SILLITOE AND THE HERO

by

JEREMY CHARLES HATTON

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[redacted]

Dr.T.L.Williams

[redacted]

Dr.D.A.T.Stafford

[redacted]

Dr.A.B.England

[redacted]

Dr.J.C.Jones

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

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Supervisor Dr. T. Williams

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the protagonist in the novels of Alan Sillitoe. Chapter I, entitled "The Hero and Sillitoe", examines some of the literary and social influences that have affected our concept of the heroic figure in recent times and, in particular, the way in which these trends have made a character such as Arthur Seaton acceptable to a general audience.

Chapter II traces the development of the central character in the novels of Sillitoe and tries to establish whether or not the protagonists represent a continuous progression in thought and character development. What emerges is the existence of two distinct groups of heroic figures. One centres around the factory worker with a grievance against society, a character encountered in the early novels. Such a figure culminates with the appearance of Frank Dawley, who is able to break out of the industrial setting and seek fulfilment elsewhere. After the emergence of this character Sillitoe appears to have created a different figure, one less concerned with class-consciousness and more involved with material success in life. It is

difficult to suggest that there is a definite progression from one character to another because the author has moved from overt social protest, and connections between some of the early and later figures are tenuous.

The third chapter concentrates on one particular aspect of the hero's character, his relationship with women, and seeks to discover if the use of the word love is applicable to the central figure in such a situation. Initially, love appears to mean lust alone, and I have tried to establish whether the definition of this word becomes more complex in the various novels, and if Sillitoe suggests that there is something more to a relationship than just physical attraction. An attempt has also been made to discover whether or not a pattern emerges similar to that encountered in the previous chapter of two distinct groupings, but I have concluded that such is not the case. In this chapter it is possible to suggest that a gradually increasing complexity in the hero's use of the word does develop, although such a progression is very slow and, in practical terms, only radically alters with the appearance of William Scorton in *The Widower's Son*.

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CHAPTER I

THE HERO AND SILLITOE

There is a certain irony in the title of this thesis because the protagonist of Sillitoe's novels lacks many of the traditional heroic qualities which have usually differentiated the hero from the other characters in a novel. When referring to the hero I am thinking in particular of the Byronic figure who perhaps epitomized, as Peter Thorslev has suggested, "our last great age of heroes",[1] but who has since virtually disappeared from literature. Sillitoe's hero owes his existence to the emergence of a less confident and secure figure who is not immediately different from any of his fellow mortals.

The literary influences upon Sillitoe that have produced characters such as Arthur Seaton or Frank Dawley are varied, but the roots of his protagonists can be traced back to the social realist novels of Zola in France, and the concern about injustice in Dickens. The picaresque quality of some of his characterizations, and that of Michael Cullen in particular, suggests the influence of Fielding, but I am primarily concerned with the effect of the more immediate past upon Sillitoe. In particular I am interested in dis-

covering the effect of the Great War upon our concept of the hero and the way that his changing image has reflected upon Sillitoe's own protagonists.

The war itself was not alone responsible for the extinction of the Byronic figure, although it did have a considerable influence upon people who had previously regarded death as a noble sacrifice through which one could achieve something of a heroic stature. In the nineteenth century the rise of bourgeois democracy, coupled with the writings of philosophers such as Marx and Bentham, hastened the decline of the romantic hero who was too much of an outsider to be wholly acceptable in an age concerned with working and living within an urban industrial setting. The Byronic figure sought to exist outside of the conformities that society wished to impose upon him and this, along with his dubious (to the Victorians) moral code, would have been unpalatable to the bourgeois mind of the nineteenth century. It was only in the last decades of the century, as disillusion with city life grew and the pastoral myth became more popular, that the romantic concept of heroism re-emerged through the writings of William Morris.

But the early years of the twentieth century saw the continuing reduction of the hero in literature and, in the case of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the destruction of the heroic myth altogether. Here I should like to differentiate

between two types of hero; namely the one in what I shall loosely call serious literature, and his counterpart in popular fiction or what Graham Greene calls his "entertainments".[2] The distinction is necessary because although in the case of the former the hero has become less glamorous and perhaps more mundane in his ideas and actions, the cult of the latter has continued unabated. In particular I am thinking of the popularity of the hero in the spy and adventure novels, such as Tarzan, Bulldog Drummond and, more recently, Ian Fleming's James Bond. Characters such as those in John Le Carre's novels or of Eric Ambler, and Graham Greene's seedy heroes tend to blur the distinction between the two groups because the protagonist's life-style lacks the glamour associated with Fleming's hero. Instead they are often closer to the protagonist in serious literature, being portrayed in a more potentially realistic manner than James Bond. The success of Bond is perhaps due to the element of escapism for the reader that is contained within his way of life and which is easily transferred to the cinema screen, where the hero has prospered as his literary counterpart has declined. The hero in the spy story is more easily accessible to many readers than the figure in serious literature partly because the narrative technique is often more conventional and also because, in the early twentieth century, the concern with appearance and action in the novel

was replaced by contemplation of the character's mind and an attempt to psycho-analyze society through an examination of the individual. However, most people wished for an escape from the problems around them, an escape which they found in the works of Sapper and in the films of Douglas Fairbanks.

Although there has always been a gap between serious and popular literature, I think that the Great War increased this divergence and certainly destroyed the heroic idea for many writers. The years immediately prior to 1914 had seen a re-awakening of some of the more romantic and illusory aspects of heroism as the exploits and fate of Captain Scott and his companions caught the public imagination. The idea of noble self-sacrifice appears to have been carried over into the outbreak of hostilities when many people adopted Rupert Brooke as a re-incarnation of Byron, embodying those virtues of Englishness that would quickly overcome the wicked hun. Today, it is difficult to realize that in 1914 many people did actually want a war as an escape from the boredom of everyday life and, for the young men of Rupert Brooke's age and class, as a way of proving themselves and of reasserting their natural superiority over all others. It was their concept of heroism that was shattered by the Great War because they couldn't comprehend the awfulness of twentieth century warfare. In dealing with Brooke it

is difficult to divorce the man from his poetry since in 1914 it must have seemed as if the hour had produced the man. His death in the following spring, appropriately enough in the Aegean, only heightened the connection between him and Byron or Shelley, and early editions of his poetry always concentrated on displaying a photograph of his profile in a manner reminiscent of paintings of Byron. It was as if the romantic hero, dying in literature, was resurrecting himself for one last gallant effort in order to help king and country. Brooke's elegiac poetry is suitably romantic in its glorification of the nobility of sacrifice:

> Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us,
> for our dearth,
> Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
> Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
> And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
> And Nobleness walks in our ways again,
> And we have come into our heritage [3]

This was written at the same time that T.S. Eliot was revising 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', and if the latter can be seen as one of the heroes of our time then the division between the old and new concepts of the heroic figure becomes apparent. Brooke's supreme confidence in his cause and in the glory of noble death is being replaced by an uncertainty and lack of faith in which life itself has become a struggle and the hero an insignificant individual. Prufrock is unsure of himself and of his meaning in life whereas Brooke and his contemporaries saw

the war, initially, as a release for the idealism that lay dormant within them.

But such romantic idealism was slaughtered in the mud on the Western Front, and the best answer to Brooke's "1914" is perhaps contained within Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*:

> . . I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it . . . Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.[4]

Hemingway has used the same words as Brooke did in *1914* but shows how impossible it was to apply them to scenes of courage that would have been beyond Brooke's comprehension. The idealized hero figure was really only ever acceptable to those living in England away from the fighting because anyone who had been to the front-line would have realized how inappropriate such a concept was when the potential hero appeared

> Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
> Knock-kneed, coughing like hags[5]

Owen and Sassoon were among the foremost destroyers of the heroic in war literature by revealing that it was an enormous deceit:

> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,
> The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
> Pro patria mori.[6]

Virginia Woolf might believe that "on or about December 1910 human character changed",[7] but people's conscious realization of change was probably forced upon them by the First World War. In literary terms the hero as embodied in, and by, Brooke, had been rejected by Lawrence in favour of the heroine and been ridiculed by the irony of Sassoon:

> He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless
> swine,
> Had panicked down the trench that night the
> mine
> Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
> To get sent home, and how, at last, he
> died,
> Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to
> care
> Except that lonely woman with white hair.[8]

This extract from the ironically titled 'The Hero' combines with Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* in rejecting the outmoded concepts of heroism but fails to provide any new idea of what should replace it. Sillitoe makes an interesting comment in *Raw Material* when he perceives that the Great War was deliberately used as a slaughterhouse in order to prevent any social change:

> The blow [the Somme] finished Britain as a
> world power, and as a country fit for any
> hero to live in. The heroes and their
> heroic spirit were dead. If they had sur-
> vived they would indeed have insisted after
> the war that England be made habitable
> for them. But such an insistence would have

> disturbed the old order too fundamentally for its comfort, which with sadistic prescience saw to it therefore that those heroes did not outlast them.[9]

What intrigues me is his use of the word hero, which is far removed from its meaning for Brooke, who would have had little sympathy for the social revolutionary that Sillitoe envisaged. To Sillitoe the common soldier was the hero; in this respect he is reiterating the idea that has become prevalent in modern literature by praising the common man. He suggests that had they survived, such people would have had a definite purpose in life, to help to establish a new Britain, and it is the opposite of this, a lack of purpose, that characterized so many figures in literature immediately after the conflict, although I don't believe that the war alone was responsible for this failure to discover any meaning to life.

The rejection of Brooke's idealized figure eventually led to the acceptance of Joyce's Leopold Bloom as being, perhaps, the quintessential hero of the twentieth century. Like Arthur Seaton he is unable to perceive any meaning to life. The anti-hero, as he has become known because of the stark contrast with the older heroic form, is unsure of himself and his position in life. In the work of Evelyn Waugh the hero becomes a cardboard figure who is no leader of men but follows in the steps of others - a sharp contrast

to the hero of old, who was usually differentiated in some way from those around him. Graham Greene mixes the uncertainty facing modern man with a belief in Faith that many other writers have been unable to portray. What all of them appear to share is an inability to perceive the hero, the central character, as being a moral agent in the way that the nineteenth century novelist believed he or she should be. Instead of helping others the hero is more concerned with trying to save himself, although Frank Dawley, the protagonist of Sillitoe's trilogy, does try to help others in order to reach a better understanding of himself because he is motivated by a desire for change.

In the period following the Second World War the hero has appeared to re-establish himself but not in the same style through which Joyce created Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*. Modernism has been rejected in favour of a more traditional mode, closer to that of the picaresque in the novels of that curiously titled group known as 'The Angry Young Men'. The hero is similar to the protagonist of old in that he is easily defined within the novel as being the central character but what often differentiates him from the older figures is his concern with his own problems. Tom Wolfe claimed that the 1970's would be remembered as the "Me" decade,[10] but in literature this attitude has been noticeable for a greater period of time

Within the decade of the 1950's itself the social background of the hero rapidly changed from bourgeois to working-class as a new awareness of proletarian culture emerged. Bernard Bergonzi has said that,

> The weak, inconoclastic young hero, whose rebellion is basically genteel, was to become a familiar figure in twentieth century English fiction.[11]

Whilst such a generalization may be true with regard to Kingsley Amis's Jim Dixon or John Wain's Charles Lumley, it is less easily applicable to Alan Sillitoe's Arthur Seaton because his protagonist is less genteel and more aggressive, closer to the knights of old in that he is a man of action. But whereas Ivanhoe or Tennyson's kings were men of action with a purpose, Arthur is acting merely for the sake of doing something, he is not consciously aware of any purpose in his life. Perhaps that is the main distinction between Sillitoe's early heroes and their literary predecessors· that although the actions might be similar the motivation behind them is often missing The shell of the hero remains, but his character is altered.

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[10]Tom Wolfe, "The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening," *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 132.

[11]Bernard Bergonzi, "The Advent of Modernism 1900-1920," in *History of Literature in the English Language Vol. 7 The Twentieth Century* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1970), pp. 22-23.

CHAPTER II

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HERO'S CHARACTER IN THE NOVELS OF ALAN SILLITOE

In this Chapter I wish to establish whether the central figure in the novels of Alan Sillitoe has developed in characterization from that of Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and, if so, in what ways that change has occurred. Alternatively, is Sillitoe using a similar figure in each of his novels who merely repeats the attitudes and beliefs that were expounded by Arthur Seaton? I don't think that this is the case, on the contrary, there has been a marked contrast of character within the novels, and the author has created a more complex, and occasionally confused, central figure.

The central character in the novels of Sillitoe may be divided into two groups: firstly, the Seaton family of Arthur, Brian, and Frank Dawley. Dawley's creation represents the culmination of Sillitoe's early protagonist as he is able to transcend the class barriers in a way that the Seaton brothers are unable to, and is more in control of his own life whilst the heroes of *Key To The Door* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* are visualized as being

dictated to by the Establishment. But after Dawley's appearance, Sillitoe seems to have looked elsewhere for a central figure outside of his previous area of creation, that of the Nottingham industrial worker and his struggle to find his own identity. It is possible that he had exhausted his ability to produce new ideas and experiences in relation to this figure and, in the creation of Albert Handley, Sillitoe is entering a new area of characterization which moves away from the 'chip on the shoulder' protagonist. Whilst both Michael Cullen and William Scorton come from Nottingham and its surrounding districts their class origins and place of birth are not seen as having such a determining effect as they do upon the heroes in the early novels. Both break out of their working-class origins and rows of terraced houses in a way that is never possible for Arthur Seaton.

However, it is not either possible or fair to state that Sillitoe's central characters represent a continuous development in characterization and that if Arthur Seaton is visualized as sitting on the bottom rung of a ladder then William Scorton is sitting at the top. But I think that there has been a marked development of character among the early heroes where the image of the ladder has more relevance, with Frank Dawley grasping the top-most rungs. It is difficult to compare Dawley with the later characters

because they have little in common with him except for birth-place.

1. Arthur Seaton

Compared with later characterizations, Arthur Seaton now appears shallow and simplistic, but at the time of publication his way of life and attitudes caused a considerable stir if only because, as Anthony West said:

> For the first time, English working-class life is treated, in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, as a normal aspect of the human condition and as a natural subject matter for a writer, and is written about by someone who understands it and its values [1]

If you accept this then the question is raised as to whether Arthur ever emerges as a distinctive character or whether he becomes a mouth-piece for what Anthony Burgess regards as Sillitoe's 'chip on his shoulder' [2] Does the characterization of Seaton suffer because he is being used to expound social and political grievances? Any answer depends upon deciding whether Sillitoe ever intended Arthur to become a political mouth-piece or if he was more concerned with creating a distinct character with social undertones. In a fairly recent interview Sillitoe would appear to deny that the use of political undertones is any longer so important in his character development.

Hennessy: You're certainly much more concerned, I would say, with the individual people you write about than with social pressures or questions of education or class. I mean you don't label things, do you?

Sillitoe: Yes, labels as far as I know are meaningless. The really interesting thing is the people, and their individual idiosyncracies. You take into account the two forces mentioned.[3]

This was in 1972, after the appearance of his three most overtly politically conscious heroes (Arthur Seaton, Brian Seaton, and Frank Dawley), and when he appeared to have switched the focus of his attention to less socially definable characters such as Albert Handley and Michael Cullen. Three years before he had made a statement which seemed partially to contradict his later views:

Hajek: . . . many people still know you chiefly as the author of one short story, "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner", a story which seems to be overshadowing everything that you have written so far. How do you feel about it?

Sillitoe: I think those people are absolutely right. This story of a working-class youth is at the same time the statement of my artistic integrity. I shall never write anything to uphold this Establishment and this society.[4]

Judging by this interview it would appear that Sillitoe was, in 1969, still very much concerned with expounding certain social attitudes and what seems to me to be so remarkable is that, in his most recent interview (1978), he has not only

repudiated this philosophy of social commitment but also denied that it ever existed:

> Halperin: Your novels often describe the relations of the working classes to others as a sort of war. Arthur sees his life as a war The protagonist of "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner" says, and I quote, 'It's war between me and them. I was born into one' - that is, into a war 'My own war is all I'll ever be bothered about ' Is that a class war or a war simply for survival or -
>
> Sillitoe: Well, in that particular novel I don't think the class war ever came into it. He was fighting people of his own class Also I don't believe in class at all, ever. I believe in individuals from A to Zed.
>
> Halperin: You mean you don't believe there should be class or you don't believe there is such a thing as class.
>
> Sillitoe: Oh, I don't believe there should be class. I believe it exists, because of course money creates class, which is obvious No need to state that. But as a writer I never could see people in class terms - you know, in the Marxist class business. I've never seen them that way - even when I was in a factory, wherever I was. I've seen hierarchies, I've seen meritocracies, I've noticed people with and without money, but I've never broken them down into classes in my own consciousness I'm a believer in merit, in intelligence, in making your own way - .[5]

I have great difficulty in accepting this because it seems to contradict his previous criticism of society, and suggests that a character such as Brian Seaton or Frank Dawley is

not motivated by class-consciousness when, in the course of their respective novels, it is difficult to forget about their working-class origins, and to think of their struggle as being other than class-motivated. Certainly, it is the individual character who is, ultimately, more important than any political or social system but in the early novels it is difficult to escape the idea that he is creating a class-conscious hero - Arthur with his 'us' and 'them', Brian in the army morally supporting the communist Chinese, and Dawley rejecting the bourgeois world of his mistress in favour of the desert, and helping the guerrillas to fight against the imperialist French. At the end of *The Flame of Life*, he reiterates Dawley's revolutionary aims as if to remind the reader that, despite his seemingly conventional appearance, he retains his commitment to change and that such a change would be socialist in character. Surely all of this is linked to class-awareness and to ensuring that his early heroes represent certain socialist ideals and principles

Whilst it is always dangerous to confuse the views of the author with those that he ascribes to his characters (and in the majority of his novels it is clear that Sillitoe does not always share his hero's thoughts), in the trilogy I find it very difficult not to link Sillitoe with Dawley. Because he treats him so seriously and subjectively, allowing

him to make political statements without any other character opposing him, it becomes difficult not to feel that he is putting some of his own ideas into this character.

I find the interview with Halperin both puzzling and confusing because a character such as Dawley is so clearly politically motivated, representing a socialist viewpoint, that to suggest he is not concerned with class consciousness seems incomprehensible. I find it very difficult to accept this statement, partly because Sillitoe has previously indicated, in his interview with Hajek, that he has been committed to projecting an anti-Establishment view, and also because so many of his heroes make us strongly aware of the class system. Some socialists, and Marxists in particular, believe in making the working-class aware of the injustices done to them by other social groups and Sillitoe is, in a way, putting across a similar idea in his early literature. And, as I think his interview with Hajek indicates, Sillitoe did at one time share some of these views. Reading the interview with Halperin I was strongly reminded of Kingsley Amis and his renunciation of socialism as he entered middle age. It is possible that Sillitoe has also become less concerned with political commitment as he grows older but to suggest that he was never concerned with class differences seems a denial of the message conveyed in his early novels. However, a movement away from an overtly political base

in his later novels indicates a change on the author's part that is not necessarily a bad thing because he appeared to have run out of fresh ideas around a well-established theme. Certainly in *The Widower's Son* the political overtones become very muted and his concern for studying the individual on his own merits becomes more pronounced.

But I believe that Sillitoe was at one time keenly aware of the class struggle and whilst it is of course possible that he has since altered his views, certainly in 1958 the awareness of 'us' and 'them' seems to have been very strong and to have affected the characterization of Arthur Seaton, a process continued with Brian Seaton and Frank Dawley:

> Once a rebel, always a rebel. You can't help being one. You can't deny that. And it's best to be a rebel so as to show 'em it don't pay to try to do you down.[6]

The problem of Arthur's rebellion is that his anger remains undefined and obscure, never finding a satisfactory outlet except in sensational and unfulfillable ideas directed against the castle. He complains but is unable to do anything about it, whilst Brian Seaton refuses to shoot the Chinese communists, and Frank Dawley goes a stage further by joining the guerrillas against the French in North Africa. These three characters can be seen as a development from impotent, frustrated anger to fulfilment of belief.

After *The Flame of Life*, Sillitoe moves away from the overtly socialist novels and instead attacks the Establishment indirectly through characters who attempt to join it, rather in the same way that Joe Lampton does in *Room At The Top*. Cullen and Scorton become members of "them" if one still uses the idea of 'us' and 'them' that is contained within *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. The hero in the later novels is not so politically motivated as Brian Seaton or Frank Dawley, which suggests that either Sillitoe has abandoned direct social comment or else that he is still working towards the same conclusion i.e. a criticism of modern society and those values upon which it places emphasis, but from a different angle. He has switched his focus of characterization away from 'us' and views society from amongst 'them'. However, that black and white distinction is not really satisfactory because Sillitoe merges elements of both 'us' and 'them' into his later heroes as their characterization becomes more complex.

But in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* the differentiation between the two is more clear-cut. Arthur's ability to see things only in black and white ('us' and 'them') is paralleled in the novel by the manner in which his life is divided into two sections - the 'Saturday Night' character who lives for the moment and never worries about what he does, and the 'Sunday Morning' figure who

suddenly discovers that actions have consequences and that he is to be held responsible for his past behaviour. The Seaton of the first half of the novel is one who derives a good deal of selfish pleasure out of life but only from a very limited existence:

> "You won't knuckle under, Arthur. If you would, you'd enjoy life."
>
> "I do enjoy it, mate," he said loudly. "Just because I'm not like you, don't think I don't. Yo've got your life an' I've got mine . . I'll stick to the White Hoss, fishin' an' screwin".[7]

The last phrase is perhaps a parody of the old upper-class expression, "huntin', fishin', an' shootin'", but what the extract as a whole reveals is that Sillitoe's early hero is an inward-looking figure who thinks only of himself and his own pleasures, whereas a later figure such as Dawley professes to be more concerned with the suffering and well-being of others. However, later protagonists, especially Cullen, see a return to an essentially selfish nature which suggests that this area of Sillitoe's characterization has advanced and then almost regressed to the views of Arthur Seaton.

One of the main features of Seaton's characterization is the use of repetition in his way of life and even in his constant use of similar phrases. Just as John Osborne, in *Look Back In Anger*, used Jimmy Porter to point out repeatedly that there is something wrong with contemporary society, although offering no solution, so Sillitoe makes

Arthur's life a ritualistic pattern without meaning that he repeats every month. I think that Sillitoe was very concerned that his first novel should contain a message and, bearing in mind his inclination towards a Marxist/social realist concept of literature outlined in the interview with Hajek, then he would be keen to emphasize that message as strongly as possible and what better way than through his hero?

To an extent, therefore, Arthur's characterization becomes a vehicle for social protest, but what prevents him from becoming a mouth-piece for political dogma (as Dawley is sometimes in danger of becoming) is that his sense of anger remains indistinct and is mitigated by a sardonic humour and elements of the picaresque which are missing from the earnest Dawley. However, even though Arthur is made to appear different from those around him, to give him an air of individuality even to the extent of allowing him to take his own flask of tea to work instead of using the firm's brew, he is also representative of a problem perceived by Sillitoe in contemporary society. The character of Seaton is being used to suggest that modern man has been reduced to a machine by the capitalist society that treats him like a robot, and from which the working man is reluctant to remove himself because, superficially, he is having an enjoyable time.

> For it was Saturday night, the best and bingiest glad-time of the week, one of the fifty-two holidays in the slow-turning Big wheel of the year.[8]

And if the year can be visualized as a wheel, then presumably once the circle is complete it will start all over again. This extract reveals both Arthur's repetitive life-style and the idea that he appears satisfied with his life. As the novel progresses it becomes evident he is vaguely aware that there is something missing from his life, something that he can't define and which will only emerge in the later novels as a more clearly established idea. If one accepts Sillitoe's idea that contemporary society has reduced man's existence to the level of a machine and has taken away a religious significance to life, then there has been nothing put in its place to replace it:

> If you believe in God, which I don't, he said to himself [9]

Sillitoe is attempting to indicate that Arthur is seen as a representative of a more general problem in modern industrial man and the working-class in particular, that it is not only what Arthur says and does that is significant but also what he leaves unsaid. There is a spiritual void in his life that he is unable to comprehend and it is an emptiness that is never satisfactorily solved in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* but which is gradually filled in the characters of Brian Seaton and Frank Dawley

with the idea of replacing religion with socialism, a concept that is seen most clearly in *The Death of William Posters*:

> "You mean mankind has to lose its soul?" Larry suggested.
> "What soul? Still, if you want to put it like that, you can. . . . The bum-bailiffs march up to the soul and sling God out kicking and screaming. Then the real things of life move in, and that space that God inhabited (all his bloody mansions) is enormous. We can get so much in there."
> "Who's 'we'?" Larry asked.
> "People who think like me, and those who have it in their blood but don't yet know how to think. I had to step out of factories to realize this, though I've always felt it, and that's a fact."[10]

By contrast, Arthur is unable to visualize life in such a profound way, and although he is aware that something is wrong, he tries to ignore the void through a series of physical actions that prevent him from thinking, and leads a life alien either to Brian Seaton or Dawley.

> Yet he remembered one of his Nottingham mates who, unless he got blind drunk, spewed his guts up, and was knocked to the ground in unequal fight, didn't feel he'd had a good time - the sort of thing that now seemed a waste of life to Frank Dawley.[11]

If, as I believe, Sillitoe has used Dawley to convey many of his own ideas then it is apparent that Seaton's way of life is dissatisfying to his author. But the difference between Arthur and the later, post-Dawley, heroes is that he is portrayed as being unable to control his own destiny, that he is trapped inside the work ethic and the rows of terraced

houses. To a considerable extent, therefore, any faults that he may possess can be blamed upon a society that imposes restrictions upon his way of life. However, in the later novels there is a development away from using the protagonist as the means by which to criticize society and, instead, a movement towards condemnation of both society and the hero who is prepared to sell his soul in order to gain material success. However, because Sillitoe eventually allows his character a happy ending, the attack upon the hero remains muted. There is a fine dividing line between the two categories since in both cases the hero is being used to show up faults in our society. The early novels explain why the protagonist behaves in the way that he does and puts the blame for any shortcoming upon the capitalist system and the established order which prevents any change. But because both Cullen and Scorton enjoy more material success and are able to enter the lives of the people who keep Arthur and Brian in their terraced houses then some of the weaknesses in their character are directly attributable to them. Instead of placing all the blame on a vague structure known as the Establishment, Sillitoe eventually places some of the responsibility for these failings upon the characters themselves, particularly if, consciously or not, they have agreed to make the necessary spiritual sacrifices in order to succeed materially,

something that Frank Dawley rejects when he abandons suburbia in order to go to North Africa to fight. After the trilogy I think that an idea is developed of partially holding the protagonist to blame for known shortcomings in his character whereas, in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Arthur is not held responsible because his life is dictated by others, whose presence is embodied in the shape of Nottingham Castle.

Sillitoe's use of repetition in the characterization of Arthur Seaton is, by comparison with his later heroes, a fairly crude way of getting his point across, but it is an effective one, and as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was his first work to be published, it was essential that it must have some impact upon the reading public if Sillitoe was to succeed in establishing himself as a writer. That is partly the reason why Arthur's life appears, initially, so sensational since it would intrigue many readers. But the repetition also suggests, to me, that Arthur's life is essentially static, and although he may indulge in fights, casual sex and drinking bouts, it is all part of a very narrow existence out of which he cannot, or will not, break. Even his speech reveals this repetitive nature as he continually tries to justify himself and his way of life:

> Tomorrow is work, and I'll be hard at it, sweating my guts out until next weekend. It's a hard life if you don't weaken.[12]

and:

> It was a good, comfortable life if you didn't weaken . . .[13]

and even at the end he still holds to this view even though the party at Aunt Ada's can be seen as a turning point in his life:

> Ay, by God, it's a hard life if you don't weaken . . .[14]

Only in the closing lines does he relent a little and provide us with the hope of a more optimistic future:

> Well, it's a good life and a good world, all said and done, if you don't weaken . . .[15]

Arthur's continual use of this phrase is, in a sense, a barrier that he creates in order to stop asking himself awkward questions. By reminding himself of what life is all about in such a blunt and simplistic ('black' and 'white') manner, and rarely altering his idea of what he sees as his function, he emerges as a relatively static character, whereas Brian Seaton manages to develop by asking himself those questions that Arthur seeks to evade, and Dawley goes a stage further by being able to find answers to some of them. In a way it is a development reminiscent of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, of seeking and accepting, seeking and asking, and eventually finding answers

to those questions. However, it is not an analogy that I wish to emphasize or dwell on because Arthur doesn't really fit into the first category since he is aware that there is something missing from his life but he is unable to decide what it is.

2. *Brian Seaton*

It would be easy to say that Brian Seaton, the hero of *Key To The Door*, is merely a more developed form of Arthur Seaton but there is more to his characterization than that. Arthur's character is influenced to a considerable extent by the actual city and the buildings contained within it as in his reaction to the presence of the Castle, and because his early life remains obscure, it is difficult to discover the motivations for his actions through an examination of his childhood. That pre-supposes that all actions are attributable to childhood, which is not necessarily the case, but Sillitoe provides us with the early years of most of his protagonists, and in each case (if one regards Frank Dawley as a continuation of Brian Seaton) their behaviour in adulthood is seen as being considerably influenced by infancy and youth. In *Key to the Door*, we trace the ancestry of the Seatons back to Grandfather Merton and can discover the historical and social background that helps to create the character of Brian and,

through his own childhood, understand more clearly why he behaves in the way that he does. I think that Arthur Seaton's dissatisfaction is due to a spiritual void which he is unable to visualize in himself, but because he fails to describe satisfactorily this lack of purpose in his life it is not always easy for the reader to understand the reason for his discontent. In *Key To The Door*, through an expanded view of the character's life, Sillitoe provides us with some reasons for that dissatisfaction. Of course not all actions or aspects of behaviour in adulthood are attributable to childhood, but I think Sillitoe believes that the formative years are essential in establishing the later patterns of behaviour in his protagonists. In nearly all of the novels he dwells on the hero's childhood and establishes a social-historical motivation for his later life. But to what extent is it a recreation of Sillitoe's own childhood? Certainly, it is in the creation of Brian Seaton that the autobiographical element is most strong and there is not much doubt that the hero is closely linked to the author. This raises the question of whether Sillitoe identifies himself too closely with the central character and fails to retain a level of objectivity that is apparent in the later novels. I am not suggesting that it is a failing on the part of Sillitoe to attempt to recreate his own experiences within the novels, but it does have

an effect upon the various characterizations if he can be seen as in some way identifying himself with the protagonist. In *Key To The Door* Brian Seaton's character has been considerably influenced by Sillitoe's own experiences, and the autobiographical *Raw Material* illustrates some of these links. But if *Key To The Door* is an examination of Sillitoe's past, then the characterization of Frank Dawley is heavily influenced by Sillitoe's vision of the future. What unites these two characters is the extent to which they represent the author himself. This differentiates them from the later heroes who are creations of the author's mind but who do not always share his sympathies.

Key To The Door traces the growth of Brian's consciousness from infancy to adulthood, and as he becomes more aware of what is going on around him so too does his character develop, and the narrative of the first two sections ("Prologue" and "Nimrod") is replaced by a discussion of motives and beliefs in the second half of the novel, intermingled with flashback chapters which help to explain why he has been transformed from the happy child into a more hostile young man. All of this is a considerable development from the characterization of Arthur Seaton, who appears static by contrast.

In essence, Brian's character is a half-way point between Arthur's unsettled but mostly superficial existence,

and the more profound and critical behaviour of Dawley. Brian shares elements of each. He is never sure why he applied to come overseas when he could have stayed in Britain with Pauline, his wife.

> He had not filled in the attached application which asked you to state any reason why you might not want to be sent overseas. I'm a nut case, he thought. Maybe I could stay in England, being married and Pauline about to have a kid. But for some unfathomable reason he had left it blank, never knowing what had induced him to do so, neither questioning nor regretting it, except to wonder why he had been sent to Malaya and not Japan. . .[16]

This inability to explain his actions is close to Arthur's frequent failure to understand why things happen in the way that they do. But Brian also foreshadows Frank Dawley's character in the way that his later post-adolescent characterization assumes a political/socialist overtone, and reaches maturity in his refusal to kill the Chinese communist.

> Brian leaned against a tree screaming with laughter, a mad humorous rage tearing itself out. 'And I let him go! Odgeson and all you bastards, I let him go because he was a comrade! I didn't kill him because he was a man![17]

Dawley takes this a stage further and actually joins the guerrillas in their fight against the French whilst Brian remains, in name at least, a soldier of the king.

In Brian, Sillitoe establishes the pattern of the self educated hero, the character who wishes to learn, to read for

his own benefit in order to escape the trap of illiteracy which he sees as being a big stumbling-block to those around him, and in particular the fear of ending up in the same position as his father. Arthur never gives any indication of being a reader, except for the racing pages, and in the context of the novel it would be difficult to establish any justification for why he should be. However, in *Key To the Door*, with its perusal of Brian's childhood, it is possible to understand why he should wish to read without it appearing strange to find such literary taste in one with so little formal education and inhabiting a world dominated by the Calvinist work ethic. As Frederick McDowell points out, Sillitoe's achievement is that he is able to make Brian a realistic figure without allowing his interest in literature to appear odd:

> It is dangerous, without sentimentalizing, to impute literary interests (often the reflection of the author's own) to a person from the working class. Sillitoe, however, maintains a proper balance in projecting Brian's personality. Brian is enough interested in books and abstractions to serve as a sensibility through which the action of the novel can be registered with sensibility and comprehension. At the same time he is much more centrally involved in his daily struggles and in his passional life than he is in the life of the mind. Brian is 'literary' enough to be articulate but not literary enough to be false to the milieu from which he arose.[18]

Brian is followed by Dawley, Cullen and Scorton in showing an interest in books, and Sillitoe's choice of reading for each of them is often revealing both of the individual's character and of the author's attitude towards them. For instance, the earnest Dawley reads "Conrad, Melville, Stendhal - the giants",[19] which seems to be literature well suited to his quest of self discovery, and it is not accidental that Michael Cullen, the picaresque figure, should reach for a copy of *Roderick Random* (by mistake) whilst working for a writer, or that William Scorton should be mainly concerned with writers of military theory and history. I am not suggesting that the various choices of literature ascribed to each character indicates a progressive development in characterization, but I think that Sillitoe's references to other novels is deliberate and reflects upon the individual protagonist. Whilst Frank Dawley uses literature in order to discover more about himself, Brian reads, as a child, as a form of escapism very similar to the way that he visits the cinema. Later on he quotes from Coleridge at the sighting of something exceptional or to sum up his feelings about an event but it is literature to be used in order to express his reactions to what is going on outside him rather than, as in the case of Dawley, to use the novel in order to help the hero to achieve a better understanding of himself. He doesn't use literature

for self-discovery in the way that Dawley does. Again, it is possible to visualize Brian as being a half-way point between Arthur and Dawley because whilst he reads far more than the other Seaton, he doesn't put it to the same use as the hero of the trilogy.

3. Frank Dawley

Frank Dawley's characterization represents the climax of Sillitoe's working class, revolutionary figure begun with Arthur Seaton and with Smith in "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner". But both Seatons are essentially passive, relying on others to start off a chain of events that will arouse them,

> Arthur was stirred by the sound of breaking glass: it synthesized all the anarchism within him, was the most perfect and suitable noise to accompany the end of the world and himself.[20]

By contrast, Dawley acts, he is the person who breaks the glass whilst Arthur watches. Through his actions Dawley comes to a better understanding of himself and of his responsibility towards others. One feature that differentiates this novel from the earlier ones is that whilst Arthur and Brian commit themselves at the end of their respective novels, we never learn whether their plans have succeeded or whether they have been stopped by the "wall"[21] that Dawley feels is threatening to destroy him. But in

The Death of William Posters, we enter at the point where Dawley has progressed beyond either of the Seaton brothers in terms of age but has reached a low point in his life because he now hates the sort of compromise that Arthur was prepared to make. Dawley is in a vacuum:

> He got work at a car park in Soho, a safe enough place for a man who wanted neither past nor future. He guided cars in, drew them out, issued tickets and collected money, easy and mindless work, necessary at the moment because he also was mindless, caved-in and floating among dead buildings at the bottom of a smoky sea. With a spear in your metaphorical side the only thing you could do was move, move, move - even if only in circles, even if only on crutches.[22]

But it is a different form of emptiness to that experienced by Arthur Seaton because Dawley is more willing to try and discover what that void within him is, and the trilogy traces his attempt to fill it whilst Seaton never satisfactorily finds out what is wrong.

There is a marked variation in character development between the three working-class protagonists but in their concluding thoughts the two Seatons foreshadow Dawley. Arthur appears as an adult figure with his fairly narrow ideas on pleasure and an impotent anarchistic feeling, but he concludes by agreeing to compromise in order to enjoy life with Doreen whilst making a prophetic statement that could herald Dawley:

> Well, it's a good life and a good world, all said and done, if you don't weaken, and if you know that the big wide world hasn't heard from you yet, no, not by a long way, though it won't be long now.[23]

Key To the Door traces the development of Brian's character from childhood to youthful maturity and ends, instead of a compromise, with the protagonist becoming more aware of social and political grievances and committing himself to helping to change. I believe all of this is relevant to my suggestion that Dawley represents the culmination of Sillitoe's early hero figure because in the course of the trilogy we see the differing final statements made by both of the Seatons being used by Dawley. He rejects Arthur's compromise and in a reaction against it there follows a period of commitment and action that Brian has contemplated, and finally a return to another compromise that is more acceptable because Dawley has discovered his inner self in a way that Arthur hasn't:

> How could one live without this flame? You didn't have to see it to believe it was there. If it was in your heart you could see it spring up in all different places. As long as it stayed in your heart your revolutionary principles were not at variance with the way you lived.[24]

Possibly Dawley's character can be seen as a synthesis of views first mentioned by the two Seatons and developed in the trilogy.

The main drawback to Dawley's character is that Sillitoe's development of an increasingly subjective approach towards his protagonist has an adverse effect upon the reader's ability to sympathize with the hero. After Dawley he becomes more objective, similar to his approach with Arthur Seaton, but in the characterization of the central figure in *The Death of William Posters* the lack of criticism of the protagonist by the author causes problems. Sillitoe treats him with the utmost seriousness and, as Paul Levine points out, at times it becomes almost too much:

> . . . like Hemingway, he is bothered by the limitations of heroism in an overcivilized society. And like both at their worst [Lawrence and Hemingway], Sillitoe goes about showing his concern with a solemn and numbing earnestness which makes him take his hero more seriously than we can.[25]

This comment is relevant to Sillitoe's development of character because Dawley is isolated from the other protagonists in that an element of sardonic humour has been removed, and replaced by an earnest tone that occasionally borders on dogma. Kermode once described Sillitoe's style in this novel as preaching,[26] and like the dissenting ministers of old his portrayal of Dawley has a style that is reminiscent of the hellfire and damnation orator who seemed to view enjoyment as a sign of the Devil. Perhaps Sillitoe was aware of this fault in his hero's character, and it is a failing if one accepts the idea that a well

developed character should contain an element of humour, or at least the author should provide moments of light relief since a continuously earnest tone in a novel is sometimes capable of making it turgid if not boring. And since Sillitoe was providing us with his vision of a new Britain and a new man whose embodiment was Frank Dawley then surely he would wish the reader not to become bored or lose interest. The problem was that Sillitoe wanted to convey a message in the first volume of the trilogy and was afraid of diverting the reader's attention in case he or she should become side-tracked into a secondary feature within the novel and lose interest in Dawley's struggles. Instead, he concentrated almost exclusively on the solemn, earnest figure of Frank Dawley who lacked a sense of humour and, at times, sounded more like *Das Kapital* than a human being. In the second and third volumes of the trilogy the prominence of the eccentric Handley household, with their Dickensian undertones, and in particular the emergence of Albert Handley, provides a convenient and necessary counter balance of restrained humour.

If I appear particularly critical of Sillitoe's characterization of Dawley then it is because the author has failed to satisfactorily convince the reader that his hero is a suitable figurehead for the new socialist person that he envisages. I find that as Dawley's earnestness becomes tedious it becomes difficult to prevent my attention

from wandering in an attempt to escape from the solemnity. And yet I think Sillitoe wants us to listen to Dawley because he is the author's vision put into words and character. It also makes one wonder if the author is not too closely connected with Dawley and if the earnestness is a result of a lack of objectivity on the part of Sillitoe; an objectivity which is retained in his relationship with his heroes in other novels and allows him either to make fun of the protagonist (as in *A Start In Life*) or share humorous incidents (as in *Key To The Door*). The problem of earnestness is particularly acute in *The Death of William Posters*, when Sillitoe focuses the reader's attention almost exclusively upon the character of Dawley without analyzing the characterization more objectively. E.M. Forster suggested that "a shifting view-point"[27] within a novel was essential:

> And the novelist must bounce us, that is imperative.[28]

This is something which Sillitoe fails to do in the first volume of the trilogy since he is too closely involved in his hero's voyage of self-discovery. Forster made another valid point when he said, in connection with Gide's *Les Faux Monnayeurs*:

> The novelist who betrays too much interest in his own method can never be more than interesting, he has given up the creation of

> character and summoned us to help analyse his own mind, and a heavy drop in the emotional thermometer results.[29]

If one accepts the idea that Sillitoe uses Dawley to reveal to us his vision of the new man who will inhabit the earth then such a view also represents a considerable intrusion of the author's own thoughts and beliefs and Forster's comments become relevant because it is very difficult to retain a consistent level of interest in Dawley. Instead, I look for some relief from it, which is rarely made available in the first part of the trilogy. As already mentioned, Sillitoe does go some way towards remedying the situation in the later volumes by providing us with the Handleys and by making Dawley less dogmatic. Perhaps it is the missing element of humour that I am more concerned with than a desire for Sillitoe to distance himself from his hero because there is no reason why he shouldn't identify himself with his protagonist so long as he doesn't expect the reader always to find him as interesting as the author appears to. And because the topic he is concerned with, the creation of a socialist figure who will one day help to make a new Britain, is a profound one, he is afraid that any intrusion of humour would destroy his character's credibility, but I think that it would have made him more interesting to read about and perhaps cause us to be more sympathetic towards his aims.

Dawley represents the character who Sillitoe would like to see inherit the earth:

> "You're the Uncomplicated Person." Frank took this as a compliment. "I'm the empty man, the man without religion. All I believe in is houses and factories, food and power-stations . . . We're going to become new men, whether we like it or not, and I know I'm going to like it."[30]

Dawley's apparent arrogance in asserting that he knows what is best for others would seem to have been shared by his author at one time.

> The character of a district counts for nothing. It's people's happiness that matters. That does not mean that people cannot be happy in terraced houses, but they could be happier in better houses.[31]

One of the unfortunate aspects of Dawley's characterization is the way that he is allowed to make statements without Sillitoe permitting any other character the right of reply. Too much of the trilogy consists of Dawley issuing forth his views like a steam-roller, without any vocal opposition. Nowhere is Sillitoe as objective with Dawley's character as he is with either Arthur Seaton or William Scorton, who are at either end of his writing career to date. Dawley is a subjective portrayal of the author's idea of a modern industrial folk hero but, despite attempts in *The Flame of Life* to remedy the situation, he seems to lack the warmth of feeling and emotion of a human being, something that is much better handled in the characterization of Brian

Seaton. In this respect there has not necessarily been a development of character which is perhaps partly because in *Key To The Door* Sillitoe is remembering his own early years and can instill emotion into them whilst he is recounting tales of his own family and friends. However, Frank Dawley is a projection of the author looking into the future when Arthur Seaton's spiritual void has been replaced by a belief in socialist revolution which, according to Sillitoe, negates the need for a religious God. Dawley is presented as a single-minded character intent upon discovering himself and seems to reject any emotional outburst or sign of affection, and it isn't until the later volumes that he begins to realize the necessity for other people.

Dawley functions most effectively when Sillitoe describes him in action, because in those episodes he is staying on a narrative level and not attempting to burden his character with thoughts and images that sometimes strain the reader's credulity.

4 Albert Handley

After the emergence of Frank Dawley the author began to look elsewhere for the creation of a hero figure other than the factory worker burdened with a sense of social injustice. There appear to be at least two possible reasons for this change in characterization. Firstly, it was becoming

repetitive and the author had possibly started to run out of new ideas around a well established theme. Alternatively, he appears to have switched his criticism of society away from the 'chip on the shoulder' worker who is always on the outside looking in and not liking what he sees, towards characters who become part of the Establishment, and through their lives he indicates a criticism of the capitalist system. There is a third possible reason for this change: perhaps Sillitoe was more interested in the individual and his way of life and no longer so concerned with making social injustice an obvious theme of his novels.

Albert Handley contains elements of nearly every other character and I believe that he may be seen as the hinging point that links both the early and the later protagonists. As with Arthur Seaton he believes that he is as good as the next man:

> ". . . but I was anybody's equal and still am."[32]

and, like Arthur, he is capable of making wild threats:

> Handley stood at the door. "If you drop it you're a dead man."[33]

He supports the theoretical notions of revolution and anarchy that Frank Dawley puts into action:

> "Nine months ago Frank Dawley went to Algeria and hasn't been heard of since. Anyone who takes on that task is helping in some unrewarded, idealistic, mystical way to bring about the unification of the world."[34]

And, like William Scorton, he is a former gunner in the artillery although not quite so dedicated to the army:

> "I wasn't a gunner in the artillery for fuck-nothing," he gloated . . .[35]

In a manner similar to Michael Cullen he is at times capable of a cynical selfishness which is the opposite of Dawley or Brian Seaton:

> "We're all guilty if you like, but pour me some more, then it stops being guilt and becomes blame, and I can drown both with booze till it's not too bad to bear."[36]

Like Arthur, his character is a fairly static one. He is forty when first introduced in *The Death of William Posters*, but whatever we learn about him afterwards never satisfactorily explains his eccentricity. He is always talking about what he is going to do but, apart from painting, and playing at revolutions, he rarely does anything by himself, relying on others to act first. Frank McGuinness had two conflicting views about Handley and his family. Reviewing *The Death of William Posters*, he said:

> In particular, one remembers the painter Frank first meets in a Lincolnshire pub, a splendidly original figure . . .[37]

which seems to me to be a fair comment, but two years later, according to the critic, that element of originality was missing from *A Tree On Fire*:

> Nor does he exhibit quite his customary flair for creating characters who emerge as real people rather than bizarre but essentially

> cardboard imitations. Indeed, for all the extravagance of their behaviour and posturing, the Handleys remain obstinately unconvincing and their antics irritate more than they entertain or illuminate.[38]

To suggest that Handley should illuminate the reader is looking for something in the character that is not there. That responsibility rests with Dawley whilst Handley's purpose, apart from providing some occasional light relief, is to remind us of Dawley when Sillitoe switches from Algeria to Lincolnshire by having both him and his brother, John, praise the fighter profusely, another attempt by the author to convince us of his hero's virtues. Handley's characterization is always subservient to that of Dawley, for whilst the former may amuse us, it is only the latter who is potentially capable of instructing us by presenting the reader with the vision of a new state. Sillitoe's achievement within the trilogy, is that he never allows Dawley or Handley to conflict or to enable the reader to prefer one to the detriment of the other. Bearing in mind whathhas already been said about Dawley I think such an achievement is a limited one because Handley is the one character who could conceivably be used as an alternative viewpoint to the hero's political stance, but that is not his role. The Handleys exist either as puppets who praise Dawley or, in Albert's case, the author provides him with interests (such as painting) and views which are never allowed to

conflict with those of Dawley. Handley's life style is amusing but Sillitoe doesn't intend it to exist as a viable alternative to the vision that Dawley believes in. So that the development of Albert Handley's character must be seen as one that is limited in a way that no other main character of Sillitoe's is, since he is being used by the author as a humorous counter-balance to the earnestness of Dawley, but he cannot emerge as an independent main figure since what the latter has to say is more significant.

Handley expresses interest in the theoretical concept of revolution, but Dawley believes that he is merely playing at it.

> Dawley always knew that Handley only let his sons play at revolution so that he could get on with his painting. If revolution ever became so real that he had no electric light or couldn't get razor-blades he'd be the first to turn against it.[39]

and what links him to both Seaton and Scorton, the author's first and latest protagonists, is his apolitical stance:

> "Politics?" Handley sat in the other armchair. "I left off that sort of thing as soon as I felt that they were necessary, as soon as I understood them and realized I had nothing left to learn. I'll only take an interest in politics when there's a civil war. In the mean time, let who will rule."[40]

What links these two disparate characters is that they avoid the political/social problems around them by turning to other forms of relief such as drinking, sex, fighting

or painting, rather than, like Dawley, deciding to confront the challenge of social commitment head on. This is another reason why I think that Handley exists as a sort of mid-way point between the two groups of heroes. Although he is closer to Cullen and Scorton in breaking away from the factory floor image of the earlier heroes, he contains elements of character which are found in both groups of protagonists.

Handley, and later Cullen and Scorton, use the class system (or are used by it) in order to achieve a level of material success previously beyond the protagonist's grasp. But because financial reward and social advancement are seen as essentially selfish motives which Dawley/Sillitoe rejects in favour of a more selfless desire to help others, then these characters have to make some kind of sacrifice in order to indicate to the reader that monetary wealth is not everything in life. With Cullen this is indicated in a loss of any moral consciousness whilst Scorton's social success is paralleled by an inability to keep his marriage together. In the case of the latter I have found some of the links tenuous and wonder whether Sillitoe has not decided to drop this theme of criticizing the Establishment and to concentrate solely on the individual regardless of his position in life or what he achieves. Certainly, he is far less dogmatic in his later novels regarding the differences

between 'us' and 'them'. He doesn't appear to judge Handley in the way that he does Michael Cullen and perhaps this is due to the fact that he hadn't yet decided how to adjust his criticism of society whilst writing the trilogy. Handley's characterization is the linking point between the worker to whom no guilt is attributable since the capitalist system has forced him to act in the way that he does, and the later more successful figure who is mildly criticized by the author because he has agreed to work within the system. In both cases the Establishment remains guilty.

5 *Michael Cullen*

Michael Cullen, the hero of *A Start in Life*, is a continuation and extension of the type of characterization established with Albert Handley. Like Handley, he is not a character preoccupied with class-consciousness but with exploiting the situation as it exists. In contrast to Handley, who maintains that the existing system is wrong but drinks in order to forget about it (as does Arthur Seaton), Cullen possesses few moral scruples as to what is right or wrong. The main difference between this characterization and any of the previous ones is that Sillitoe is now attacking the existing social system from within, by describing the life of its members through a person who is willing to escape from a life in the terraced streets and

council houses, and seeks monetary gain. Previous to this, Sillitoe has always placed the blame for the protagonist's behaviour upon the capitalist system and removed any element of guilt from the hero's shoulders. But now, although he still regards the contemporary British social system as destructive, he also criticizes the protagonist for accepting its values and wishing to join the ratrace, instead of fighting against it like Dawley. Sillitoe has put a distance between himself and his hero's ideas whilst in Dawley's characterization he has closely identified himself with the hero.

Contrasts abound between Michael Cullen and Frank Dawley and suggest not so much a development from one character to the next but a different look at the variety of human experience.

It is possible to see *A Start in Life* as a negative version of the trilogy, in as much that whilst both protagonists are surrounded by people from whom they can learn, Dawley comes to believe in the value of helping others as well as achieving a better understanding of his inner self, whilst Cullen never goes beneath his superficial existence and rarely bothers to help anyone unless there is something in it for him. In that sense the two characters parallel each other on the 'good' and 'bad' side of an imaginary chart illustrating Sillitoe's idea of virtues and vices.

Dawley is treated very seriously by the author whilst irony is consistently used in *A Start in Life*. It is the return of an element of humour in his portrayal of the hero that makes a big difference to Cullen's character in comparison with Dawley's. Dawley appears dogmatic and boring in his earnest approach but Cullen, who is treated less seriously by Sillitoe, is able to amuse the reader although not instruct in the way in which the other is supposed to. I am not suggesting that all serious characters are boring or that those treated in a more sardonic manner are interesting but, that in Sillitoe's novels the character whom he most wishes us to admire and respect loses our interest because of his dogmatic style, whereas a character like Cullen is capable of entertaining us by making us laugh, either at him or at the people who surround him. Frank discovers a philosophy of life through a process of extreme hardship but Cullen only copies the appearance of those around him, never attempting to learn anything fundamental in the way that Dawley does with Shelley Jones or, in a previous novel, as Brian Seaton was educated by Knotman. Cullen prefers to imitate rather than reject.

> Concern with worldly preoccupations was stamped quite clearly on my face, for I'd noticed it one morning gazing in the mirror before shaving, and since it suited me I decided to cultivate the picture it gave to my features, no matter how false it might be.[41]

The attitude that he displays here makes it difficult for the reader to admire such a character. Indeed, whilst we are supposed to admire Dawley for his selflessness and his struggle to survive, Sillitoe is deliberately preventing this hero from emerging in such a light. At the same time, because many of his acquaintances, such as Moggerhanger and Lantonhorn are worse than he is, it is difficult to dislike him. He copies the superficial mannerisms of those around him because he lives in a society that judges people by their appearance. The world that Cullen enters is an extension of the middle-class, advertising world that Dawley rejects because he sees it as spiritually dead.

After reading the trilogy it is impossible to see Sillitoe's characterization of Cullen as anything more than a muted disapproval of the protagonist's life-style combined with a more general condemnation of a system that not only allows him to succeed but encourages him in further dreams of avarice. In this respect I would disagree with Jany Watrin, who provides several good examples of the link between the picaroon and Cullen, and then goes on to say:

> In *A Start in Life*, Alan Sillitoe constantly refrains from commenting on people or events, he avoids all kinds of theoretical digressions, he refuses to interfere in his characters' lives. Nowhere do we feel the obtrusive presence of an all-knowing author manipulating

> his characters and contriving events in order to convey a 'message': what we get is the characters' own points of view, and this contributes to give greater coherence to the novel.[42]

As already indicated, there is a message within this novel although it only becomes noticeable when one has read the trilogy and decided that Sillitoe's heroic figure is one who is searching for a new social system.

Of course, in choosing to write a picaresque novel, Sillitoe has reverted to a form of character development practiced two hundred years earlier by Fielding and Smollett, elements of which can be found in Arthur Seaton. In this respect his characterization is a backward step when compared with the development of character revealed within the trilogy and Dawley in particular, which is more profound and closer to the social realist method favoured by Zola, and in Russell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. Like the two Seatons and Handley, Cullen remains a fairly passive individual to whom things happen rather than acting as the catalyst and so there isn't really a development of character in that sense either, rather a return to an established mode. However, unlike the other heroes he is aware of his laziness and, in true picaresque fashion, is able to use it to his own advantage.

> So I made a virtue out of my idleness and sloth. When strength came out of weakness it had the force of self-preservation behind it, and that was what I depended on. There didn't seem much else at the moment.[43]

In contrast to the other heroes, and what links him to William Scorton, is the fact that he has no desire to change the world because he is able to exist within the system quite satisfactorily.

6 *William Scorton*

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to say that William Scorton, the protagonist of *The Widower's Son*, represents the culmination of Sillitoe's hero figure because there has not been a straight forward development from one novel to the next. Scorton is closely linked to both Handley and Cullen because, like them, he is able to escape from a working class background and succeed in life in a way that was never possible for the early heroes and that was rejected by Dawley. This is one of the main features that has emerged from my study, and is one method of distinguishing between the various protagonists.

Even though Scorton is the figure whose portrayal is closest to the character outlined in Sillitoe's interview with Halperin, I still do not accept the novelist's contention that he is *solely* concerned with the individual and not at all interested in any social message when, as his

interview with Hajek suggests, he was at one time very much concerned with showing political commitment through his heroes. What I do think distinguishes this particular characterization from the earlier ones is that some of the political undertones are missing, but it is still possible to parallel Scorton's success in the army and in business with a failed relationship with his wife, and to suggest that the author deliberately makes Scorton's marriage fail in order to indicate that excessive personal ambition is regarded as a dubious merit. But the links do become more tenuous in this novel than they have been in previous ones, and it would be more appropriate to compare Scorton with some of Sillitoe's earlier heroes and to indicate whether or not the author has been able to develop his previous attitudes and methods of characterization.

What differentiates Scorton from an earlier figure such as Dawley is the noticeably objective approach on the part of the author in his handling of the former which contrasts strongly with the close links that sometimes appear to exist between creator and character. Brian Seaton's childhood appears to have been closely modelled on that of the author's own early years and so, at times, it is difficult not to link the two, just as in the trilogy it is very hard not to unite Sillitoe and Dawley as representing the author's hopes for the future. But with the later heroes we see a

return to a more objective approach similar to his treatment of Arthur Seaton.

In a review of *A Start in Life*, Jany Watrin accused Sillitoe of manipulating his characters in his previous novels, which is a fair criticism, and one way of distinguishing between Scorton and Dawley is to compare the way in which the author controls their lives. For me, Scorton's character is an improvement upon that of Dawley because he is less dogmatic and more acceptable as a character. More acceptable because Sillitoe goes out of his way to ensure that Dawley appears to succeed at everything he does, and to overcome every potential stumbling-block put in his way so that he becomes more like a machine or a superhuman figure, probably an unintentional move on Sillitoe's part but one which is possibly a result of not being critical enough of his characterization. Whilst Sillitoe is not deliberately trying to create *ubermenschen* such continual success becomes repetitive and casts a seed of doubt in the reader's mind that the author is deliberately helping his character. Most people experience set-backs at one time or another, but Dawley overcomes them continually because he has to succeed in order to demonstrate the viability of Sillitoe's socialist hero. By comparison, Scorton is treated in a much more critical manner by the author and his success in one area is paralleled by failure

in another. In Scorton's case the author is obviously keeping himself at a distance from his character in order to be more objective about him, and this is an improvement because the soldier does not become so mechanically successful. This, combined with a less earnest and dogmatic personality, results in a figure whom it is easier to sympathize with whereas, in fact, we should possibly be more receptive to Dawley and his views.

To give one instance of the change in manipulation on the part of the author, Sillitoe no longer allows his hero the same freedom of expression that Dawley enjoyed. This was done in order to use Dawley as a way of expressing his own views and suggests that Sillitoe wasn't prepared for any contrasting or opposing ideas which could destroy either his own, or his character's, credibility. Dawley is allowed to expound his theories without vocal opposition, and everyone accepts his view, there is little objective criticism of his ideas. But in *The Widower's Son* the hero is reduced to verbal impotence by his wife and prevented from becoming as verbose as Dawley, perhaps because Sillitoe is no longer so concerned with getting any message across:

> "Anyway, don't try. You mean well, but I can't stand this earnest deadlock we slide into whenever you get serious. Let's walk. It's such a nice day."
>
> Perhaps she was right. What good was talk?[44]

This is a complete reversal of Dawley and the subservience of all others to him. Instead of the author quite noticeably supporting the protagonist he has now moved away from identifying himself with the hero and feels more at liberty to prevent him from making those profound, earnest speeches that are so prominent in Dawley.

One important feature of Scorton's character which does represent a considerable development on the part of Sillitoe is his changing attitude towards the army, and a recognition of the importance of the individual even within an institution that threatens to submerge him within a uniformed mass. Previous to this he has condemned it because of its lack of individuality and the brutalizing effect that he believes it can have upon people, most clearly demonstrated in *The General* when his view of soldiers is that they are closer to animals:

> But this was war and they were enemies, and to slay, pillage and torture was second nature to them, a sublime perquisite of their expended energy and peril.[45]

Even within this novel the General himself is not treated in such a simplistic manner but his characterization is always subservient to the ideas and thoughts that are conveyed through him so that he never emerges as a fully developed character whereas Scorton is a much more developed individual and the soldier is now seen as a multi-faceted figure instead of just an animal.

This expansion away from a simplistic attitude towards one which no longer sees all soldiers as necessarily evil or army life as destructive.

> "The on'y thing the army cures you on," Arthur retorted, "is never to join the army again."[46]

is perhaps best displayed in the development that has occurred in the author's apparent attitude towards his character when comparing Scorton with Guzman, in the short story, "Guzman, Go Home". The link between the two characters is that both belong to organizations which have at one time been condemned by the author - the Nazi party and the army. But whilst Sillitoe had to ridicule Guzman in order to have any sympathy for him.

> As an old Nazi, Guzman was such a despicable character that I had to joke about him, otherwise I could have no sympathy for him. Making fun of him helped[47]

he has since progressed beyond this and been able to conceive of a hero who belongs to an organization he may have mixed views about but whom he can treat seriously, although not so solemnly as he treats Dawley. He is able to portray Scorton as a human being whereas in *The General* the soldiers had to be reduced to the level of animals.

The development of Scorton's character within the novel follows Sillitoe's established pattern of tracing childhood, youth, and adulthood, and allowing the hero a

successful conclusion, suggesting that he favours this method of characterization because it enables him to provide the reader with as many reasons as possible for explaining why the hero behaves in the way that he does. The most obvious difference from the other protagonists is that Scorton is the only hero to date to grow up without a mother but, like Cullen and his absent father, this is not so much a development but merely a part of Sillitoe's desire to explore various human experiences.

In each novel in which the author delves into the hero's childhood he uses the early years to show the effect that it has upon the protagonist in his later life. Brian Seaton is haunted by the threat of the means-test and illiteracy, Cullen is aware of his illegitimacy, and Scorton can never escape the vigorously logical example of his father. Development of the character is seen by Sillitoe as being considerably influenced by childhood.

What I have tried to show in this chapter is that it is not possible to trace a straightforward development in characterization from onenovel to the next, and that although William Scorton is an improvement upon previous figures in some respects, he can in no way be said to represent the culmination of Sillitoe's hero figure. Such an accolade, if it is at all applicable, should be accorded to Dawley who is, I think, the one character whom Sillitoe sees as

embodying certain heroic features. Rather, the protagonists can be more usefully divided into two groups - the early working class figures, and the later more successful individual in whom the class-consciousness becomes muted although it never entirely disappears.

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CHAPTER III

THE HERO IN LOVE

Reading Sillitoe's novels, I have become increasingly aware that his protagonist rarely fits into Peter Thorslev's definition of the Byronic hero, who was "universally courteous towards women."[1] Of course, such a disparity should not be surprising, bearing in mind that our earlier concept of the hero has been radically altered in the course of time, but whilst the contrast offered between the behaviour of a figure such as Childe Harold and Arthur Seaton is ironically amusing, I have found that in his protagonist's dealing with women, Sillitoe provides his hero with a chauvinist attitude that is only markedly improved upon in *The Widower's Son*. This novel sees a remarkable transformation in attitude by the hero and an acceptance of the woman as a potential equal. What I am trying to discover in this chapter is whether the early hero's concept of love, which is closer to lust, is replaced by a more complex attitude in which the protagonist is able to think about the partner and not just of himself. In a way I am also trying to see whether it is possible to distinguish between two distinct groups of protagonists as indicated

in the previous chapter.

I have chosen this particular aspect of the hero's character because, as E.M. Forster suggests, the love relationship is perhaps the most important and time-consuming theme in most novels, and Sillitoe is no exception to the rule. I have found Forster's rather clinical definition of what is in real life a fairly emotional topic very interesting because it seems to me that Sillitoe has not always viewed the topic in the same way that Forster did:

> Some people say that sex is basic and underlies all these other loves - love of friends, of God, of country. Others say that it is connected with them, but laterally, it is not their root. Other say that it is not connected at all. All I suggest is that we call the whole bundle of emotions love, and regard them as the fifth great experience through which human beings have to pass. When human beings love they try to get something. They also try to give something, and this double aim makes love more complicated than food or sleep. It is selfish and altruistic at the same time . . .[2]

Sillitoe's heroes, with the exception of William Scorton, stress the selfish attitude in their relationships with women whilst failing to display much altruism. I am reluctant to say that characters such as Arthur Seaton genuinely love the women in their lives because, in the context of Forster's definition, there is little to suggest that they understand the meaning of the word. Like Forster, I think that love should be more complicated in the novel

than either food or sleep, but Sillitoe's hero sometimes reduces it to the level of a meal, particularly in the characterizations of Arthur Seaton and Michael Cullen. Sillitoe is deliberately providing some of his protagonists with chauvinist and selfish attitudes which cannot be described as love because it seems to be physical lust alone, devoid of any thought of giving other than in the form of the penis.

An attempt is made to develop beyond this attitude in some of his later characters although there isn't any real change in practical terms until the creation of Scorton. I shall return to this idea later, but what I am suggesting is that although Dawley may theorize about the various concepts of love, and go far beyond Forster's meaning of the word, in practical terms he is little better than Arthur Seaton. Sillitoe does attempt to widen the hero's concept of the meaning of love but such progress is slow, and it is only in William Scorton's characterization that the word is able to assume a more significant meaning than just lust. The majority of Sillitoe's heroes see love and physical lust as one and the same thing in practice, and Scorton is the only one who realizes that there is more to a successful relationship than that alone. I am, of course, assuming that such is the case and that the Victorian idea of male domination is no longer correct,

that sex alone (which for Sillitoe's heroes is closely linked to man's supremacy) is not sufficient to maintain a good relationship.

> "We might fuck from time to time but we don't share anything anymore."[3]

Such a situation would suit Arthur Seaton because it would mean that no woman could intrude upon his private life of fishing and boozing, but Scorton's character indicates a development in that he is able to realize that such a situation is unsatisfactory and, ultimately, disastrous.

Arthur's desires reduce women to the role of slaves because in his relationships with them he is interested only in sex and not in any other emotional rapport. This is a failing in several of Sillitoe's protagonists, a willingness to accept women for his sexual needs alone, that is only slowly improved upon by the author. He rarely shows the hero thinking about the woman's feelings or her side of the situation. Instead, most of the protagonists turn to a male-dominated society (the pub, the air force or the army), from which women are excluded, to provide them with argument and discussion. As with everything else in his life, Arthur's view of women is very simplistic. There are those women who want to be loved and those who don't. His emphasis on the idea that it is women who need loving, and not men, is important because it is indicative

of his belief in man's basic superiority over woman:

> They were the sort of women who thought you were barmy if you tried to love 'em, and they just didn't understand what love was, and all you could do was end up by giving them a smack in the chops. Hopeless and barmy. But I reckon that mostly women want you to love 'em and be nice to 'em, and that even if they didn't they'd start to love you back after a bit. Make a woman enjoy being in bed with you - that's a big part of the battle - then you were well on the way to keeping her with you for good.[4]

For Seaton sex and love are one and the same thing, and he corresponds to Forster's third little category inside his 'whole great bundle' in that Arthur's idea of love is a basic sexual one that is not connected to anything other than physical desire and certainly not linked to either religion or patriotism, subjects which mean nothing to him. In fact, Forster's 'other loves - love of friends, of God, of country'[5] seems almost entirely inappropriate with regard to Sillitoe because few of his heroes display any feeling for these traditional values which here appear as old-fashioned as the pre-war concept of the hero. Instead, as in the case of Dawley a new form of love is introduced, one that would perhaps have been unthinkable to Forster, that of political ideology although it can be linked to both nationalism and to love of country. Sillitoe doesn't succeed in his attempt to convince us that love of socialism is necessarily either equal or

preferable to the love of an individual but it does represent an indication of the way in which love, like the hero figure, has been transformed in recent times and applied to different causes.

Forster's view of the love theme in a novel, "of a man and woman who want to be united",[6] does not appear valid in connection with Arthur and several other protagonists, partly because we rarely know just what the woman wants, but mainly because the only unity that the hero seems interested in is a sexual one, and he is reluctant to admit to any form of dependence upon the woman. Forster's unity implies a meeting of equal partners but the majority of Sillitoe's heroes are more concerned with establishing some form of supremacy over their wives and girlfriends:

> "And it's only right that I should always get my own way, you know that."[7]

says Arthur to Doreen, although the implied idea of male domination is a thought echoed by other main characters until Scorton arrives with his new-fangled ideas of equality.

Brian Seaton's image of love is mixed because his childhood provided an image that was upsetting to him.

> He was baffled. Love? His mam and dad loved each other: black eyes, split heads, table tipped over, black looks and no fags for ever and ever.[8]

In this case his characterization is a definite development from that of Arthur's, as his vision of love is more complex since it includes the ability to perceive what effect it can have upon others. Arthur only thinks of the word in relation to himself and his sexual relationships with women, but Brian applies the word to those around him. There is a widening of the hero's mental horizon as he becomes less absorbed in himself and more aware of others around him. Brian is able to look at his own relationship by comparing it with those of others:

> Brian saw Jim's courting as a more intense affair than his own.[9]

whilst Arthur never bothers to wonder whether his idea of love is a satisfactory one or if others might enjoy a more fulfilling relationship.

In *Key to the Door* there is a slight change of emphasis in the hero's attitude towards love. By the end of the novel it appears that Brian must miss Pauline for reasons other than sexual ones, because he has Mimi to fulfil that need for him. His relationship with the Malaysian 'hostess' is very stereo-typed and similar to that of Arthur and Brenda, but for Pauline his feelings go deeper:

> The horseshoe again set him thinking of the picture in his grandmother's parlour, of the girl holding a bunch of flowers and saying to the youth by her side: 'If you love me as I love you, Nothing can ever part us two' - which, pleasurably brooding on his living with Pauline, was how he felt about her.[10]

The image that Brian dreams of is very romantic, and I don't think that there has been any major development between Arthur's view of love and Brian's, but there is a slight improvement in the younger Seaton's ability to think of the woman not merely as a sexual chattel but as someone human. Arthur would never think of his relationship in the romantic manner that Brian does, but what differentiates them is that Brian is able, at times, to think about the woman and her feelings in a way that the other Seaton isn't. Arthur has already said that some women deserve to be hit, but Brian is able to perceive why Pauline ditches him after they have quarrelled and he has hit her. In his relationship with Pauline there is a slight widening of the horizon which persuades the hero to occasionally think of the woman, but there is still no attempt made to define what love means to them. Love is still closely linked to sex, possibly because those passages often find Sillitoe at his most vivid:

> His inner world grew to a blind illuminated space, the inside of a sphere that marked the limit of all pictures in his mind and turned his kiss-breathing into a vision. This was marvellous.[11]

For a writer such as Forster this emphasis upon the sexual aspect of the relationship would be unsatisfactory because Sillitoe is ignoring the full range of "other loves" that is available to the novelist.

It is in the trilogy that Sillitoe attempts to define the meaning of love, in its application to Frank Dawley. As in other areas of his characterization, I think that Dawley can be seen as the culmination of the author's ideals, and in the course of the trilogy Sillitoe attempts to answer some of the questions raised in the previous novels. Dawley's ideas concerning love are reached towards the end of *A Tree on Fire*, when he is recovering from the injuries inflicted in the desert. He rejects the rather sentimental concept of love that Brian Seaton has enjoyed in his imagination:

> Love came with two faces, usually that of the great destroyer, rage, and maggot-fire hiding behind the smile of the all-embracing womb of sweetness that tried to get you. Love destroyed your will, the soft evil old-fashioned swooning love that one had read and been told about, that froze the bowels and cooked the heart. . . . It was a sort of love you had to say goodbye to, drop dead to . . .[12]

Presumably this love that must be destroyed includes the concept tacitly endorsed by Forster. Forster's main bone of contention appears to be the extravagant amount of time devoted to it by authors and here there may be agreement with Dawley who wants to reject the old fashioned idea of love because it is out of place in the society that he envisages. However, Forster is primarily concerned with the relationship of two people and what they make of it, whilst Dawley goes through a period of attempting to

reject this in favour of a socialist love which is all-embracing and is not far removed from the Christian philosophy of "love thy neighbour as thyself". It is an aspect of love never considered by Forster who was concerned with more traditional values that could inspire love, such as the cross or the Union Jack rather than love for a political ideology. Dawley replaces the romantic vision of love with an idea which embraces his socialist ideals, so that it can now be seen as subservient to a political cause:

> When the foul and useless love you had been conditioned to accept by a finished and rotten society dead in its tracks had died, and you knew that to love only one person out of all others in the world, and be yourself loved by someone else out of all the others in the world was wrong in every sense, then you began to experience a new warmth of life, a responsible manifold feeling towards all others and not just one. The love of one was the love of death and of the devil. The love of all was a respect for creation.[13]

This is a rejection of everything that Arthur and Brian have understood the word love to mean and, as I say, it is in one respect very close to the Christian faith. But it is also a very rigid and dogmatic assertion that is essentially theoretical for it seeks to destroy the form of love that is at the heart of Forster's argument and at the centre of nearly every single novel and real life situation, the relationship between two individuals.

Ironically, although he sounds quite passionate in his argument, Dawley wants people to dispense with the emotional attachments of one person for another, and replace it with a concern for "all". I am assuming that the selfish quality in love that he wants us to reject is the emotional and sexual side of a relationship but this appears to be a fair assessment of what he has implied. This new love that he envisages is not based upon sexual desires alone and in that respect it is a considerable improvement and variation upon the meaning of the word as it has been applied to previous novels. But Dawley's assumption that the existing form of 'selfish' love is unacceptable is very questionable because he believes that all people are incapable of caring for others in the way that he wants us to. His argument is simplistic because he wants to reject this traditional form of love altogether and, instead, turn to something completely different. Why should he seek to reject it altogether? Surely it would be better if a compromise were to be reached whereby one could continue to share the love of the individual with a love for humanity. It is not his concept of "love of all" that I am arguing against, since that in itself appears to be a laudable aim, but I an unhappy with his wish to completely reject our existing concept of love. Sillitoe appears to have accepted the need for some form of compromise because,

at the end of *The Flame of Life*, Dawley has become less dogmatic and his perception of love is closer to Forster's understanding of the word. In particular, the conclusion of the novel fits in with Forster's idea that "Love, like death, is congenial to a novelist because it ends a book conveniently"[14]

> But as time went on he did not know how to reconcile his revolutionary principles and writings to his life as a normal family man. It bothered him most when he was happiest, because he was happiest when he was in the garden with his children, feeling he had no right to be happy with so much misery and devastation in the world. But he could not avoid loving Myra and the children and being happy.[15]

By comparison with the definition of love that he reached in *A Tree on Fire* this represents something of a climb-down on the part of the protagonist but it is a necessary compromise because he recognizes the value of personal relationships and no longer wishes to do away with them.

It is also very difficult to accept the idea that the love for an individual is a product of the western capitalist system. Like religion or nationalism, two of Forster's "other loves", politics is peripheral to the unity of two people. Dawley's argument is extremely tenuous because to link what he sees as a selfish form of love with an economic and political system which envisages people to think only of themselves is to make a connection that is not necessarily correct.

What represents a big step forward in the development of the protagonist is Dawley's perception that love is composed of more than sex alone:

> There was a love in which the phallus dominated all else, the boss and operating member tyrannising over everything you did or wanted to do. The other love was controlled by the hands that helped, taught, built and if necessary fought. The phallus could not be ignored, but neither could it be allowed to dominate . . .[16]

This is a more altruistic form of love than has previously been encountered in Sillitoe because Dawley is a socialist industrial folk hero who is concerned with helping others instead of, like Arthur, solely helping himself. With regard to Forster this appears to be one instance where the various concepts of love are connected laterally, in which Sillitoe's character is consciously preventing the sexual idea of love from becoming over-important in his life. But this other form that he mentions, which is socially motivated, is eventually less important to him than his love for Myra and the theorizing is compromised by an eventual acceptance of affection for an individual.

In terms of love for a woman, the protagonist's definition of the word is still closely linked to sexual desire since the implication is that love for a woman is "dominated" by the "phallus", which suggests that there has been little progress from either Arthur or Brian Seaton.

But in *The Death of William Posters*, Dawley has indicated that he is capable of widening the idea of love away from the sexual urge alone. His early thoughts on the subject are closer to those of Arthur Seaton

> "Love's not much more than a holiday in life. I think everything should be put in its place. The most important thing is work - to do something that means something . . . Aren't work and fucking enough? Both of them excite me equally - "[17]

It suggests that, at this particular stage in his characterization, there has been little development beyond the ideas endorsed by the earlier hero. However, in the course of this novel there is a remarkable transformation thrust upon the hero, whose theoretical concept of love becomes much more enlightened:

> . . . the sort of love he had always known about and felt as fully as anyone was to be discarded as a fraud and a trick, the stone tied around a corpse to make it sink. To cut it loose would enable a man and woman to live in equality, with regard and respect for each other's purpose in the world. Mutual destruction had to cease.[18]

Only Scorton possesses comparable ideas and the last sentence in the quotation is also relevant to that particular hero since, in his attempt to treat the woman as an equal a mutually destructive battle develops. But these views of Dawley's, which represent a tremendous advance in the hero's ability to understand what love is all about, remain theories because, in practice, he has a habit of retreating

to the old idea of male domination. He and Handley are the two people most resistant to change in the household; when Enid, the latter's wife, proposes that the men share the housework, these two supposedly enlightened men are most vociferous in their objections. This occurs in *The Flame of Life*, the last volume of the trilogy, in which Dawley moves away from love of his previously mentioned idea of enlightenment and accepts a more traditional situation.

It is Pat, his first mistress, who points out one of the great weaknesses in the ability of Sillitoe's protagonist to love the woman:

> "I can't be happier, so I think of the wide open spaces open to us."
> "Open to 'me', you mean. If you had any love in you you'd keep such thoughts to yourself. The first sign of love is when you think about the person you love, and apply the thought to her before turning it to yourself. As it is, you just torment me."[19]

Here, I think, is one of the main differences between Forster's definition of love, and that which appears in Sillitoe's heroes. Forster suggests that love is a mixture of giving and receiving but Pat has, through Sillitoe, indicated the selfish nature of the hero in his dealings with women and shown why his idea of love is so one-sided since he is usually incapable of thinking about the other person's feelings. Arthur Seaton never thinks about the woman's view in his idea of what love/lust is all about

and neither does Dawley at this stage of the trilogy. His similarity to Arthur is complete at this point, even to the extent of using his fists, as Arthur felt he should do against a certain type of woman. But Dawley is able to develop whilst Arthur remains largely static, but in *A Start in Life* Cullen's views are unchanging and close to those of Seaton. Dawley's development as a character, and his progression beyond the earlier heroes, is not always paralleled by a similar development in his relationships with women because any theoretical progress is qualified by a retreat to the old idea of male domination in *The Flame of Life*. One problem I have encountered in deciding whether or not Dawley is a development in character from the earlier heroes is that there sometimes exists a noticeable conflict between his theories and his application of them. His theoretical ideas represent a tremendous step forward in achieving equality between man and woman but his practical nature is unable to absorb them into his everyday life (as when he votes against any change in the household chores), and they remain mostly unachieved ideals.

Dawley's vision of love is also far more encompassing than anything contemplated by any of Sillitoe's protagonists and embraces a variant that was not even considered by Forster. It is a love 'for all' which is radically different from the

lust portrayed in the earlier novels and so the word love assumes a new significance compared with *Saturday Night* or *A Start in Life*. As a character, Dawley encounters a much wider physical horizon through going abroad (of his own volition, as opposed to Brian's enforced absence in Malaya) than any of Sillitoe's previous heroes and this expanded horizon is repeated in some of his views. His concept of love is a good example of this because he enlarges its definition to include 'all' instead of just 'one', which is considerably different from either Arthur or Brian's use of the word. But it is an ideal that remains theoretical partly because he conceives of it whilst in the desert away from the person whom he loves, and when he sees her again he returns to a more conventional use of the word.

All of Sillitoe's heroes are dependent upon women for what they describe as love but for all of them, with the possible exceptions of Dawley and Scorton, it is essentially a selfish view of the subject in which they think of themselves first and the woman later, if at all. Pat's criticism of Dawley could be applied with equal force to either Handley or Cullen because they both have a similar attitude. Handley is a development from Arthur Seaton in that he does have considerable emotional feelings for both his wife and daughter but these alternate with periods of equally intense hatred, and their love is described with a use of

images similar to those in *The Widower's Son*:

> She said nothing, no bitterness left,
> words crushed as they kissed, unable to
> withdraw from the black infesting lust.[20]

Handley and Enid are emotional in their relationship whereas Dawley's affairs with women are rarely described in such passionate terms. This doesn't necessarily indicate a development from one to the other or suggest that Sillitoe believes that one form of love is superior, but I think that the author is here, as elsewhere, exploring the various forms and types of human experience. It isn't possible to trace a continually progressive idea, within the novels, of what love should be or come to represent between a man and a woman but rather it is possible to find an expanding view of the various meanings of the word as applied to the protagonist. Only in *The Widower's Son* is it possible, I feel, to see a distinct development of the hero's practical ability to recognize woman as an equal. Dawley theorizes about it but Scorton puts the idea of equality into practice. In the trilogy it might be possible to see a mixture of Dawley's theoretical equality and Handley's more emotional outbursts combining to form a whole, an all-embracing view of love that unites Handley's love for the individual with Dawley's wish to embrace humanity.

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VITA

Surname: HATTON Given Names: JEREMY CHARLES

Place of Birth: Devizes, Great Britain

Date of Birth: June 6, 1955

Educational Institutions Attended, with Dates of Entering and Leaving:

UNIVERSITY OF WALES (LAMPETER)	1974	to	1977
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA, B.C.	1978	to	1980

Degrees, Diplomas, Etc., Awarded, with Dates and Names of Institutions:

B.A.	1977	University of Wales

Honors and Awards:

University of Victoria Fellowship, 1978/79

Publications:

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Title of Thesis/Dissertation

SILLITOE AND THE HERO: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CENTRAL CHARACTER IN THE NOVELS OF ALAN SILLITOE

Author: [redacted]
Signature

JEREMY CHARLES HATTON
Name (typewritten)

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Date

Like Arthur Seaton, Handley's sexual needs are very important, as Enid is aware:

> "It's nothing but an old man's folly," she shouted, "I should have known it would come to this. You'd send us all to the wall for a single flick of your randy tail."[21]

Dawley recognizes the importance attached to the 'phallus' in the hero's concept of love, and Enid knows that her husband's sensual desires always threaten to dominate his life. Dawley's theorizing sought to extend the meaning of the word beyond sexual desires but now we are turning to a use of the word that is closer to Arthur Seaton's lusting, in which sex is not connected to any other form of love. This is something of a regressive process, which is continued in Cullen's character. Handley indicates that for him, the intellectual/aesthetic side of his relationship with women is subservient to his physical desires.

> They gave up talking for kissing. Intellectual discussion, he said, always made him randy.[22]

But Dawley believes that sex, although a temporary relief, is not completely fulfilling:

> Love is a form of self-destruction, a kind of slow suicide, a full-time occupation that pulls you away from your central self - though I wouldn't mind a bit of it right now, because it can be useful in hauling you clear when your middle starts to eat you up. Still, it's a bitter sort of get-out, expensive and time-consuming.[23]

What I am trying to indicate is that Sillitoe's protagonists constantly return to the sexual image in describing their relationships with women because it seems to be the most important feature as far as they are concerned. As Forster indicates sex can be related to other forms of love but for the majority of Sillitoe's heroes it is never applied to anything other than the relationship with a woman. Only Dawley attempts to use the word outside its sexual connotation but even he eventually returns to its more conventional usage. Whilst I think that it is possible to see Dawley, in other respects, as the culmination of Sillitoe's characterization of his early hero, his views about the man/woman relationship are never satisfactorily resolved because although he is able to conceive, in theory, a much wider reaching form of love, in his actions and his concluding ideas he reverts to a compromise that is closer to some of the earlier figures. Although he recognizes some of the injustices inflicted upon women in a male dominated society, he is eventually reluctant to change it although he is, in other respects, a revolutionary figure.

By contrast, Michael Cullen is hardly the revolutionary type and in his behaviour towards most of the women around him there is an apparent return to the lusting of Arthur Seaton, which suggests little or no development upon the

part of the author in that respect. However, Sillitoe does provide an expanded interpretation of the word so that love is no longer seen as being based solely upon sex. Previous to this novel, love has always been closely linked to sexual desire and the two words have become virtually synonymous to Arthur Seaton or Handley, and although Dawley attempts to break out of this by introducing the idea of love for an ideology, he never carries it into practice and eventually compromises in order to enjoy married life with his wife and children.

But in *A Start in Life*, Sillitoe introduces a love based on a different emotional attachment, the mother/son relationship,

> A letter was pushed through the door with a Nottingham postmark and she said, to my surprise, how much she'd worried about me, and how much she missed me, and how much she loved me - love being a word I don't think I'd heard her mention before.[24]

with its semi-serious Freudian undertones, and a hero who develops a more obvious affection for his parent than he does for any of the women in his life. Sillitoe might have been gently mocking Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers* because Cullen's love for his mother is handled in a much more flippant manner than it is in Paul Morel's story, but Michael does indicate some sort of emotional attachment towards her that is missing from his dealings with most

other women. This love for his mother culminates in an outburst in which the hero, for perhaps the first time, actually recognizes the injustices done to women in a male dominated society:

> I was almost in tears, not only from shock and brandy, but from realizing what a hard life she'd had, all because of Gilbert Blaskin, and of having me without being married, a fact that didn't let her forget the man who gave me to her, and at the same time made it difficult if not impossible for her to get somebody else. I thought how the world was a million times harder on women than men.[25]

Being essentially a superficial character who thrives by imitating the behaviour of others he soon retreats from this moment of vision but I think that it is an important development in considering the hero's ability to perceive the role of women in society and not just to take them for granted. For example, Arthur Seaton treats his mother like a slave, and the occasional recognition of her existence:

"Good owd mam"[26]

scarcely suggests that Seaton has any idea of what life means to her. Obviously, Cullen is not a psycho-analyst who has pondered deeply over the injustice done to his mother but he is given a momentary insight into her position and it is perhaps an indication of his love for her that he is able to achieve this.

The Widower's Son is a radical improvement upon Sillitoe's other novels in that the hero no longer attempts

to dominate his wife in the way that previous protagonists have, and he is credited with views on sexual equality which go far beyond anything previously encountered. After the Arthur Seaton-like behaviour of Cullen this equality comes as a considerable surprise, but what is perhaps even more surprising is that, having altered the views of the hero, Sillitoe also presents a more complex female figure for once and the potential actually arises for 'a man and a woman who want to be united and perhaps succeed'. Prior to this, his novels have largely ignored the female half of any partnership but in *The Widower's Son* considerable attention is paid to Georgina's thoughts and ideas. Perhaps this is the novel that most fully bears out Forster's overall definition of the love theme in a novel as being both "selfish and altruistic at the same time", because both the hero and his wife give to and take from each other in a way that has not been contemplated before. Perhaps the most unusual twist in this novel is the reversal of the attitude towards sex. In earlier novels it has always been the woman, such as Pat or Enid, who has sought for something more in a relationship than sex but, in *The Widower's Son*, Georgina requires Scorton only for his penis; something which is made clear to William by his father-in-law:

> "Do you *manage* her?" . . . "Plenty of give and take, eh? She wants a lot of giving, I expect. Her mother did. *That*, especially."[27]

whilst the hero feels that sex alone is not enough to sustain

their relationship.

> 'We might fuck from time to time but we don't share anything any more.' [28]

I have used this quotation before but repeat it because I think that it highlights the reversal of roles that has occurred within this novel. Georgina is closer to Arthur Seaton and Albert Handley in needing a marriage partner only for sex whilst the hero has taken on the woman's role of seeking something more in the relationship. With regard to other protagonists, William Scorton is a considerable improvement in his ability to conceive of the sexes as being equal and, unlike Dawley who never goes beyond the theoretical stage, Scorton tries to put his ideas into practice. But they fail to work because his partner is, in her attitude, an ideal companion for Arthur Seaton.

I have encountered some problems in accepting Scorton's characterization not because I disagree with what he says but because I find it difficult to understand how he could have such enlightened attitudes when everything around him seems to suggest that he should turn out to be like Arthur Seaton. Like Arthur, he is brought up in a male dominated household and women are treated like glorified slaves. He enters the all-male world of the army and the behaviour of girls such as Helen and Jane, who act vindictively against William, might have the effect of making him more intolerant of them. But his views are far more enlightened than those of any previous character even though the influences all

around him are male and concerned with male domination. Perhaps he reacts against this but it is never made clear why he is capable of a perception that enables him to realize that:

> It was amazing how many men weren't worthy of the woman they met up with.[29]

This is a far cry from Arthur's indifference to women other than as sexual partners and also radically different from any other protagonist, with the possible exception of Dawley and his theorizing. But I don't think that it is ever clearly established why he is so enlightened and suggests that the author has deliberately forced his views upon the character.

Another example of his views upon sexual equality reveals, once more, how different he is from any of Sillitoe's other heroes:

> She wanted to serve him. It came as a shock, because he'd never thought that any woman had come into the world to do that. It was a far cry from the raucous give-and-take of pub tarts a long time ago.[30]

To "serve" has a sexual connotation and is indicative of a new type of hero figure in Sillitoe's literature who no longer seeks to dominate women or expects them to be subservient to him. But, ironically, it is his wife who seeks to return to the old idea of love and it is she who eventually triumphs in the battle that takes place between them. Her victory is not meant to suggest that the author necessarily believes that sex alone is all that is necessary in order for

two people to love each other because it is her attitude that is seen as bringing about the fighting between them. Scorton seeks to reduce the sexual role by introducing other features into their relationship but she always tries to return to the idea of domination by the phallus. Like Forster, Scorton seeks to make his love "more complicated than food or sleep" but, like Arthur Seaton, Georgina wants their marriage to remain like a sexual meal. In terms of Forster's definition William Scorton stresses the altruistic side of their marriage whilst she is essentially selfish.

The hero's understanding of love undergoes a considerable transformation in *The Widower's Son* but minor incidents in previous novels have perhaps indicated that a character such as Scorton would eventually emerge. Scorton puts into practice some of Dawley's theories about rejecting a purely sexual desire although not discarding it altogether and, like Michael Cullen, he is capable of moments of insight into the woman's position in a society where the male likes to imagine himself as being dominant. There is a tremendous difference between Scorton and the early heroes who fail to really develop beyond sexual love. Physical attraction remains a dominating theme in most of the later novels but what differentiates a character such as Dawley or Cullen from Arthur Seaton is that the later heroes are credited with at least considering other forms of love whilst Seaton thinks of it only in terms of lust. The development is erratic

and I don't think that it is possible to suggest that there is a form of progress similar to the one that has emerged from my discussion in the previous chapter. It is not possible to distinguish two separate groups of hero figures because their attitudes, until the emergence of Scorton, remain similar.

It is only with Scorton that Forster's definition of love as being both 'selfish and altruistic' becomes appropriate, before that the heroes have stressed the former at the expense of the latter, although Dawley does attempt to rectify the situation. Scorton loses the struggle with his wife but I think that he can also be seen as a winner in that he is the first hero who tries to make a relationship work without relying on sex alone.

What has emerged in the course of these chapters is a marked variation upon the part of the author in his ability or willingness to develop aspects of his heroes character. Chapter Two indicated that his hero figures can be divided into two distinct groups, and that connections between the early and later characters become tenuous. However, this chapter has revealed a more definite idea of continuous progression through the hero's relationships with women, although such a development is slow and only radically altered in his latest novel.

This study has focussed upon a writer who has created one of the most vivid hero figures in recent English literarue, Arthur Seaton. Seaton's working-class aggressiveness and defiance of authority are a far cry from the proletarian characters of Dickens or Kipling, whose

creations were imbued with a bourgeosis sense of decency. He is far removed from Rupert Brooke's idealism and unquestioning patriotism. It would be impossible to imagine Arthur going off to war in quite the same manner as Brooke since the latter's concept of heroism was destroyed on the Western Front. A later character such as Frank Dawley does eventually decide to involve himself in an armed conflict but with motives that differ radically from those of Brooke and his contemporaries. These changed motives reflect upon both the essential nature of the hero and on the transformation of society's attitude towards him.

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[2]Forster, p. 79.

[3]Sillitoe, *The Widower's Son*, p. 245.

[4]Sillitoe, *Saturday Night*, pp. 38-39.

[5]Forster, p. 79.

[6]Forster, p. 85.

[7]Sillitoe, *Saturday Night*, p. 180.

[8]Sillitoe, *Key to the Door*, p. 83.

[9]Sillitoe, *Key to the Door*, p. 253.

[10]Sillitoe, *Key to the Door*, p. 377.

[11]Sillitoe, *Key to the Door*, p. 257.

[12]Sillitoe, *A Tree on Fire*, p. 357.

[13]Sillitoe, *A Tree on Fire*, p. 358.

[14]Forster, p. 86.

[15]Sillitoe, *The Flame of Life*, pp. 298-99.

[16]Sillitoe, *A Tree on Fire*, pp. 358-59.

[17]Sillitoe, *William Posters*, p. 236.

[18]Sillitoe, *William Posters*, p. 268.

[19]Sillitoe, *William Posters*, pp. 99-100.

[20]Sillitoe, *A Tree on Fire*, p. 58.

[21]Sillitoe, *The Flame of Life*, p. 93.

[22]Sillitoe, *A Tree on Fire*, p. 90.

[23]Sillitoe, *The Flame of Life*, p. 157.

[24]Sillitoe, *A Start in Life*, p. 303.

[25]Sillitoe, *A Start in Life*, pp. 339-40.

[26]Sillitoe, *Saturday Night*, p. 157.

[27]Sillitoe, *The Widower's Son*, p. 193.

[28]Sillitoe, *The Widower's Son*, p. 245.

[29]Sillitoe, *The Widower's Son*, p. 118.

[30]Sillitoe, *The Widower's Son*, p. 131.

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