

CRY OF DISSENT IN SILLITOE'S NOVELS

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British novelist, short story writer, essayist, poet, playwright, screen writer and author of children literature, Alan Sillitoe was one of England's most prolific contemporary authors known for his candid and compassionate depictions of British working class life. He is part of a generation of writers known as the 'Angry Young Man' including John Wain and Kingsley Amis – whose defiant male protagonists fight against the deprivations and injustices of Britain's strongest class system. Although Sillitoe often portrays disillusioned characters who are either unemployed or trapped in unskilled occupations, his works utilise a realistic prose style allowing the emotions and concerns of his characters to appeal to a universal audience.

Much of Sillitoe's work revolves around working class life especially in Nottingham, England, depicting a feeling of dissent, a significant working class attitude. The protagonists of his novels and fictions are typical examples of Sillitoe's defiant male characters. His novels give a voice to disillusionment, restlessness and protest of the English working class of 1950's. In April 1965, Alan Sillitoe published an article on working class life in which he attempted to analyze the psychology of being poor. The article ranged haphazardly over various working class conditions and attitudes and finally came to focus on what Sillitoe sees as the central bias of working class life. The poor know of only two classes in society-'them' and 'us'. 'Them' are those who tell them what to do, use a different accent, pay your wages, collect rent, hand you the dole or national assistance money, live on your backs and tread you down. They are the non-working class individuals, representatives of the government, characterised by their power to oppress the workers, to tell them what to do. More specifically 'them' includes the politicians, policemen, commissioned ranks in the armed forces and factory bosses. Conflict with 'them' is a working class habit of mind, according to Sillitoe and this belief finds widespread expression in the thoughts, words and actions of his characters especially with the protagonists.

Smith, the imprisoned protagonist in Sillitoe's **The Loneliness of the long –Distance Runner**, reflects on the division between 'them and us' and develops a feeling of protest against the so called 'them'. He says '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'¹ Inequities in the distribution of wealth, the

obvious gulf between the possessors of property, position and power and the working class have given Smith both target and weapon in his war against 'them' and accelerated his feeling of dissent.

A similar utopian fantasy is expressed by another protagonist Brain Seaton in Sillitoe's **Key to the door**, who theorises that 'the wealth of the world should be pooled and divided fairly among those who worked doctors and laborers, architects and mechanics'². Although Brian does not attempt to redress working class grievances about social injustice by stealing from those who are better off than he is or who have power over him, he nevertheless nurtures an emotional and spiritual rebellion which affects all his relationships with them, allows him to assert with pride at the end of the novel: 'I ain't let the bastards grind me down'³ The statement is an echo or a response to his brother Arthur's caution in **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning**: 'Don't let the bastard grind you down.'⁴ Arthur Seaton feels that rebelling against institutions that oppress the workers is both necessary and inevitable. He claims its' best to be a rebel as to show 'em it don't pay to try to do you down.

The seeds of protest and the roots of conflict lie deep in Sillitoe's working class families and children who learn at an early age to mock and fight against the opposing forces of 'them'. The most obvious childhood adversaries are teachers and police. Brain Seaton recalls that his school head master, Mr. Jone's 'was enemy number one, a white haired tod who stalked the corridors during school hours sadistically dealing out undeserved punishments'⁵. Childhood skirmishes with teachers and police men however are merely preparations for the more extended conflicts with 'them' carried on by Sillitoe's adolescents and adults. Conflicts or Confrontations may be direct or indirect, sometimes resenting in physical or verbal battles between one of them and one of us, sometimes recorded as a silent or verbalized damnation of their policies or actions. If there is one common element in these outbursts, it lies in the sense of persecution which motivates them, a widely held belief that they are pursuing a policy of unjustified enmity and harassment aimed directly against members of the working class.

Inside the factories, feelings of dissent run high against the 'gaffers', a term applied by the workers to anyone with power to tell them what to do, from foreman to factory owner. Brain Seaton's bitterness is marked as he remembers how wage rates at Robinson's had been carefully regulated- 'set as a fraction above the dole money, enough to give the incentive of a regular job, but hardly enough to keep its employees far from a harrowing experience in near starvation'.⁶ Derogatory reference to coppers' pepper Sillitoe's early fiction and reveal the fear, sensitivity to unfairness and sheer hatred felt by his characters. In **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner**, Smith remarks that : 'it's a good life if you don't give in to coppers and Borstal bosses and the rest of them bastard faced In-laws.'⁷ The pervasiveness of this aggressive attitude is shown in

various working class encounters with the police. The character reacts much more belligerently when threatened by 'them', whether they are directly involved in a personal confrontation or finding themselves affected by the impersonal procedures of government. They denounce even the most ordinary powers of the government such as living and collecting taxes, enforcing law and order and waging war, for they consider the exercise of such powers to be further efforts by them to live on your backs to tread you down. This feeling of protest and anti-government attitude of Arthur Seaton are typical of those held by other principal characters in Sillitoe's early novels and fiction. Arthur Seaton's hatred and dissent is strongly felt when he talks about his lifelong fight against law and order and claims that 'the government's looney laws are made to be broken by blokes like me'.⁸ His personal aversion to army duty provides another useful focus on the hostility Sillitoe's working-class men exhibit against 'them'. The widespread unwillingness of these working-class men to take part in government wars reveal their feelings of protest and underlines their mental habit of associating government with 'them'. They tell you what to do and so does the army, they try to grind you down and wars give them additional opportunity to do so.

Working class hostility is directed against the Tories or Conservatives in much of Sillitoe's early novels. There is also more general condemnation, such as Arthur Seaton's railings against these big fat Tory bastards in Parliament 'who rob our wage packets every week with insurance and income tax and tell us it's for our good'.⁹ Generally Sillitoe's characters align themselves politically with Labour. In **Key to the Door**, working class adolescents 'who snubbed any suggestion of joining a cadet force yet wanted to meet friends once a week, congregate at a local club supported by the Labour party'.¹⁰ There is also a certain sympathy for the Communists in the Nottingham fiction. Arthur Seaton resists easy classification: on the one hand he protests 'I ain't a Communist, I tell you. I like 'em though, yet he votes Communist illegally on his bedridden father's voting card because 'I all us like to 'elp the losing side'.¹¹ Arthur's sympathy for the losing side may be a natural outgrowth of working class feelings of resentment at being perpetual underdogs in society, this may also account for Brain Seaton's half facetious and serious claim to be a communist while he is fighting Communist guerilla action in Malays.

The political alignment of Sillitoe's workers-against a traditional Tory association with power and privilege; for an assumed egalitarianism in Labour and Communist creeds mirrors their interpretation of English Society. In a social world sharply divided between 'them' and 'us', members of the working class see themselves rejected, exploited and persecuted. In a world dominated by 'them', they constantly search for ways to redress the balance. Most of Sillitoe's characters in a number of the Nottingham stories, including Smith and Tony, feel justified in stealing from 'them' and frustrating their agents- the police, whenever the opportunity presents itself. Both Arthur Seaton and Liza Atkin support industrial unrest frustrating the planned- profit

formulas of the factory owners and bosses. Harold Seaton, along with numerous relatives and others such as Donnie Hodson, rejects and avoids compulsory service in the armed forces. And Brain Seaton devotes a good deal of his energy to castigating past and present power elites and dreaming about the achievement of a new social order.

By and large, however, the characters in Sillitoe's early fiction remain incipient revolutionaries, aware of the need for drastic social reform but unable or unwilling to commit themselves fully to it. The rhetoric of revolution may be found throughout the Nottingham novels and stories but it usually takes the form of simplistic theorizing or fantasised projections of violent retribution to be meted out to them. In **The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale** Jim's wife used to talk about politics... when he came home from work at the factory saying 'how the world was made for blokes like me and that we should run the world and not leave it to a lot of money grabbing capitalist bastards'.¹² Liza Atkin listens sympathetically to a strike leader's speech: 'well, they can give us what we want in this dispute And they can give us a raise when we force the buggers to it, but as far as I'm concerned.....it's not a raise here and a bit of an improvement there that we want..... it's a whole bloody change A turnover from top to bottom'.¹³ Liza reflects later that the strike 'wasn't total or decisive enough... 'such downing of tools as had taken meant little because instead of coming back to work they should have stayed and gone on from there.'¹⁴ Liza's intuitive feeling that a workers' revolution is likely to happen, is shared by various characters in the early fiction, including Arthur Seaton and Ernie in **The Other John Peel**. Ernie has even chosen his weapon, a 303 rifle like the one his friend Bob stole from army stores: 'Just the thing to have in case of a revolution, I hope I can get my hands on one when the trouble starts'.¹⁵ Others, such as the narrator in **The Bike** and Smith in **The Loneliness of the Long Runner**, speculate on the possibilities of revenge against 'them' once it is achieved. Smith fantasises about the Borstal warden's death and he dreams of having the whip-hand when he can take 'all the cops, governors, posh whores, penpushers, army officers, members of Parliament..... stick them up against a wall and let them have it.'¹⁶

Belief in the possible achievement of an egalitarian social order, and contemplation of revenge against those who control the present one, may be considered spiritual resources which Sillitoe's working-class people draw on in the Nottingham fiction to mitigate the physical and psychological pressures afflicting them. Ironically their habitual concern with the immediate and momentary aspects of perennial confrontation with 'them' allows only a tentative approach to the larger issue of 'a whole bloody change'. In the Nottingham fiction the lines of battle are clearly drawn, but the characters must content themselves with small triumphs, with temporary and individual success in skirmishes with 'them'. It is only later, in the first two novels of the trilogy (and to a limited extent

in the third), that Sillitoe's protagonists take more positive action to implement the social utopia of their dreams.

Sillitoe's heroes are not only defiantly working class but also an untrammelled egoist who rejects all authority. That could be Sillitoe's himself speaking and an anti-authority figure who desperately hated to be pigeonholed simply as a working class writer.

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