director and other establishment symbols.

Sillitoe's representations of **Them versus Us** in this novella, is well brought out through Smith's unending conflict with the authority and in one scene his treatment of some middle class children describe the time where social mobility has gone to a halt.

Smith, the incarcerated protagonist in **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner** reflects on the division between **them** (authority) and **us** (working class) and easily convinces himself that "**they don't see eye to eye with us and we don't see eye to eye with them so that's how it stands and how it will always stand.**"<sup>(7)</sup>

Jogging along over the early morning countryside, he holds his hatred to a fine point against them-- the cops, governors, pen pushers, army officers, members of parliament, grouping them together as "**In-law blokes like me and is waiting to phone for the Coppers as soon as we make a false move.**"<sup>(8)</sup> The feeling of Paranoia is clearly echoed in Smith's feeling of injustice at being incarcerated for stealing about a hundred and fifty pounds from a baker's shop and he decides that "**by sending me to the borstal, they have shown me the knife and from now.... on its war between me and them... now they've shown me the knife whether I ever pinch another thing in my life again or not, I know who my enemies are.**"<sup>(9)</sup>

There is an on-going war between **them** and **us**. Sillitoe's real hatred of **them** is clearly evident from the protagonist of the novella, **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner**, Smith, who says as soon "**As soon as I got to Borstal, they made me a long distance cross-country runner. I suppose they, though I was just the built for it because I was long and skinning for my age, (and still am) and in any case, I didn't mind it much, to tell the truth, because running had always been made much of, in our family, specially running away from the police, I have always been a good runner, quick and with a big stride as well, the only trouble being that no matter how fast I run, and I did a very fair lick even though I do say so myself, it didn't stop me getting caught by the cops after that bakery job.**"<sup>(10)</sup>

Smith, in the story, also remembers mocking "**some Tori (on television) telling us about how good his government was going to be if we kept on voting for them, their stack chips rolling, opening and bumping, hands lifting to twitch moustaches and touching their button holes to make sure the flower hadn't wilted, so that you could see they didn't mean a word they said.**"<sup>(11)</sup>

Smith's vehement denunciation of **them** in **The Loneliness of the long Distance Runner** is both **explicable** and **plausible** in the light of sociological research. He uses his talent to thwart them instead to gain personal glory and that he develops into a vociferous advocate of working-class grievances against the middle class establishment.

In **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner**, however the working class adolescent is not boarding at Eton or Willows- in- the Dale, but (is incarcerated in) at Essex Borstal. He makes his mighty effort not to win the race but to lose it: (and) the nation for which he strives is not Green England but the Black Kingdom of the Downtrodden.

For many, who focussed their attention on Smith, the aggressive protagonist of the title story, the battleground should have been clearly visible. Most of them, however chose to see Smith as a victim of his background rather than as a champion of the working-class grievances. This is not to say that his belligerent stands towards **them** was ignored by the critics like Muriel Spark in *The Observer*, where he has referred to his choking resentments of treatment of his class and Pamela Hansford Johnson showed the depth of his feeling, when she wrote: "To defy **Them** means **Borstal**."

The novella explores the dehumanising effects of the British Social Situation. It opens with Smith's plain and honest statement of hatred for the **In-laws** who try to reform him but deny him ordinary pleasures: **If only 'them' and 'us' had the same Idea, we'd get on, like a house on fire but they don't see eye to eye with us and we don't see eye to eye with them, so that's how it stands and how it will always stand.**<sup>(12)</sup>

In the opening passages, Smith's life in Borstal is described as a prison making analogies between Borstal and the army. He remarks on his regimental existence: **"they can't kid me, the bastards. I have seen the barracks near where I live,.... And now the governor talks to me when he comes on his rounds, almost as he had talked to his price racehorse, if he had one."**<sup>(13)</sup>

Smith pictures the fate of his own class as veritable prison and he is in the 'stable' of aristocratic tradition. Moreover, Sillitoe uses the racehorse analogy and the references to the militaristic accommodation of the Borstal to reveal the protagonist's thralldom. Throughout the novella, we find Smith's disdain for every instrument of social order is consistent, in describing the "Outlaw" life at the Borstal, in relation to the daily lives of the "In-law" aristocrats, Smith complains that, **"they sit there like spiders in the crumbly manor houses, perched like jumped-up Jackdaws on the roof, watching out over the drives and feels like German generals from the top of the tanks."**<sup>(14)</sup> Similarly he refers to the detective who arrested him as "Old Hitler face." All these remarks reveal Smith's deep rooted hatred and rebellious attitude against the authorities. His decision to lose the cup race against Ranleigh Public School marks the climax of his war against the authority. Smith senses that the governor is pressuring him to win in order to realise his selfish ambitions:

**"Our doddering bastard of a governor, our half-dead grangrened gaffer, is hollow like an empty petrol drum, to and he wants me and my running life to give him glory to put him in blood and throbbing veins he never had."**<sup>(15)</sup>

By losing the race voluntarily, Smith demonstrates his refusal to "buy into" the governor's system of values and thereby remains true to his "outlaw" identity. He dedicates his gestures of rebellion to his father's cause, saying: **"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 have got the guts for this..... no matter how bad it feels."**<sup>(16)</sup>

Smith knows that he is sacrificing a great deal by deliberately losing the race, as he will lose all favours from the governor, including the special privilege of free runs. Still he denounces the system. This is his rebellious attitude against the authority. While running the race, Smith is assimilating the bloody horror of his father's death, he summons courage and vitality: **"..and down the drive, I went carrying a heart like boulder dam across my arteries."**<sup>(17)</sup> John Byars asserts that a "transfusion experience occurs from the 'thick and pink' Outlaw father's blood to the 'throbbing veins' of the son."<sup>(18)</sup> To Smith, winning is not crossing the finish line, Instead, he sees beyond this aspect of winning to an underlying implication: **'A winner is one who chooses his life and lives according to his principal.'** Smith rebels

to retain control over his life and to ensure that conformity will not suppress his individuality. The result of his actions is isolation.

Thus themes of rebellion and isolation dominate the story. As Smith grapples with his life's meaning and direction, he comes to understand and defend his defiance of authority.

Undoubtedly Sillitoe's novella, **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner**, presents a social statement and a timeless comment on the plight of a rebellious youth in his quest for identity and happiness. **"Smith is an incorrigible and defiant young rebel, inhabiting the no man's land of an institutionalized Borstal. Watch over by a phlegmy sunlight, as his steady jog-trot rhythm transports him over and unrelenting frostbitten earth, he wonders why, for whom and for what he is running."**<sup>(19)</sup>

Although there were questions about Sillitoe's technical competence in some of the stories, the majority of critics seem to agree that Sillitoe created 'a minor masterpiece' in the title story. **Malcolm Bradbury** captured the feeling of many of his colleagues when he concluded that **"Alan Sillitoe, is certainly, on this showing 'a major writer who ought to be read.'"**<sup>(20)</sup>

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