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AP English IV

26 May 2011

Alan Sillitoe Vs. The World

In The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner Alan Sillitoe galvanizes his audience to follow their desires as individuals instead of following what society expects of them, and uses examples along with a fiery tone to drive home the consequences of doing otherwise. In the title short story, Sillitoe introduces this idea of individuality over societal whims, whereas the other short stories center on consequences of disobeying this idea. Over the course of short stories like "The Fishing Boat Picture", "On Saturday Afternoon", "The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller", and "Uncle Ernest," these consequences range from regrets, disillusionment, and the loss of the ability to choose one's own fate. Sillitoe dishes these consequences out with a fiery vigor, all the while promoting the dominance of the individual's desires over society's expectations, and leaving the reader empowered to get out into the world and achieve his deepest desires.

In the title story, Sillitoe introduces his paragon character of Smith, who follows his desires to rebel against those who aren't true to themselves or others. He comes up with a plan to fluster his captors at Borstal instead of following their expectations of him winning a long distance race for them:

> "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, though sure as God made me I know that when I do lose I'll get the dirtiest crap and kitchen jobs in the months to go

> before my time is up. I won't be worth a threpp'ny-bit to anybody here, which will be all the thanks I get for being honest in the only way I know" (Sillitoe 64).

Smith holds his head proudly and purposely loses the race by jogging in place in front of the finish line to spite the governor of Borstal and his cohorts. Despite the annoyed administrators at Borstal's best efforts, Smith is released from the penitentiary virtually unchanged in thought or motive, and proceeds to go about his life his own way. Smith has the best ending he can possibly have due to him following his desires, and ends up with money in his pocket and a smile on his face as the story ends. Sillitoe drives the point home that if one follows his own desires above the desires of his society or environment, then he will prevail as the happier and richer person. Mr. Andrew Maunder agrees with this synopsis, and adds that society figures cannot hope to change people like Smith:

> "Although The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner seems to be a story of defeat, it has also been read as a gesture of self-assertion and refusal on the part of a young everyman to accept the smug, comfortable values of a decaying older generation—represented by the governor (a kind of surrogate father)...One of the messages of the story is that the Borstal system fails to work; men like the governor cannot hope to change Smith" (Maunder).

In fact, Sillitoe seems to have contempt for men whose constitutions to prevail against society turn out to be weaker than Smith's, as the main characters in all the other stories don't have quite as happy endings.

Sillitoe's tone begins to take a different tact with the next short story, as the main character Harry doesn't follow what he really wants out of life, and is therefore punished.

Harry's wife Kathy walks out on him after a tumultuous marriage, and Harry lets her go against his better judgment. Dr. Irene Wiltshire considers the reasons for their failed marriage:

> "Although the couple married at a young age and had a low income it is not material poverty that destroys the marriage but a basic incompatibility, made worse by the lack of children" (Wiltshire "The Fishing Boat").

And so, Harry lets her walk out. Already, he has doomed himself to a lifetime of regrets as he loses Kathy, and everything around him becomes frozen in time the same way it was before she left (Sillitoe 84). After a long while, Kathy returns to a house that is much the same as she had left it, but only to visit as a stranger in a house that was once both of theirs. Harry lets her visit every now and then, but is never truly happy now that he let her get away the first time. Kathy eventually dies, leaving Harry regretful and sorrowful for all the time wasted that he could have spent with his wife:

> "…I began to realize that I should never have let them go, and that I shouldn't have let Kathy go either. Something told me I'd been daft and dead to do it, and as my rotten luck would have it it was the word dead more than daft that stuck in my mind, and still sticks there like the spinebone of a cod or conger eel, driving me potty sometimes when I lay of a night in bed thinking. I began to believe there was no point in my life—became even too far gone to turn religious or go on the booze. Why had I lived? I wondered. I can't see anything for it" (Sillitoe 99).

Sillitoe damns Harry to a regretful purgatory as soon as he lets his wife go without a fight instead of following his true wishes and going after her. Dr. Wiltshire agrees, and underlines the marital aspect of the story:

> "At his wife's funeral Harry learns that she had been living with another man. With his marriage finally at an end, Harry replaces neither his wife nor the picture but broods on the meaning of his life. This story is a close study of marital disharmony and deceit and the man's inability to acknowledge or express his deepest feelings" (Wiltshire "The Fishing Boat").

This is Sillitoe defending his thesis with the bare minimum power of his arsenal of judgment, and the man's hammer only comes down harder as the book progresses.

In the short story "On Saturday Afternoon," Sillitoe shifts gears as he presents a character who attempts to follow his own desires via suicide by hanging. The man's attempt is unsuccessful, but as soon as he crashes to the ground, he is arrested for the attempt, against all logical reason or thought:

> "You'll get five years for this," the copper told him.
>
> "That's what yo' think," the bloke said, a normal frightened look in his eyes now. "I only wanted to hang myself.
>
> "Well," the copper said, taking out his book, "it's against the law, you know."
>
> "Nay," the bloke said, "it can't be. It's my life, ain't it?"
>
> "You might think so," the copper said, "but it ain't" (Sillitoe 125).

Upon hospitalization, the man fulfils his suicidal desire by throwing himself out of the hospital window. He followed his desires to the very end; the man overcame his societal captors to follow his desires, but it is a macabre success due to its subject matter. Sillitoe is saying here that society will punish any attempt of achieving one's own desires, and to not give up on personal desires, no matter how macabre, ridiculous, or inane they may be. As long as they are one's personal desires, they should be defended to the death, as this man succeeded in doing.

The main topic of "The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller" revolves around the narrator Alan telling of Frankie Buller's losing battle with society as he attempts to follow his desires. Frankie lead his little group of children as their general, and waged war against the neighboring kids of Sodom. He wanted to go into battle during World War II to follow in his father's footsteps, and practiced with his troupe of children. Eventually, Frankie is arrested for breaking a bottle over a man's head, and for trespassing. Alan does not see Frankie for two years, until he meets him as a lonely young man pushing around a cart of wood, who claims to be in the army. Sillitoe punishes Frankie for being broken by society's whip, as his decline only continues. Ten years later, Frankie returns as a meek, middle aged man with a semi-prosperous wood business. He had been sent to an asylum for some time for shock treatment, and as a result is a functioning member of society who doesn't follow his own desires. Alan remarks on this change in attitude:

> "He was about thirty-five now, no longer the javelin-wielding colossus he once appeared, but nearer my own height, thinner, and unmistakable air of meekness in his face, almost respectable in his cap and black topcoat with white muffler tucked neatly inside" (Sillitoe 173).

Sillitoe warns the reader by describing Frankie as the weakest and meekest version of him thus far, in comparison to his hey-day as a gladiator who followed his own whims. The differences between Alan's descriptions of latter-day Frankie and Frankie in his hey-day are striking, and further prove Sillitoe's point:

> "As we mounted the railing on his left and right Frankie was half-way up the slope, within a few yards of the enemy. He exhorted his wings all the time to make more speed and surround them, waving his dangerous spear-headed length of iron now in their faces" (Sillitoe 164).

Throughout the course of the story, Frankie is stripped of his wings, his speed, his spear, and his desires to exchange them for meekness, a black topcoat, and a respectable cap. In Sillitoe's eyes, Frankie is now incarcerated in a society-induced hell.

Sillitoe's crusade is most evidenced in the short story "Uncle Ernest," where one man stops following his own desires due to an intervention by society, and falls into heavy drinking as a result. Ernest is a lowly upholsterer who sticks to himself, and spends most of his time at the bar (Sillitoe 55). One day, in a tea-shop, he meets two lonely little girls and decides to take care of them by buying them food and tea during lunchtime everyday. Eventually, after a few months of charitable feeding the girls, other tea-shop patrons become concerned about his motives, and call the police. Dr. Wiltshire stresses Ernest's loneliness and sheer goodwill as his only motives to help the girls:

> "A survivor of two world wars, he lives alone in lodgings and makes a living as an upholsterer. Because of his loneliness, Ernest seeks solace in public houses, where he can drink beer undisturbed, and in a local café where he takes most of his meals" (Wiltshire "Uncle Ernest").

The police tell him to stay away from the girls, or he will be arrested, despite his intentions being honorable. But instead of upholding his integrity and freedom to do as he pleases, he caves completely and utterly:

> "He was only aware of the earth sliding away from under his feet, and a wave of panic crashing into his mind, and he felt the unbearable and familiar emptiness that flowed outwards from a tiny and unknowable point inside him. Then he was filled with hatred for everything, then intense pity for all the movement that was going on around him, and finally even more intense pity for himself. He wanted to cry but could not: he could only walk away from his shame" (Sillitoe 67).

Ernest returns to the bar the next day, and gives up completely on what he wants as an individual with no resistance. Sillitoe inspires sheer outrage at the end of the story due to Ernest folding so easily in the face of society. In doing so, he ingeniously implants in the reader a sense of self-worth, by inspiring him to never compromise his own wants for society's expectations. Dr. Wiltshire muses over the significance of this masterfully sowed seed in Ernest's demeanor:

> "Officialdom has put a stop to an innocent occupation and driven him to one that is potentially more harmful. This story is characterized by its stark realism, achieved by closely observed detail. The reader recognizes Ernest's social isolation by the fact that the lavatory attendant is the

> only person he can rely on to look after his tools. His low self-esteem is indicated by his dirty raincoat, unshaven face, and general lack of cleanliness" (Wiltshire "Uncle Ernest").

The significance lies in the pathetic nature of Ernest, and how easily his whims are broken by society's pressures, and both of these factors cause Sillitoe's fiery individualism to become infectious.

Alan Sillitoe rages at his audience all throughout The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner to follow their desires, and to never let society stand in their way. He uses his role model Smith in the title story to convey the importance and glory of standing up for oneself against the establishment, and as a result, Smith is the only character in Sillitoe's book of short stories that has a truly happy ending. As the book goes on, Sillitoe damns the other main characters to lives of unhappiness for not following their desires; they go on to live lives filled with regret and sorrow, their once happy fates derailed by their ineptitude to uphold their own desires against society's crushing weight. As each of them fall, Sillitoe pounds into the reader's head that happiness is up to him and him alone to safeguard and guarantee, for as soon as he gives up on it, he will be the next of society's victims.

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