

**POST-WAR  
WORKING – CLASS FICTION**

**“Literature is made anytime the legal apparatus  
is challenged by a conscience in touch with humanity.”  
Nelson Algren, *Chicago City on the Make***

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**Abstract**

This paper deals with works written by post war writers represented by the works of Alan Sillitoe, John Wain and John Brain. These writers emphasize in their novels on the condition of the working class, especially after the World War II. Their works cast light on the salient characteristics of the working-class fiction.

However, Britain had to put up with many economic and social problems such as the problem of unemployment, the Irish cause, the obligations towards the countries that used to be part of the “Empire” and the increasing rate of poverty.

This paper depicts how the above mentioned writers have shifted the point of focus from the metropolitan to the wronged provincial working-class man who has remained displaced for a long time.

## رواية الطبقة العاملة بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية

المخلص :

يعالج هذا البحث أعمال كتبها روائيو فترة ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية ممثلة بأعمال كل من ألن سيليتوي وجون وين وجون برين. يؤكد هؤلاء الكتاب الثلاث في رواياتهم على ظروف الطبقة العاملة خصوصاً بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية. تلقي أعمالهم الضوء على السمات البارزة للفن الروائي للطبقة العاملة.

تحملت بريطانيا مشاكل إقتصادية واجتماعية كثيرة مثل مشكلة البطالة، والقضية الأيرلندية، والإلتزامات تجاه البلدان التي أصبحت جزءاً من الإمبراطورية البريطانية وزيادة معدلات الفقر.

يوضح هذا البحث كيف يحول الكتاب المذكورين أعلاه نقطة التركيز من أبن العاصمة الى الانسان الريفى العامل المظلوم والذي بقى معزولاً لفترة طويلة.

I

The term 'working – class fiction' in the researcher's viewpoint does not necessarily entail that the writer of this type of fiction belongs to the working class. The basic point in question is the paramount emphasis this fiction lays on the condition of this class, its aspirations and frustrations in a turbulent world. A very wide and representative works are by Alan Sillitoe, John Wain and John Braine. Hopefully, these works may cast light on the salient characteristics of this kind of fiction. A survey of the prevalent circumstances on post-war Britain, however, is considered as indispensable clue in judging the attitudes and views of the writers

concerned. The years that followed Second World War brought about a radical change in the whole social fabric in Britain with its ultimate, inevitable effect on literature and culture in general. The social system was undergoing a ceaseless process of change that put an end to the dominant type of the old middle-class citadels, whether of the country or provincial town in the English society, and the emergence of new variables – economic, political, and social – that exerted their impact on the intellectual and literary scene in Britain in the wake of the Second World War. People's behaviour and attitudes reflected that state of social instability since these changes "are incorporated in the existing attitudes, and often, at first seen to be only freshly presented forms of those 'older' attitudes. Individuals can therefore inhabit more than one 'mental climate' without conscious strain..." (Hoggart, 1957: 138).

As a matter of fact, Britain, throughout the whole half of the twentieth century, faced serious setbacks and crises whose consequences are echoed in the fiction in question. This age has been described as that "of aspirin, rather than of aspirations" (Seaman, 1962: 153). T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Man* expressly pinpoints the spiritual bankruptcy and mental exhaustion prevalent in Britain in the 1920's. The temporary and short-termed policy of the disarmament between 1931 and 1933 "was swept away by the gales of depression" (153).

Consequently, Britain had to put up with many economic and social problems such as the problem of unemployment, the Irish Cause, the Obligations towards the countries that used to be part of the 'Empire' and the increasing rate of poverty. The glaring rift among classes can be noticed when the rate of poverty-stricken classes is taken into consideration. For instance, "in 1964 about a quarter of a million families had less than the £ 8-10.5 per week plus rent which the National Board reckoned as necessary for subsistence" (Marwick, 1968: 432). In addition, the new socialistic measures taken after the Second World War added another source to the exciting reason of resentment. New opportunities were offered to the sons of the working class to join the universities. However, this generation felt cut off from elitist circle, social and cultural.

Accordingly, this situation paved the way to the emergence of writers with totally different views and demands usually called the "Angry Youngmen." This 'anger' or resentment is due to their disillusionment and despair. Hence, the role played by literature as viewed by these writers in inevitable

different. As Bill Hopkins puts it in their manifesto, ie *Declaration*, literature should be reoriented in this direction:

Instead of acting as a brake, it (literature) has been intent upon glorifying the lost ness, the smallness and the absolute impotence of Man under adverse conditions. This is the reserve of what its role must be in the future. It must begin to emphasize in every way possible that Man need not to the victim of circumstances unless he is too old, shattered or lack to be anything else...

(Maschler, 1977: 137)

In other words, the Angry Youngmen are the representatives of “both revolutionary and indifferent or even destructive qualities: irreverence, stridency, impatience with tradition, vigour, vulgarity, sulky resentment against the cultivated, a hard-boiled muscling on culture, adventurousness, self-pity” (Allsob, 1958: 10).

In order to have a thorough and adjective judgment of the disputable of the ‘Angry’ writers, one is bound to take the fore-mentioned factors into consideration, and ultimately see their works as representing a certain juncture in the history of Britain. The aim, first and foremost, is to reflect “the new social alternations and viewpoints of post-war Britain, from a lower or working-class perspective” (Bradbury, 1973: 177), despite the fact that one should be on one’s guard in using such generalizations since the final outcome is tinged with purely personal impressions and views (See, Wellek & Warren, 1978: 584).

Many writers in the United States “have ridden the tidal wave and by doing so shaped the direction the wave went” (Rosenbaum, 2002), such as Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, Richard Wright, Jack London. They were literary challenges to the legal apparatus by conscience in touch with humanity.

## II

Before preceding further, it is necessary to show the qualities of the new ‘realistic’ novel with its new concept in presenting reality. In his interesting essay ‘Realism and the Contemporary Novel’, Raymond Williams draws

our attention to the indivisible and reciprocal relationship between the individual and the community. The realistic novel does not or rather should not emphasize one aspect at the expense of the other since “Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most importance in completely personal terms” (Lodge, 1972: 584)

Now, where do these writers (Sillitoe, Wain, Braine) stand with respect to this view? These writers, however, have succeeded to some extent in depicting characters that impinge upon the reader’s consciousness and thanks to the clear-cut way through which their disposition and idiosyncrasies are presented. The social milieu in Britain in the aftermath of the Second World War is highlight –these novels reflect for the first time the sense of frustration and the uncertainty of social values and attitudes in “a society of somewhat greater mobility in which the hero is apt to be a good deal less sure of from what or to what he is moving” (Cinding, 1962: 3). Illustrative of this is that when the hero does not belong to the elite as the elite as seen in Larkin’s novel *Jill* (1946), where the debased hero on his way to the university has to eat his sandwich prepared by his mother in the W.C. of the train lest others detect some awkwardness in his way of eating.

Osborne’s feat, *Look Back in Anger* (1957) initiates a new trend in post-war English literature both in content and form. Osborne’s hero, Jimmy Porter, the university graduate who has to work in a sweet-stall for his living, has become the fashionable type of the 1950’s. Alan Sillitoe, at least in his earlier works, does similar thing in fiction in the sense that he deals with the working-class and its position in society. To be exact, Sillitoe in fact theorizes about the objectives of the working-class fiction. In *T.L.S.* symposium, he states that

Workingmen and women who read do not have the privilege of seeing themselves honestly and realistically portrayed in novels. They are familiar with wish-fulfillment images flushed at them in cliché from on television or in the press, and the novels they read in which they do figure are written by novelists who are quite prepared to pass on the old values and, unable to have any feeling for the individual delineate only stock characters...

(Gindin, 1962: 5-6)

What is important here is the words “honestly” and “realistically” that sum up the procedure and tendency of the working-class fiction. Alan Sillitoe touches upon a very sensitive spot in the social make-up of his society, namely the injustice and wrong his working-class has been smarting under. In a similar way Ellison (1965: 2) tackles the question of injustice and discrimination in the States represented by his “a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids, and ... a mind.”

Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* establishes his reputation as a working-class novelist and attracts the attention of the public to his art. As suggested in the title, the protagonist’s interests are confined to Spend a Saturday night boozing, fishing next day in a canal near the Balloon Houses and simultaneous sexual relation with two married sisters, Prenda and Winnie. Arthur Seaton, a young worker in a bicycle factory, earns fourteen pounds a week on piece work. Here, Sillitoe shows the protagonist’s anger at the prevailing conditions under which the workers have to earn their living

...the factory smell of oil suds, machinery and shaved steel that surrounded you with an air in which pimples grew and prospered on your face and your shoulders, that would have turned you into one big pimple if you did not spend half an hour over the scullery sink every night getting rid of the biggest bastards.  
What a life he thought...

(1958:23).

However, there is no one single reference to any attempt at improving the conditions of the workers. Apparently, everyone is content with him/her life for all its harsh realities and inconveniences. As mentioned earlier, Sillitoe in his novel pays equal attention to the two levels of the novel –the personal and social. From the first page of the novel, the reader begins to recognize the hero (Arthur) thanks the curious and interesting pattern of his life: on Saturday night he spends a boisterous time which contrasts vividly with his routine on Sunday morning: namely, his fishing in perfect tranquility and solitude so that he is reluctant to speak to a neighbouring man fishing in the same place.

Needless to say that the idea of the 'bait' and 'fishing' carries some thematic allusion: in this microcosm depicted by the novel, there is always a bait in store for one whether it takes the form of the exploiting employer or the monotonous and rewarding activity or even perhaps a wife

The rate-checker sometimes came and watched you work, so that if he saw you knock up hundred in less than an hour Robee would come and tell you one fine morning that your rate had been dropped by six pence or a pop. So when you felt the shadow of the rate –checker breathing down your neck you knew what to do if you had any brain at all: make every move over complicated no slow because that was cutting your own throat, and to everything deliberately with a crafty show of speed

(24-25).

In this novel, the serious weakness can be generally seen in the writer's use of almost a single-character work in the sense that the emphasis is laid on the character of Arthur while the other characters are employed for the single tasks of manifesting certain aspect of his character. However, the main "merit of the novel lies in its probing and reflecting the bitter realities and daily practices of his generation with admirable courage and honesty: 'the traditional radicalism, the beer fights, fornication and skittles ...'" (Burgess, 1971: 150)

In his novelette entitled *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, Sillitoe pursues the same line, already started in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Here, Smith, the young hero, is a teen-aged worker in milling-machine who is conscious of the keen chasm, separating his own class from other classes. His juvenile behaviour reflects the effect of his environment (his own upbringing, lack of fatherly guidance, the painful and eradicable memories of his father's death) on his mind in his recurrent trespasses and defiance or even contempt towards the representatives of authority and power. The spirit of challenge is seen in the way Smith looks at the dominating class or "the In-Law blokes" as he calls them and the derisive epithets he uses in describing them: "the pop-eyed potbellied governor said to a pop-eyed potbellied Member of Parliament who sat next

to pop-eyed potbellied whore of a wife that it was his only hope getting the Borstal Blue Ribbon Prize Cup for Long Distance Cross Country Running” (1959: 39).

Sillitoe presents his material by resorting to the technique of retrospect. On the first page, Smith is seen in Borstal (imprisonment) and the reasons of his imprisonment are given (stealing some money from a bakery). Generally, the reader is furnished with some details pertaining to his miserable upbringing as well as his dissatisfaction and rebellion. To be sure, his rebellious nature, which “represent a whole generation” (West, 1967: 188), is crystallized by his deliberate losing of the long distance run, a concrete form for all the disadvantage such an act incurs: “... when I do lose I’ll get the dirtiest crap and kitchen jobs in the months to go before my time is up...” (Sillitoe, 1959: 45).

This minute picture of the drab life of the downtrodden class represented by Smith and his painful experience, permeates the other short stories in the novel. In *On Saturday Afternoon*, Sillitoe casts light on the bitter feeling of loneliness and despair swaddling the life of the working-class. A man tries to hang himself and the end of the story he succeeds in doing so. Another short story “The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale” shows that Jim’s father dies of consumption, Jim’s marriage too ends in separation due to the condescending view of his wife towards his social status as a worker. His continuous submission and aloofness lead eventually to jail, just like the young hero of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*.

It is interesting to note that Sillitoe’s heroes in general feel that they are inextricably united with their own class for all its wrongs and evils. They are true to their background: there is no attempt on their part at social climbing. But this attitude differs when we approach Braine’s fiction though dealing with the same topic, i.e. class differences and their impact on social relationships.

In *Room at the Top* (1959) and *Life at The Top* (1962), John Braine describes the way of reaching the top; viz, the upper class and the privileges it offers. *Room at the Top* is devoted to reveal the details of social life: the outward reality, in particular, the barriers the protagonist has to overcome before his intents materialize. Haywood (1998) “makes a convincing case for *Room at the Top* as one of the important novels of the post-war boom period, alongside the customary *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.” In *Life at the Top*, on the other hand, this outward conflict



is internalized: the focal point here is being the inner psychological conflict smoldering his soul as a result of the infidelity of his aristocratic wife.

The main idea of *Room at the Top* is even implicit in the very title of the novel: the comfortable social position the young worker gets at last. Joe Lampton, a handsome Youngman of poor class belonging, comes to work in Warley, a provincial town, as an accountant in Town hall. In the course of events, he becomes involved in emotional relations with Alice, a married woman ten years his senior, and with Susan, a nineteen-year-old girl. His love affair with Susan brings to light the theme of class antagonism, since she is also attached to the wealthy Jack Wales. The novel develops Joe's attempt and means to vanquish his rival, Jack and the social class he stands for.

What is striking here is the prospective through which the emotional relations are viewed in comparison with the primary task of seeking material advantages. His relation with Susan moves in this orbit: "I'll make her daddy give a damned good job. I'll never count pennies again" (137). This point is reinforced by his rash act of abandoning Alice who he described earlier as follows: "I try to think of Alice just as the person I love, the one with whom I could be kind and tender and silly, the one whom I was certain of the last breath, the one who'd tear her heart for me to eat if I wanted" (195). This act of sacrificing that Alice takes is another thematic dimension if we recall the fact that she belongs to his own class. Thus, by the end of the novel Joe turns out to a social climber, a self-centered man who is solely concerned with getting rid of bounds of his own class, to end "with the familiar interaction of crudity and self-pity" (Williams, 1972: 588).

*Life at the Top* presents Joe's life after ten years of his marriage to Susan and its privileges—a grand house, a car and a good job. The novel shows that his mind is divided between two equally strong poles—his enthusiasm and revolutionary nature that has been unfolded in *Room at the Top*, on the one hand, and the limitless privileges he has harvested out of his alliance with the Browns, on the other. The novel reveals that this long-dreamt-of house is, after all, a place of everlasting pain and suffering due to his wife's overt infidelity. The brief blurry of his revolutionary spirit that has manifested itself in his leaving Warley and temporary staying in London turns out to be short-termed. His reconciliation with Susan that takes place at the end of the novel indicates, among other things, that the hero has succumbed to the dictates of the upper class.

If *Room at the Top*, as it were, is the reward or dream Joe has been entertaining, it is not wide off the mark to say that *Life at the Top* is the punishment, the costly price he is condemned to pay. Joe remains virtually alien although he has lived in the midst of the bourgeois world.

Compared to Braine's hero who, as it is clearly indicated, has to surmount many obstacles in his attempt at improving the social condition, John Wain in *Hurry on Down* (1954) lays the emphasis on the attitude of "the rootless hero leaving the university to survey the world" (Gindin, 1962: 11). Charles Lashey, the hero of Wain's novel is a young man with a degree in History. His conduct throughout brings to mind Murdoch's popular hero, Jack Donaghue in *Under the Net* in particular his adventurousness, rootlessness and ceaseless evasion of any attempt at identifying himself with any class, including the working-class to which he belongs by virtue of his social background and upbringing.

Throughout the novel, Charles passes through a long series of jobs: a window-cleaner, expert delivery driver, smuggler, hospital servant, chauffeur, checker-out, and finally a radio comic. The irony of the title lies in the hero's "deliberate descending the social ladder" (Burgess, 1971: 147).

A large part of the novel, however, highlights his inner conflict as to the lure underling the bourgeois' life (a point already discussed in Braine's fiction) and his impatience with all types of obligations any social identification entails. As in Sillitoe's fiction, the upper class forms a butt for the contempt and derision: "Men he despised, Men like Robert Tharkles and Hutchins, would stand chance more than he did. Any crawling vermin who happened to have his pockets well-lined could leave him standing in the race..." (Wain, 1954: 77).

Curiously enough, Wain's treatment of his own class (the working-class) in his novel is different from the two mentioned writers. In *Hurry on Down* there is no strict demarcation line as regards the attitude towards the upper-class. Lumely does not betray any inclination towards the upper-class as it is the class in Braine's Joe. Nor is there that complacency, that full identification with the working-class Sillitoe's Arthur reveals. Instead, *Hurry on Down* portrays the classless hero, the seeker of adventure for adventure's sake. Here the hero's norms of behaviour are tinged with signs of picaresque radicalism manifesting itself in the "last of these spirits, whose journey ends in complete bafflement" (Cox, 1963: 161).

### III

The achievement of the three mentioned writers has been a subject for critical controversy with the ultimate result that their works have not received their due recognition except some casual remarks here and there. Blamires, for instance, is skeptic about the significance of this fiction when he states that “the fifties and their foibles, however, have now recorded, and one may question whether fashionable trends of that decade ought to carry much weight...” (1974: 473). Almost in same vein, C.B Cox concedes that these novelists “at their worst, are sentimental or historical, at their best, they honestly reject the belief in heroic action and violently expose their hypocrisies of society” (1963: 160).

Admittedly, this is not the case. Far from being “fashionable trends”, the working –class fiction in post-war Britain has succeeded in embracing a critical epoch in the history of Britain, in particular the position of the working-class together with the social upheavals the English society. Their fiction, it must be noted, traces and unravels the emotional and psychological turmoil as its members are placed in direct encounter with the elite which leads to paradoxical attitudes as it has been exposed. To say that their works carry an important historical element does not necessarily mean that their appeal lies solely in their being a social document. However, the appeal of these novels, though undeniably less than before, is an irrevocable proof of their “artistic achievement”, particularly the subtle characterization, the ability to depict memorable characters, capable of capturing the reader’s attention in their moments of triumph for fiasco. In other words, the novels of this fiction (the particular and the general) are sustained to a great extent.

These representative works along with many others have shifted the point of focus from the metropolitan to the wronged provincial working-class man who has remained displaced for a long time. This fiction, generally speaking, is not content with the passive reflection of the society and its variable; rather it points to “a change which is considered to be primary function of literature” (Sartre, 1978: 238). In short, the working-class fiction along with some dramatic works by John Osborne and David Storey is replete with the mood of ‘dissentience’ and ‘anger’. Its Achilles’ heel lies in the fact that its emphasis is not placed on purely artistic aspects such as the language or narrative techniques put in vogue by the modernists like Joyce, Woolf and others. What animates the work discussed above is the traditional type of writing devoted to a specific purpose: these novels are

written by and for the members of a certain class that have got different interests and demands. Gilbert Philips (1974: 491) in his essay, 'The Novel Now' epitomizes the features of the working-class fiction in the following statement which I find convenient to quote in full to round off this study with: "The fact remains that the best of the novels in this group have an energy and vitality in a refreshing contrast to the 'candelabra-and-wine' writers, and that they successfully reflect certain aspects of the temper of the fifties... ."

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