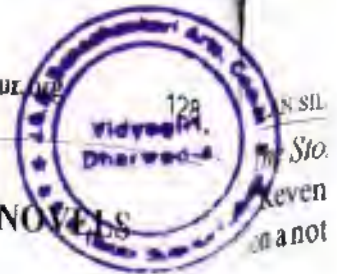


38 not culture



ALAN SILLITOE'S WORKING CLASS FICTION: THE MINOR NOVELS

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Alan Sillitoe is one of the best working-class fiction writers in England. He is only next to D. H. Lawrence in this genre of fiction. Alan Sillitoe is from a minor's family in Nottinghamshire. The classic example, from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is D.H. Lawrence, a writer whose background and location often prompt misguided comparisons with Alan Sillitoe. Sillitoe's factory experience in Nottingham first and then his army experience in Birmingham and air force experience motivated him to write about the working class life.

Thus out of working class life and experience came out Sillitoe's first and best working class novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* in 1958. The novel is set in the late 1950s, and part of its success comes from the hero Arthur Seaton and the narrator Sillitoe's indifference to circumstances that appeared to reduce everyone else to a state of powerless resignation. In the 1920s when Sillitoe served in Malaya his reading of Wells and Wodehouse inspired him to write about the workers in the East. Fascinatingly it was during this period that Sillitoe first encountered Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and for this he wrote a foreword later. Sillitoe was in effect making use of the novel to address a question that has taxed writers and teachers for centuries: does literature make us better or even different people? Commendably he does not settle upon an easy conclusion, yet a hint of skepticism is evident in his life and works. This article examines Sillitoe's minor novels.

In the 1970s when Sillitoe decided to turn his hand to the contemporary picaresque, memories of his time on the loose in Spain vied for contention with literary antecedents from the same country. At the end of *A Start in Life* the anti-hero Michael Cullen is sent to jail, framed by his one-time mentor Moggerhanger but accepting his fate as simply that, an event to be endured he had enjoyed many others. There are, self-evidently, parallels between the incident in Barcelona and the conclusion of *A Start in Life* (1970), but a less obvious and more intriguing echo occurs in a piece Sillitoe wrote less than a year later and which would eventually appear in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. *Life Goes On* (1985) is a sequel to this novel *A Start in Life*. Both novels are about self-reformation.

*Travels in Nihilon* (1971) is a political novel. Nihilon is an anti-utopian country that is a combination of the worst aspects of capitalism and stark socialism. While *The Widower's Son* (1976) discloses no explicit connection with Sillitoe's private state of mind it is formed and driven by the same impulse that allied him to Judaism and Israel. *The Widower's Son* should not, however, be treated simply as a contemplation upon the addictive capacities of writing. The novel's blurb has this: "A beautifully integretaed study of a father-and-son relationship which brings him back to his earlier novels" (*The Widower's Son*).

Sillitoe began and finished his next novel, *The Storyteller* (1979), with astonishing speed during his 50th year. He wrote to his brother Brian: 'Half a century. Dad was gone at 56, but I'm feeling all right,' and three days later to Bill Daleski: I will be in the Lake District with David: I promised months ago to go there and do a reconaissance with him.

The first draft of my novel is finished. I call it "The Storyteller" about a man telling a story about a man who tells stories in pubs, clubs, common rooms and cruise liners for a living. I don't think the chaos is inextricable. I'm working on further drafts, and will be so for the next few months. I have to blacksmith it into shape and sparsity, hoping it will come out all right in the end (AS to BD, 4 April 1978. Bradford 277).

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