The Loneliness of the Long-distance Runner Study Guide

The Loneliness of the Long-distance Runner by Alan Sillitoe

BOOKRAGS

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The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner

The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner Summary

A seventeen-year-old boy, identified only as "Smith," is confined in a place called Borstal for committing an attempted robbery. Borstal is a sort of boys' home for troubled and delinquent youths. The headmaster of this place, called the governor, has asked Smith to train in long-distance running, and compete in a local tournament (presumably between Borstal and other boys' homes), with the goal of Smith competing in and winning the long-distance running championship. And so every morning Smith runs for miles, which he finds liberating and a good time to think. Though he puts up every appearance of being a good kid and intending to win Borstal a long-distance award, inwardly he feels he is at war with the governor and "in-laws" (those people who abide by the law), and he means to lose the race on purpose to show the governor he's a human being and not just a race horse to bet on.

Smith describes the crime that landed him in Borstal, and his home life around that time. His dad dies from cancer of the throat, and his dad's company gives the family a large amount of money as a bereavement payment. His mother and the kids go on a shopping spree, buying a television and other luxuries. Smith is especially enamored of the television.

One day, Smith and his best pal Mike go wandering the streets, and they happen to see an open window at a baker's store and intend on robbing the place. Mike hoists Smith on his shoulders to climb the wall, and together they steal a money box from the bakery. They are smart about not spending the significant amount of money all at once to earn suspicion, instead burying the money in a drainpipe near Smith's door and only taking a little out at a time.

Suspicion falls on Smith for the robbery, and soon a policeman is at Smith's door. Smith's mother naturally thinks he isn't capable of such a thing, and Smith is completely calm and unafraid of the policeman, lying easily about the robbery and frustrating the cop with smart remarks. And so the policeman is temporarily frustrated in his efforts to force a confession, even after the house is searched several times. Unfortunately for Smith, the policeman comes calling a final time. It's pouring rain, but Smith doesn't ask him to come inside because he secretly wants the cop to catch a cold and die. As Smith is being interviewed on the porch, the rain forces a couple money bills up from the drainpipe. The cop sees them, and Smith is caught red-handed with the stolen money.

Back to the present, the day of the long-distance match has come. Smith lies to the governor that he'd like to be a professional athlete when he grows up, playing the part of the "good kid" while still intending to throw the race. The race begins and Smith paces

himself; he is a natural athlete and doesn't exert himself. He knows he can easily win the race and even at just the half-way mark of the race he has pulled ahead. Smith considers running away from Borstal entirely with this opportunity, but in the end he only has six months left in his sentence and he doesn't want to risk more time at Borstal. Smith thinks of his dad, and finding him dead of throat cancer in his bed with blood all over, and this creates a "nail-bag" in his heart that stabs at him, yet he continues to run. In the end stretch of the race, in a place where the governor and Borstal boys can see him, he purposely stalls and runs very slowly. Despite everyone's urging for him to "Run!" Smith waits until another racer passes him to trot to a second place finish.

The disappointed governor of Borstal has Smith do back-breaking chores for the rest of his six-month stay, but Smith feels he has beaten the governor, and he has earned the respect of the other Borstal boys who know he threw the race. Now a young man, Smith tells the reader he was released from Borstal, and that he was excused from joining the army because he developed pleurisy while running and training at Borstal. Smith has just pulled a big robbery, and has an idea for an even larger one. He has written this story and given it to a friend, so in case he is caught the friend can give it to the governor to show him what's become of Smith and how ineffective his rehabilitation efforts are.

The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner Analysis

At the heart of this story is an expression of the debate between nature versus nurture. Smith has been, to use his phrase, an "out-law," a person born to steal, lie, and break rules. This is his nature, and when he is acting as a criminal, he is being an honest person (to his mind), as he is not behaving contrary to his nature. He considers those who stay within the law, "in-laws," as timid cowards who many times are behaving in dishonest ways, that is, ways contrary to their nature. In this way, the author has turned the notion of "honesty" on its head; it is a powerful way to get the reader inside the head of the protagonist and see things from his point of view. The governor wants Smith to promise to be an "honest" person when he gets out of Borstal; that is, to play by the rules, to work for what he earns. The governor believes he can teach (nurture) Smith and the other boys in his care to become honest men. To Smith this would be a dishonest living, as he would have to be someone other than himself.

One consequence of Smith's logic is that rehabilitation becomes impossible, and thus the principle behind Borstal (to reform young delinquents) and the governor as Borstal's headmaster is a sort of lie. Honesty and lies is a constant theme in the story, from Smith's intent to ruin the race to Smith's straight-faced lying to the policeman trying to nab him for the baker's theft. The "out-laws" and the "in-laws" cannot co-exist, they are "at war" as Smith realizes, and so most any interaction Smith might have with "in-laws" is necessarily mendacious. This is a pessimistic view of human nature, insofar that the reader could never imagine Smith ever integrating with society.

Uncle Ernest

Uncle Ernest Summary

Ernest Brown works as an upholsterer. Every night he takes his bag of upholstering tools to a security guard, as he is afraid they would be stolen from his room. In another routine, every day he frequents the same cafe to have his breakfast, tomatoes on toast, and a tea.

Ernest is a thoroughly lonely man, but not so lonely that he has given up on someday finding company. He is a World War I veteran and has let himself go, unaware of his shabby clothes. He is convinced he should have died on the battlefield, as he feels like a ghost, disconnected from reality. His wife left him and his brothers have moved to other towns. He lives from hand to mouth repairing furniture, and lean times or good times in this business hardly matter, as he does not notice or care.

Into the cafe come two girls, twelve and nine perhaps, named Alma and Joan. They sit near Ernest and squabble about how to use their meager tuppence, either as bus fare or to buy some pastries. They continue arguing and Ernest drifts into his own thoughts, despairing at how many empty days he has ahead of him, when he notices that one of the girls is crying.

He asks her why and the girls say it's nothing, but he suspects the girls don't get much to eat and so he orders them several pastries. While initially wary of Ernest, the girls eventually eat the pastries hungrily and happily. Ernest learns that the girls' father died, and that mother is having a hard time working enough to pay the bills. Ernest tells them that he eats at the cafe every day, and if they are ever hungry they should come to him, which the girls agree to.

Over the course of the next couple weeks, the girls sit with Ernest and he orders them whatever they want. For the first time in a long time Ernest is content, calling them his "little girls" and having company and something to look forward to every day. The eldest girl, Alma, senses how much the girls mean to "Uncle Ernest" and uses such leverage to get presents as well as food out of Ernest, who is oblivious.

One day Ernest gives the girls money to buy food as usual, but he is approached by two men. They are policemen, and they warn him against giving little girls he doesn't know money and presents, believing him to be a pedophile. In defiance, Ernest yells that his intentions are entirely innocent, and the police drag him outside the cafe and force him to promise he will not be around the girls any longer. Defeated, Ernest agrees. Lonelier than ever, Ernest goes to a different pub to drown himself in alcohol.

Uncle Ernest Analysis

Like Smith in "Long-Distance Runner," Ernest is a man who seems to be incompatible with and disconnected from the world around him. With Ernest, this manifests itself as loneliness, versus Smith's defiance. Fate hands Ernest reprieve from his loneliness in the form of two neglected girls, but just as suddenly society robs him of this happiness, disapproving of a scenario involving a middle-aged man ingratiating himself with two young girls via presents and foods, though Ernest's intentions are completely good-hearted. Like Smith, though in a less obvious way, Ernest stands on the outside of what is "good" or "moral" or "acceptable" in society; unlike Smith, Ernest has nothing but good intentions and suffers from a lonely heart, making his retreat into alcoholic oblivion at the story's end all the more sympathetic and tragic. The consequence of the proceedings is again a pessimistic worldview; Ernest and Alma and Joan, people who seem to need one another, are kept apart by an irrational, cold, and arbitrary society.

Mr. Raynor the School Teacher

Mr. Raynor the School Teacher Summary

Mr. Raynor is teaching school, but is far more interested in what's out the classroom window across the street, a draper's shop where Raynor ogles the young women who work at the shop. His class is used to vast periods of silence in class when Raynor is looking out the window in a daze.

He sees a small, heavy-set girl in the shop, and longs for a previous employee, a young girl physically perfect in every way. He tries to evoke memories and imagine her. This perfect girl recently died.

The class gets rowdy, and Raynor leaves his fantasies to yell at them. He questions one clueless boy about the reading assignment, who clearly doesn't know the answer even as Raynor presses and derides him. Another boy answers, and Raynor awards him with a gold star, indicative of some reward system he's established for the class.

Raynor again fantasizes, looking out the window, when he's interrupted by the worst and most loutish kid in class, Bullivant, beating a kid in front of him with his fists. Raynor calls him up and gets out a stick to beat Bullivant. His sexual frustrations are mixed with his rage at Bullivant as he beats him about the shoulders, probably much too hard. Bullivant tackles Raynor and they wrestle and then separate, with Bullivant threatening to bring an older boy one day to beat Raynor. Raynor is content to end the class reading to them from the Bible.

His next class is younger and thus quieter and less rebellious. Raynor's thoughts again drift to the young beautiful woman. He recalls that he had built up the courage to talk to her one night, but refrained when he saw the woman meeting a young man who escorted her to the bus stop. Raynor later learns from the newspaper that the girl had been murdered by that young man.

Mr. Raynor the School Teacher Analysis

A theme begins to develop with these initial stories concerning the individual's inability to communicate or interact with society at large. Here, Raynor's interaction with society is limited to looking at it through a window, wishing to be a part of it rather than a mere spectator. His "natural" or "honest" (in "Long-Distance Runner" terms) sexual desire and energy is repressed and relegated to fantasies; like Smith, he cannot be "honest" in this society and must contain his desires in order to fit in. This containment is detrimental to his well-being, as one sees when he conflates his sexual repression and hatred for his thuggish class when he beats Bullivant.

As the others stories, "Mr. Raynor" ends on a pessimistic note; the young man who had been seeing the beautiful draper's shop girl had in fact wound up murdering her. Given

Mr. Raynor's repression, one is compelled to believe the murder was a result of the young man's sexual advances being unreturned/unwanted. A younger and bolder Mr. Raynor could have very well been that young man. There is no possibility here for a healthy sexual union; there is only Mr. Raynor's perverted, unhealthy voyeuristic repression (and subsequent release in the form of physical violence on his students) and the young man's own murderous violence when denied sexual pleasure.

The Fishing-Boat Picture

The Fishing-Boat Picture Summary

Harry has been a postman for twenty-eight years, and has also been married for twenty-eight years. For the purposes of this story, he says, the marriage fact is much more significant. He recalls a visit to Snakey Wood when he deflowered the girl he married, Kathy, and agreed to marry her at the same time. Friends and family said they were never meant for each other and their marriage wouldn't last five minutes, which upset especially Kathy. Indeed, they did fight a lot, though Harry remembers the good moments, and Kathy was somewhat of shrew; Harry compares marriage to switching one mother for another. The two last six years, not five minutes.

Harry relates their last big fight, which involves Kathy coming on to Harry and Harry, with his nose buried in a good book, rejecting her romantic overtures. Kathy responds by insulting Harry's job and books, which culminates in Kathy ripping the book from Harry's hand and throwing it in the fire. Harry hits her and she runs from home. A month later, Kathy runs off with a housepainter.

Ten years later, Harry is living a bachelor's life, never officially divorced from Kathy. One day, Kathy goes up the drive and to the gate, looking worse for the wear. The conversation is awkward and superficial; Harry invites her in. They talk about the threat of World War II, and the fact that Kathy has a job at a lace factory. Attention is turned to a fishing-boat picture. Kathy says she wants the picture, and Harry gives it to her. She leaves and Harry invites her to visit any time.

A few days later Harry, on his postal route, sees the same fishing-boat picture in the window of a pawnshop. Kathy had pawned it for money. More than anger Harry feels sorry for Kathy, and he buys the picture back and re-hangs it where it was.

Kathy winds up visiting every Thursday at the same time. The next time she reveals she got fired from her job. She sees the picture but says nothing about it or her selling it. She always asks for money and Harry always gives it. He eventually figures out that the money is for booze, because as the price of beer rises she asks for exactly as much more money as the rise in price.

One night, Kathy again asks for the fishing-boat picture, and Harry gives it. Once again Harry sees the picture pawned in the window. Days later, Harry learns that Kathy died by being hit by a lorry. In her possession was the fishing-boat picture. Whether she stole the picture back or bought it back from the pawnshop is unclear. At the funeral, there is a crying man present who Harry figures is the housepainter Kathy lived with for years.

Harry regrets he didn't do more to save his marriage or love Kathy. He questions his very existence and why he was born, but figures in a small way he helped Kathy along in her last, miserable months.

The Fishing-Boat Picture Analysis

"The Fishing-Boat Picture" features the disintegration of a marriage and the subsequent reconciliation tinged with regret that follows. The marriage falls apart based on the pair's differing education levels, and hence probable differing class. Harry is a voracious reader, while Kathy thinks books are nonsense and that her father says only fools read books, as that proves they have a lot to learn. Harry stabs back, stating that her father only said that because he was illiterate and jealous, a blow indirectly aimed at Kathy as well, no doubt. Author Sillitoe is particularly adroit at these type of exchanges; "The Match" also features a similar spat and disintegration. Eventually Kathy burns Harry's book and Harry slaps her. The reader has seen before how physical violence seems to bubble just below the surface in many of these stories, and here as elsewhere it explodes suddenly.

The Fishing-Boat Picture itself becomes symbolic of Harry and Kathy's marriage; it is the "last of the fleet," the one that has survived their frequent violent fights. As it has survived, so has something between Harry and Kathy also survived. Unfortunately, ten years later, reconciliation is impossible due to Kathy having developed alcoholism. Once more in Sillitoe's trademark pessimism, Harry's "taking care" of Kathy by giving her money is essentially akin to a doctor with a terminal patient increasing the morphine drip, easing her pain but hurtling her faster toward death. In the end, touchingly, Kathy's feelings for Harry and the regret at her failed marriage wins over her alcoholism as evidenced by the presence of the fishing-boat picture in her possession at the time of her fatal car accident. Having pawned it earlier, she must have thought twice, realized the symbolic significance of the painting, and either bought or stolen it back. Still, the end paragraphs have Harry questioning his very existence and bemoaning the fact that neither ever tried to reconcile their differences earlier.

Noah's Ark

Noah's Ark Summary

A boy named Colin is bored in school when he sees a procession of vehicles out the window. The circus has come back to town, and each car has a ride or different circus things on it. Colin, age ten, and his older cousin Bert, age eleven, decide to attend the circus that night.

Colin is Oliver Twist to Bert's Artful Dodger, timid and moral versus budding criminal Bert. Bert hatches a scheme to make pennies by cheating at the penny rolling game; they will put (and not roll) pennies on certain squares when the game runner isn't looking to get coin awards. At the game, an older man is rolling pennies, and Bert remarks to Colin that he isn't winning. The old man hears this and confronts Bert, who doesn't back down from his (true) assertion that the old man is losing money. Bert makes like he's going to leave because of the old man, and in doing so palms some coins sitting on the counter. The old man notices and grabs Bert's wrist. Bert swears the coins were his, and Colin meekly backs him up. The old man relents and lets him have some of the coins.

They have fun with the money on rides and food, and soon it's gone. Bert dangerously crawls into the mechanics of one ride to search for pennies, but finds none. The two then proceed to beg money from passersby, and they get a dozen pennies for their efforts. They again spend it all, and find they have no money for a favorite ride, the Noah's Ark, a merry-go-round.

Bert shows Colin how they can ride for no money. He boards and, when the carnival worker goes around to collect ride fare, Bert switches from animal to animal, evading the worker and therefore paying nothing three minutes later when the ride stops. Colin boards to try the same trick. He finds walking around the merry-go-round at full speed very difficult and nauseating, but he manages to fool the collector for awhile.

Unfortunately, the collector doubles back, something Colin has never seen, and spies Colin. Colin scrambles the other way, and it becomes a chase on the merry-go-round. The collector nabs Colin at one point but Colin worms out of his grasp. The merry-go-round begins to slow and Colin, cornered by the collector, jumps. The ride was going way too fast and Colin slams into a railing, hurt and dazed.

Bert goes to Colin and urges him to get up, as the carnival worker still means to nab him. Colin is out of it, so Bert slings him over his shoulder and stumbles away, baring escaping the gaze of the worker before he collapses from Colin's weight.

They decide to go home. While on the journey back, they sing an anti-war song they heard from their dads, proverbially waking the neighborhood and cutting up.

Noah's Ark Analysis

"Noah's Ark" is perhaps the most symbolic short story in the collection. It is important to realize the setting, working class England after one of the World Wars. Within the context of this setting, one interpretation of the Goose Fair of "Noah's Ark" (and importantly the boys first spy the fair from atop a war memorial) is as an allegory for life after war. It seems gaudy, even obscene, as if happiness after war can only be faked with ridiculous colors and lights. And even in the Fair atmosphere, death, violence, and crime still hovers just beneath the surface. For some examples, consider Bert's violent exchange with the old man losing pennies at the penny roller game, or the "python woman" attraction with a deadly snake wrapped around the performer as if ready to suffocate her, or the potentially lethal grinding of the gears beneath a ride which Bert navigates in search of pennies.

There is finally the "Noah's Ark" ride itself, surely the ultimate symbol in the Fair for the state of humanity after the World War. Colin finds it a frightening place, so fast and topsy-turvy he feels sick, full of dragons and crocodiles and other strange and ominous images. The carnival worker's pursuit of Colin is, to maintain the symbolism, the ever-present specter of a repressive society, or perhaps even Death itself. But Colin is young; he can make mistakes; his glimpse into reality and the future is only a glimpse, and he survives the encounter. But as Colin and Bert blithely sing the rest of the night away while returning home, the reader is reminded of remarks in the very first paragraphs, foreshadowing Colin's demise, which state that Colin's fascination with the Fair (here, generally, the wide world and what's behind it) would one day turn violent and deadly.

On Saturday Afternoon

On Saturday Afternoon Summary

The narrator informs the reader that he once watched a man try to kill himself. It began on a Saturday afternoon, when everyone in the family but the narrator goes to the pictures, a scenario the narrator is sore about. He discusses that his family is one full of "black looks," which means members, especially his father, take on a dark mood or "black look," and in these times one had best stay away or else there might be shouting and violence. The narrator dismisses this tendency as something in the blood. It is during one of these foul moods that the father orders the narrator out of the house.

Outside, he sees a neighbor who hadn't lived near them long, carrying a new coiled rope. One neighbor lady asks what he needs the rope for, and he responds that he's going to hang himself, a response the neighbor lady takes as a joke.

The gentleman goes into his room, and the brave narrator (only ten at the time) pushes the door open and follows him in. The narrator also asks what the rope is for, and the gentleman truthfully responds it's to hang himself. The man fastens the rope to a light-fitting, and the narrator doubts the rope will hold. The narrator is just young enough to find fascination rather than horror in the proceedings. He tells the man that the rope won't hold, and the man tells him to mind his own business, though he doesn't tell him to leave. In fact, he asks the narrator to push the chair out from under him once his head is in the noose.

The gentleman, when asked, says that he's hanging himself because he lost his job and his wife left him. He stands ready to hang, and the boy charges in and knocks the chair away. The man struggles, but suddenly there's a crack in the ceiling, and the ceiling comes down. The narrator was right that the ceiling couldn't support the weight. The narrator runs away, but is lured back when he sees a policeman heading into the man's house.

As the narrator looks on, the policeman cuts the rope from the man's neck, and then informs him he's under arrest, as attempted suicide is a crime. The man can't understand such a notion; it's his life to live, he contends, but the policeman nevertheless hauls him away. For his part, the narrator would never do such a fool thing as to end his life on purpose, and he hopes he lives a very long time.

On Saturday Afternoon Analysis

The repressive nature of society again is foregrounded as an important theme in these stories. The man who attempts suicide is utterly flummoxed when told that his attempt constituted a crime, and that he would have to spend time in jail, perhaps as many as five years. Society literally owns this man ("it ain't your life," says the policeman who discovers him), which is ironic in two ways. One, society has essentially betrayed him,

as he has lost his job and therefore his wife, and yet still purports to own his life. Second, his misery will only be elongated and deepened in his current mental state by a long stint in prison, though he gets the proverbial "last laugh" by plummeting to his death while in prison.

The presence of the ten-year-old narrator, who goes as far as to push the chair from under the man, adds a macabre and even darkly comic touch to the proceedings. Too young to understand the gravity of what's happening, the narrator is nevertheless humorously old enough to know that the man's hanging will end in failure because the ceiling won't hold his weight. Perhaps the gentleman's ineptitude in killing himself indicates a "cry for help" rather than genuine attempt, but in this society there is no such distinction, but instead merely cold indifference. As with Frankie's treatment in "The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller," treatment for mental illness at this time is still fairly barbaric.

The Match

The Match Summary

Notts County plays Bristol City in a football (American soccer) match. Until the very end, it appears it might be a one-one draw, which is disappointing enough, but in the last minutes a Bristol City forward gets a breakaway and scores the winning goal. Two spectators, auto mechanic friends Lennox and Fred, are very disappointed along with all the other hometown spectators. Fred is less involved, remarking how late in the game it is for such a change of fortune, but Lennox seems more sullen and genuinely saddened by the goal. Lennox vows to get glasses, as he has very poor vision that is deteriorating to the point that one eye is cross-eyed. He used to be able to distinguish every player; now it's mostly a blur. His cross-eye has earned him the nickname "Cock-eye" at work, which he detests.

It's clear the air has been let out of Notts County's tires, and so the two friends decide to leave the stands before the butt-end of the game. Fred remarks he would have been better off cuddling at home with his newlywed wife; the older and seemingly wiser Lennox remarks that it will just be a matter of time before the cuddling stops and the arguing begins.

On the way home, Lennox hopes his wife made some decent tea or something edible to eat, while Fred doesn't care at all; he's more interested in the physical delights his wife can offer. The friends part.

Lennox is greeted at home by his wife. He tells her she should have made a fire, and he instructs (and eventually yells at) his stubborn daughter Iris to fetch coal. She is reduced to tears and Lennox is ready to slap her before Iris relents and goes for the coal bucket. His wife has two kippers in the oven for Lennox, which disappoints Lennox, as does her half-day-old tea. Lennox yells at his son to fetch a football magazine and some pastries, and yells at his wife to make some fresh tea. The reader is told Lennox makes every Saturday afternoon this kind of hell, especially after a losing football match. This day, Mrs. Lennox draws the line and instructs her son not to fetch the items for Lennox; Lennox can do it himself. She accuses Lennox of acting so foul because of the losing match. Lennox is shocked at her insubordination, and he throws his kippers to the floor and punches Mrs. Lennox three times, knocking her to the ground as the children cry.

Next door, Fred and his wife hear some thudding and yelling, and dismiss it as Lennox being Lennox after a losing match. Fred's wife is glad Fred isn't like that, because if so she'd "bosh you one." They share in their newlywed bliss; meanwhile, the latest beating is the last straw for Mrs. Lennox, who has taken the children and left Lennox for good.

The Match Analysis

Like Mr. Raynor in "Mr. Raynor the School-Teacher," Lennox is a man who is misdirecting his frustrations. He cannot beat up the soccer team, but he can beat up his wife when the soccer team doesn't win. Lennox's literal shortsightedness is a symbol of his general shortsightedness when he takes Mrs. Lennox's accusation of his acting out as a result of a losing match as a revelation he never considered before. In this story, one life ends as the other begins, as Fred and Lennox are clearly compared and contrasted, by the narrative and by themselves in dialogue. The tale ends with Fred's newlywed bliss just beginning and Lennox's marriage and family in ruins.

The question to ask here is, Is Fred destined for Lennox's fate? Fred does seem to be heading down the same road - a mechanic and married with a baby on the way, living in the same neighborhood. But Fred says he's not so "daft" as to get that worked up by a soccer game, and indeed Fred behaves differently at the game than Lennox, less crushed than awed by a late goal. Given Sillitoe's pessimism, the possibility cannot be denied, but yet it is unanswered. Surely Lennox did not start his young marriage by becoming a brooding and violent man whenever the local team lost a match, and obviously there is a deeper problem than the home team losing at soccer. In one scenario, life could grind Fred down to become as jaded and brooding as Lennox; in another scenario, perhaps Fred does have the qualities to avoid such a fate. Like "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," the debate comes down to nature versus nurture.

The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale

The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale Summary

The narrator tells us that Jim Scarfedale is a man who held on to his mother's apron-strings for too long, and that's probably what led to his disgrace. As for the narrator, he is not going to make the same mistake, and has already plotted a course through England when he's old enough to leave home. Scarfedale lived in the narrator's terrace, but considerably closer to the bike factory, and it was always a din of noise in the Scarfedale home. The narrator figures it might have been the constant noise in addition to a suffocating mother that drove Jim to do what he did.

Flashing back, the narrator describes Jim's mother, "a real six-footer" who tends to Jim's every need. She works hard after Jim's dad dies in the first World War to provide Jim everything he needs and more.

One day, Jim informs his mother that he is getting married, seemingly out of the blue. Jim's mother goes on a long tirade about what an insult it was that she wasn't consulted or hadn't even met the girl, how ungrateful Jim was not to extend this courtesy to his mother who only lived for him, etc., etc. After yelling, she sobs "her socks off," further berating poor Jim for his selfishness. She figures Jim met his fiance at the Co-op youth club he attends, and she rips that organization to shreds for enabling such a tragedy. She ends by demanding that she meet this potential wife.

To the surprise of all the neighbors and the narrator, Jim stands tall, refusing to cave in to his mother and bringing his future wife, Phyllis, home. She is an office professional, and again to everyone's surprise she is quite a catch - pretty, sophisticated, polite, and well-read - when she meets Jim's mother. Jim is married and leaves his mother's house.

Jim comes back six months later with his proverbial tail between his legs, defeated. He explains to his mother that things were okay in the marriage at first, but that Phyllis increasingly became bored and angry with simple Jim, who couldn't discuss politics or current events or art with her. She stops making him dinner or evening tea, and once burns his newspaper because he's looking at football scores. Phyllis calls Jim the "noble savage," and it seems to be the last straw when Phyllis becomes pregnant and Phyllis becomes very bitter and angry at carrying a little "noble savage." She leaves Jim suddenly, and Jim doesn't know where she went.

Jim's mother takes all this in with nothing but concern, and no sort of "told you so" sentiment. Jim promises to pay rent and keep up his part of the house if his mother will take him back in, and of course his mother does.

However, over the months after Jim returns home, everyone can see he has changed for the worse. He becomes brooding and aloof. He gains weight and loses his hair. He

also leaves most evenings to who-knows-where and doesn't return until midnight or later.

One day, a policeman arrives in the neighborhood, and the narrator panics because he thinks the man is there for him. However, he knocks on the Scarfedale's door. The policeman tells Mrs. Scarfedale something and she becomes faint. It's revealed in the papers that Jim was arrested for harassing and chasing little girls in a dark alley near a pub. The narrator has heard of a host of crimes, but nothing as queer and perverted as that. And that's why the narrator believes no one should live with their mother too long.

The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale Analysis

Ostensibly a cautionary tale about the dangers of hanging on too long to mother's apron-strings, as the narrator puts it, "The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale" is another portrait of a man disconnected from society, like Mr. Raynor, Uncle Ernest, or the man who tries to kill himself in "On Saturday Afternoon." In the spirit of variations on a single theme, this particular disconnectedness comes from a smothering home life and a suffocating mother. Jim never grew up in his sheltered existence; like Mr. Raynor, he can only watch life's passing parade and wish he was a participant. The First World War rears its ugly head once again as the reader learns that Jim's father died to poison gas on the battlefield; surely Jim's life would have been much different with a strong father around.

As in "The Fishing-Boat Picture" and "The Match," Sillitoe adroitly charts the disintegration of a marriage. Unlike the marriages in those examples, however, Jim simply doesn't have the tools from day one to make the marriage work. He has been essentially ruined by his mother, and no amount of "nurture" will change the man's "nature." Like Smith in "Loneliness," there seems to be no possibility for Jim to change as he comes crawling back to mother, who treats him like the man-child he is.

Not able to properly communicate or integrate into society, yet still possessed of a desire to love, to have companionship, to have sex, Jim is caught chasing after little girls. Whether Jim did something worse than "frighten the life out of [little girls]" is up to the reader to decide. Perhaps Jim is so socially ill-formed that he can only play an inappropriate game of "peek-a-boo" with his victims. Regardless, there seems to be no redemption for Jim Scarfedale, as after his prison term he is whisked away to someplace nameless with his mother, no doubt to remain suffocated and repressed for the remainder of his days.

The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller

The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller Summary

The narrator is sitting in his study, gazing at his vast collection of books and thinking how he can never "unforget" any of them, that they have become a part of his psyche. However, he visits a friend's house and hears the cry of a cuckoo, and this sound allows him to return in his mind to a time before all the books, a time in the narrator's youth when he was part of "the kingdom of Frankie Buller."

The narrator (Alan, ten years of age in the memory) is a member of a dozen-strong boys' "army" headed by twenty-something Frankie Buller. Frankie is enamored of war and military strategy. He has a father who was wounded in the first World War, whose monthly government allowance allows Frankie to play at soldier instead of taking on a job. His goal is to join the Sherwood Rangers, an army unit that his dad was in. He is a delinquent and vandal, but Frankie's antics rarely rise to the level that police are needed or summoned.

Frankie leads his unit in a war charge in a part of the neighborhood called Sodom against a rival gang of boys. They throw stones at one another. Frankie is taking some "casualties" as it were, so he rallies his troops for a final surge of effort, and the rival gang is overcome.

This goes on for some time. The fed-up neighborhood brands Frankie a "Zulu" and Alan's father gives Alan a good whipping if he hears that the boy has been hanging around Frankie. Meanwhile, Frankie's acts of vandalism increase - from petty pranks to more serious vandalism like ruining gardens or putting holes through walls - but the neighborhood hardly notices because the second World War looms heavy on the near horizon. Frankie himself grows up some, turning attention to girls, but he is innately adolescent and cannot seem to communicate with girls his own age.

Frankie gathers his troops a final time and they make war on the Sodom kids, gaining a couple of "POW"s. It is getting late and everyone wants to go home, so Frankie sends everyone through a railroad yard. As Alan looks on, Frankie gets caught in the yard by a railway man, and Frankie hits him over the head with a bottle. The other boys get away, but Frankie is arrested for trespassing and assaulting the man.

War comes and Alan loses track of Frankie for two years. When he sees him two years later, in the middle of WWII, Frankie is pushing a wood cart to provide firewood for the neighborhood. When Alan asks the obvious, So you never joined the army?, Frankie betrays mental illness as he responds he is in the army right now, and his dad rejoined as well.

Ten years pass. Alan joins the army himself and afterwards becomes a writer, reading a lot in the process. He happens into the old neighborhood and is greeted by Frankie. He

is still pushing the wood cart but now he has a pony to help haul it. Frankie reveals he was in an asylum for a time and that he received electroshock therapy, accounting for his lack of spirit. Alan feels very sorry for poor Frankie. Frankie, still illiterate, asks Alan what's playing at the local cinema, and Alan responds that it's a "sort of cowboy picture" with a good train wreck at the end. Frankie seems to light up, saying that it sounds like his kind of picture and that he'll see it, and Alan realizes that even electric shocks couldn't totally kill the man he knew as Frankie. Alan waves goodbye and never sees Frankie again.

The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller Analysis

If there was any doubt that Sillitoe ascribes positive aspects to criminals, "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner" and especially this story put such doubt to rest. Frankie Buller is a charismatic individual, a "bad boy" without too much of an edge. His childlike ways and unconditional adoration of his father are endearing. Most importantly, Frankie Buller is alive. He is experiencing life and living every day to the utmost. As Smith in "The Loneliness" says, "out-laws" are alive and "in-laws" are dead. Importantly, however, Frankie does not possess the kind of "cunning" Smith so covets and talks about; Frankie is an innocent, a free spirit, a man-child with no inhibitions.

In a last lark, Frankie crosses the line into true criminality, getting arrested for smashing a bottle over a railway man's head. Some time afterwards, as was fairly common in that time, Frankie is given electroshock therapy to shock the bad tendencies from him. And, true to that era's relatively barbarian approach to mental illness, Frankie comes out with not only bad tendencies gone, but a lot of qualities that made Frankie, Frankie. Like Ernest in "Uncle Ernest," Frankie is now a sort of dead man walking, a ghost of his former self, once again a Sillitoe protagonist who cannot integrate with society. Alan takes little but significant comfort from the fact that Frankie still lights shoot-em-ups and action pictures, but it's clear society has robbed Frankie of his life, and Alan wonders how much more they can carve from Frankie before they're through with him. Frankie's "Decline and Fall" is truly yet another testament to the theme of society as oppression, and a particularly heartfelt and tragic one.

Characters

Smithappears in The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner

Smith is the protagonist and narrator of this, the longest story in the collection. He stole money from a baker and was sentence to spend a couple of years in Borstal, a prison for juvenile delinquents. He has agreed to train in order to compete in the annual long-distance running championship held between the various boys' homes. These morning training sessions allow Smith a reprieve from the cramped confines and menial tasks of the boys' home, and also allow him to collect his thoughts. During these sessions, he has decided to buck the establishment and essentially throw the long-distance championship race, as a way to get back at the governor (the headmaster of Borstal) and show everyone he cannot be changed or rehabilitated.

Smith believes he has been born an "out-law" or someone meant to operate outside the law, as opposed to "in-law"s. This is his natural state of being, and so for the government or anyone else to try to make an "honest" man of him is a ridiculous process, as their "honest" is his "dishonest." He believes he cannot change or be rehabilitated, and his decision to throw the race is his way to express this. Smith sees himself as a soldier at war against the government and law-abiders, though he respects the other side in that he believes "in-laws" are as cunning as "out-laws." In the end, he not only throws his time in Borstal back in the governor's face by throwing the race, he has developed pleurisy in his lungs from all the training, and thus he is able to avoid the army, which he regards as another way the government would confine and try to change him. At the time of the writing of the story, he has successfully pulled off a robbery and plans for a bigger one next.

Frankie Bullerappears in The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller

Frankie Buller is between perhaps twenty and twenty-five, and yet his father's generous government payment for being wounded in war allows Frankie to act like an adolescent and not have to get a job. He leads a local army of children hooligans (much younger than himself, perhaps ten to fifteen years of age) in raising general hell around the neighborhood and also engaging in fights with other hooligan groups. His favorite target is a neighborhood called Sodom, in which he will leads his "soldiers" armed with rocks against kids in the other "army." He loves war and military strategy, having the narrator Alan read him war news from the newspaper, and bragging about his father and how one day he will join the same army unit, the Sherwood rangers.

Time and circumstances make Frankie irrelevant, as World War II looms and Frankie's vandalism and antics pale in comparison to the real war. He tries to court women his

age, but behaves (appropriately) like a twelve-year-old instead of someone in his late twenties, crudely whistling like a wolf at passing girls. He also does not join the army for the war effort, and is instead relegated to bringing firewood around to homes in a little cart. As the title indicates, this "decline and fall" of Frankie Buller is quite saddening and disappointing to the narrator. In the end, it is revealed that Frankie's personality was largely robbed from him due to electroshock therapy after he punched his father. Narrator Alan hopes and believes that somewhere inside Frankie is still a fire the establishment cannot extinguish.

Ernest Brownappears in Uncle Ernest

Ernest Brown is a World War I veteran who feels lost and lonely after the war. An opportunity to feed and converse with two needy girls gives him purpose and life again, but the police warn against such potentially perverted behavior, and he ends the story even deeper in despair.

Mr. Raynorappears in Mr. Raynor the School-Teacher

Mr. Raynor spends most of his time in the classes he teaches looking out the window at the cute girls in the draper's shop across the street. His sexual repression manifests itself in the corporal punishment he doles out against his students.

Kathyappears in The Fishing-Boat Picture

Kathy left her husband Harry after six years to run away with a housepainter. Ten years later, Kathy returns to Harry much changed, the spark in her eyes gone, surrendered to alcoholism. She dies being hit by a truck trying to rescue a painting representing better times in the marriage from a pawnshop she sold it to for booze money.

Bertappears in Noah's Ark

Bert is only eleven, and yet he has developed into quite the little criminal, always looking for a way to steal from someone or cheat the system. He shows Colin how to ride the Noah's Ark ride without paying by continually moving away from the fee collector as the ride is moving.

Lennoxappears in The Match

Lennox is a working-class mechanic, very good at his work, who attends a local football match with his younger friend Fred. The local team loses, and later Lennox seems to take his frustration at the loss out on his children and wife, yelling at them and eventually hitting his wife. Mrs. Lennox takes the children and leaves, the latest violent incident being her last straw.

Mrs. Scarfedaleappears in The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale

Mrs. Scarfedale is Jim's over-protective and suffocating mother. At twenty-eight, Jim still lives with his mother, and when Jim announces he will marry, Mrs. Scarfedale takes it as a personal insult. When Jim's marriage fails and he comes back, Mrs. Scarfedale's re-embrace of Jim is somewhat akin to a spider binding her prey.

Jim Scarfedaleappears in The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale

Jim is a timid mother's boy who never quite grew up. Frustration with his overprotective mother and nag of a wife result in Jim chasing young girls and getting arrested for his seeming pedophilia.

The Governorappears in The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner

The Governor is the headmaster of Borstal where Smith the protagonist is confined. The Governor believes in his boys' ability to rehabilitate and become productive members of society. He represents law-abiders and the establishment.

Objects/Places

Borstalappears in The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner

Borstal is a boys' home for delinquents, and in that way functions more like a prison than a halfway house. Smith has been serving time for several months at the start of the story.

Borstal Blue Ribbon Prize Cup for Long-Distance Runningappears in The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner

This is the coveted prize the Governor wants Smith to win, and Smith agrees to train to try to win the prize. However, Smith decides well ahead of time to throw the race in order to defy the governor and the establishment.

The Draper's Shopappears in Mr. Raynor the School-Teacher

Mr. Raynor longingly gazes at the pretty girls working in the draper's shop through his classroom window. It becomes an unreachable place for Raynor, a sort of happiness he can only gaze upon rather than participate in.

The Fishing-Boat Pictureappears in The Fishing-Boat Picture

The Fishing-Boat Picture is the last of three paintings that have survived from Harry and Kathy's violent fights. They call it "the last of the fleet" and it comes to symbolize better times in their marriage. After Kathy returns to Harry, she sells the picture to a local pawnshop for booze money, but is later found to have stolen (or bought) it back.

Noah's Arkappears in Noah's Ark

Noah's Ark is the merry-go-round at the carnival Bert and Colin go to. Bert shows Colin how to ride Noah's Ark without paying, but when it's Colin's turn to ride he is chased by the carnival fee collector and eventually is thrown from the ride in a daze.

Penny-Rolling Gameappears in Noah's Ark

The penny-rolling game involves rolling pennies from a movable shooter onto the game board, where if a penny lands on particular squares, prizes are won. Bert has a plan to cheat the game by placing rather than shooting pennies, but instead he steals some pennies from an old man.

The Football Matchappears in The Match

The Football Match features Bristol City beating hometown team Notts County. Spectators Lennox and Fred are disgusted at the outcome, Lennox especially, and Lennox vents some of this frustration (as well as frustration from his work at a mechanic's shop) on his children and wife, yelling at his children and beating his wife.

The Narrator's Perchappears in The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale

The unnamed narrator of this story is able to relate to us what goes on in the Scarfedale home because he has found a particular hidden ledge where he can spy and listen in without being discovered. The narrator tells us it would be a perfect way to rob the house, but Jim and his mother have nothing of value, so it wouldn't be worth it.

Frankie's Wood Bundle Cartappears in The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller

After years of adoring his military father and promising to join the Sherwood Rangers army unit, Frankie is subjected to electroshock therapy (disqualifying him from serving) and he is thus reduced to selling firewood from a cart to locals. It becomes a great sadness for Alan the narrator that Frankie had been reduced to such an occupation, but Frankie takes pride in his job and eventually gets a pony to pull the cart.

Sodomappears in The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller

Sodom is a part of the local neighborhood where a rival gang of kids hang out. Frankie frequently takes his kid "soldiers" to Sodom to wage battle against their rivals. To the kids and Frankie, Sodom is just a name and they have no knowledge of its biblical significance.

Themes

Disconnectedness

A common theme throughout every story of this collection is the individual's inability to assimilate into a repressive society. This is the very nature of criminality, and of course in stories like "Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner" and "The Rise and Fall of Frankie Buller," criminals are the subject. However, this theme goes much deeper and spreads farther than the criminal act. Ernest in "Uncle Ernest" has no friends and no family members to rely on; he is a ghost carved from the horrors of the first World War. When a chance encounter with two needy girls fills him with life and purpose again, society severs this connection in the form of policemen and unneeded rules, forcing Ernest to, again ghost-like, sink into the night. Mr. Raynor can only look at society passing him by in "Mr. Raynor The School-Teacher," the neighbor in "On Saturday Afternoon" has turned to suicide after his failed integration into society, and Jim Scarfedale in his story lashes out in perversion when the institutions of family and marriage have failed him.

It is probably an impossible "chicken-and-egg" type question if one attempts to examine the root cause of this disconnectedness. Does it lie with the individual, or with society? In "Loneliness," the individual and society seem entirely incompatible. Mr. Raynor survives in society via inappropriate release of his frustrations, while the postman in "The Fishing-Boat Picture" experiences a sort of spiritual crisis at the end of his narrative after success for many years within society. Lennox in "The Match," meanwhile, breaks from society with a violent snap, as does Jim Scarfedale in "The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale." So while there are different degrees of this disconnectedness, it is always lurking just beneath the surface.

Misplaced Physical Exertion

In many works in the volume, physical exertion, most obviously violence but also exercise and exhaustion, figure prominently. Much of it, it will be argued here, is misplaced and is the product of frustrated characters - be it emotionally, financially, sexually, or spiritually - lashing out. The most obvious example of this is Mr. Raynor in "Mr. Raynor the School-Teacher." Sexually aroused but largely helpless regarding the stock girls in the draper's shop through the window, Mr. Raynor explicitly combines his sexual repression with hatred for his students when he beats Bullivant with a stick.

This equation can take different and more subtle forms, however. The subject of "On Saturday Afternoon," despairing because his wife left him and he's jobless, attempts a hasty and ill-fated suicide attempt. This "misplaced exertion" has a particular irony, insofar that he is caught and will get five years in jail for the attempt, further elongating his miserable life in an even more miserable way. In "The Match," Lennox takes his disappointment about a losing football match home, taking his frustration out in the form

of violence against his wife. And the titular character in "The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale" releases long-repressed frustrations about women, caused by his smothering mother, in the form of chasing and harassing young girls on a street corner.

It is clear that author Sillitoe wishes to state the case that society (especially this specific society of mid-century working-class England) is repressive for one reason or another. His primary characters are almost always repressed in one way or another. In "Loneliness," Sillitoe expresses this sentiment succinctly, stating that the notion of society wanting to raise "honest" citizens runs into a problem when the natural inclinations of those citizens run contrary to society's idea of "honest."

The World Wars

Setting is key to the mood of these stories, as most take place either on the cusp of a World War or after one. Generally, the fact that these characters are so close to war and its consequences increases existential pessimism. In "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," which takes place after World War II, Smith remarks how he'd sometimes like to "do myself in," and that the easiest way would be to join the army and hope for a big war like they just had. He states he is in a war of his own, against the lawful. The protagonist of "Uncle Ernest" is directly affected by war, having been on the battlefield during World War I and believing he should have died with his fellow men there. As a result, he feels lost, disconnected, and alone. Frankie Buller in "The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller," in a sort of fascist fashion, idolizes war and his father who was wounded in war, playing out war games with the children in the neighborhood, immature to the point that he becomes irrelevant when the real war comes, unable to participate in war in reality, his identity shattered. Even a story with only implicit references to war makes a statement on how the World Wars have effected British society; in "Noah's Ark" the boys look at the gaudy marvel of the carnival from a "war memorial" and in the end as they head home they sing an anti-war song learned from a father.

The consequences of this proximity to war is multi-faceted as the reader sees. If a story is set after World War I and on the cusp of World War II, as many are, there is a sense of war's inescapability, that it is a permanent nightmare. War can physically and emotionally change a person, as with Ernest Brown who was traumatized and now cannot forge relationships with people, or Frankie Buller, his identity shattered when his war games and petty vandalism become foolish on the verge of true combat when he cannot "step to the plate" and serve his country. And the author seems to impart the notion that things cannot (and perhaps should not) be the same after a war. Can a society truly go back to the blissful escapism and the entertainments of a carnival, looking symbolically on as Colin and Bert do from a war memorial in "Noah's Ark"? Instead of fun, the final ride at the carnival for Colin becomes dizzying, upsetting, panic-inducing, and physically harmful. War casts its shadow over a great many things, in great and subtle ways.

Style

Point of View

Point of view differs from short story to short story, as characters and approach necessarily change. Many of these stories are written in the first-person with a narrator as at least a minor character in the story; examples include "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," "The Fishing-Boat Picture," "On Saturday Afternoon," "The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale," and "The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller." The narrator is usually a "working-class bloke" with comments on life and how they live along with a storytelling narrative. "Loneliness" and "Disgrace" feature criminals, and "Loneliness" in particular features a protagonist with a particular worldview that figures prominently into the story proceedings.

Other stories feature an invisible narrator operating in third-person; these stories include "Uncle Ernest," "Mr. Raynor the School Teacher," "Noah's Ark," and "The Match." Without a clear narrative voice, authorial intent in these stories becomes a bit trickier and more open to interpretation. The reader is left to wonder at and venture answers for such questions as "Was is the lost football match that made Lennox become physically aggressive with his family, or was it something deeper." Or, "What does the Noah's Ark ride represent in 'Noah's Ark'?"

Though criminals and other invested in the action narrate, the notion of the "unreliable narrator" usually does not surface. Instead, there is usually a sense that a character will tell one the story as it happened, and then offer their own "spin" or perspective to the story, rather than being untruthful in relations of events themselves.

Setting

Though the stories vary, the setting is very similar throughout. Stories almost always take place in England, specifically Nottingham, in poor, working-class neighborhoods. As such, most protagonists are also members of the working-class poor. The time varies more than the place, but many stories take place during the lead-up to World War II, that is to say, the late thirties, though a few stories take place during the fifties.

Setting is a crucial component of these stories. Crime and violence are usually just on the edge of these stories, giving them a certain ominous energy. There is a sense of desperation in many characters who wish to break free of their poverty and low status in life, and a consequent fatalism on the part of the author who seems to indicate any such wishes are futile and impossible.

Also important is the fact that many stories take place between the World Wars, which increases a sense of fatalism or pessimism. Some characters, like the titular "Uncle Earnest," fought directly in the first World War and has been ruined by it, walking the earth like a ghost. Others have been indirectly affected by the war, like Frankie Buller

who idolizes a father hurt in World War I. And World War II looms large in many stories, the nightmare of worldwide war come true again, as if England were caught in a perpetual cycle of ruin and death. These sentiments figure strongly into the overall mood in the stories.

Language and Meaning

In dialogue, the author accurately captures the clipped, Cockney accents of the protagonists, using a variety of slang, apostrophes to indicate dropped syllables, and sentence structure. The effect, if read aloud, approximates actual working-class British speech at the time.

British slang (and presumably especially working-class slang of the thirties, forties, and fifties) is a constant in this collection, including such colorful phrases as: barmy, sod, splash the lolly, narky, doggo, nowt for nothing, big beano, daft bleeder, pop-eyed, and clink yer tab'ole, among many others. The author wishes to capture working-class Nottingham as realistically and unapologetically as possible, and actual slang is one way to accomplish this. One can usually tell the class status of a narrator depending upon the vernacular they are using; the narrators of "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner" and "The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale," for instance, are working-class criminals, and thus their expressions, idioms, and slang reflect this. The postman narrator of "The Fishing-Boat Picture" is also working-class, but is more of a professional and not a criminal or hooligan, and so his narration is only tinged with a few working-class phrases. At the other extreme is the narrator of "The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller," who toured the world as a soldier and then became a writer, and so hardly any slang or tell-tale working-class phrases reach the narrative.

Finally, one characteristic of author Sillitoe in several short stories is an affinity for onomatopoeia. When the narrator is running in "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," the author may represent this by using "crunchslap, jog-trot, crunch crunch" and other words meant to sound like what they're describing.

Structure

This volume is a collection of nine short stories, including the longest titular story (and perhaps best-known story) "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," all by British author Alan Sillitoe. They share a setting (discussed in detail in "Setting") and certain themes in common, such as the inability to escape the slums and what it means for the individual to exist in society.

Many stories have a present narrator speaking in first-person, as with "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner"; others keep the narrator invisible in a third-person perspective, such as "Uncle Ernest." In "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner" there are essentially three "acts" or chapters separated by Roman numerals. The first act presents the narrator (Smith) at Borstal training for the long-distance race championship. The second act comes in the form of a flashback, as Smith remembers

his home life, his theft, and his capture by police prior to being placed in Borstal. The third act presents the long-distance race championship, climaxing in Smith throwing the race and coming in second. As for the other stories, they are short and self-contained, with little room for subplots or tangential storylines, and as such they have no such divisions. There are no introductory or editor's notes, and no footnotes.

Quotes

"The first thing is that them bastards over us aren't as daft as they most of the time look, and for another thing I'm not so daft as I would look if I tried to make a break for it on my long-distance running, because to abscond and then get caught is nothing but a mug's game, and I'm not falling for it. Cunning is what counts in this life; I'm telling you straight: they're cunning, and I'm cunning. If only 'them' and 'us' had the same ideas we'd get on like a house on fire, but they don't see eye to eye with us and we don't see eye to eye with them, so that's how it stands and how it will always stand. The one fact is that all of us are cunning, and because of this there's no love lost between us." The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner, pp. 8-9

"Then he turned into a tongue of trees and bushes where I couldn't see him anymore, and I couldn't see anybody, and I knew what the loneliness of the long-distance runner running across country felt like, realizing that as far as I was concerned this feeling was the only honesty and realness there was in the world and I knowing it would be no different ever, no matter what I felt at odd times, and no matter what anybody else tried to tell me. [...] It was hard to understand, and all I knew was that you had to run, run, run, without knowing why you were running, but on you went through fields you didn't understand and into woods that made you afraid, over hills without knowing you'd been up and down, and shooting across streams that would cut the heart out of you had you fallen into them." The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner, pp. 43-44

"He was only aware of the earth sliding away from under his feet, and a wave of panic crashing into his mind, and he felt the unbearable and familiar emptiness that flowed outwards from a tiny and unknowable point inside him. Then he was filled with hatred for everything, then intense pity for all the movement that was going on around him, and finally even more intense pity for himself. He wanted to cry but could not: he could only walk away from his shame.
Then he began to shed agony at each step. His bitterness eddied away and a feeling the depth of which he had never known took its place. There was now more purpose in the motion of his footsteps as he went along the pavement through midday crowds. And it seemed to him that he did not care about anything any more as he pushed through the swing doors and walked into the crowded and noisy bar of a public house, his stare fixed by a beautiful heavily baited trap of beer pots that would take him into the one and only best kind of oblivion." Uncle Ernest, pp. 67-68

"Deprived so suddenly he felt for a cigarette, but there was half an hour yet for the playtime break. And he still had to deal with the present class before they went to geography at ten o'clock. The noise broke into him, sunk him down to reality like cold water entering a ship. They were the eldest rag-mob of the school, and the most illiterate, a C stream of fourteen-year-old louts rearing to leave and start work at the factories round about. Bullivant the rowdiest subsided only after his head was well turned from the window; but the noise went on. The one feasible plan was to keep them as quiet as possible for the remaining months, then open the gates and let them free, allow them to spill out into the big wide world like the young animals they were, eager

for fags and football, beer and women and a forest of streets to roam in." Mr. Raynor the School-Teacher, pp. 70-71

"I began to believe there was no point in my life - became even too far gone to turn religious or go on the booze. Why had I lived? I wondered. I can't see anything for it. What was the point of it all? And yet at the worst minutes of my mid-night emptiness I'd think less of myself and more of Kathy, see her as suffering in a far rottener way than ever I'd done, and it would come to me - though working only as long as an aspirin pitted against an incurable headache - that the object of my having been alive was that in some small way I'd helped Kathy through her life.
I was born dead, I keep telling myself. Everybody's dead, I answer. So they are, I maintain, but then most of them never know it like I'm beginning to do, and it's a bloody shame that this has come to me at last when I could least do with it, and when it's too bloody late to get anything but bad from it." The Fishing-Boat Picture, p. 99

"Colin well knew that it was wrong, and dangerous, which was more to the point, yet when a Noah's Ark stood in your path spinning with the battle honours of its more than human speed-power written on the face of each brief-glimpsed wooden animal, you had by any means to get yourself on to that platform, money or no money, fear or no fear, and stay there through its violent bucking until it stopped. Watching from the outside it seemed that one ride on the glorious Noah's Ark would fill you with similar inexhaustible energy for another year, that at the end of the ride you wouldn't want to come off, would need to stay on for ever until you were either sick or dead with hunger." Noah's Ark, p. 110

"I once saw a bloke try to kill himself. I'll never forget the day because I was sitting in the house one Saturday afternoon, feeling black and fed-up because everybody in the family had gone to the pictures, except me who'd for some reason been left out of it. 'Course, I didn't know then that I would soon see something you can never see in the same way on the pictures, a real bloke stringing himself up. I was only a kid at the time, so you can imagine how much I enjoyed it." On Saturday Afternoon, p. 118

"All of which will make me think twice about how black I sometimes feel. The black coal-bag locked inside you, and the black look it puts on your face, doesn't mean you're going to string yourself up or sling yourself under a double-decker or chuck yourself out of a window or cut your throat with a sardine-tin or put your head in the gas-oven or drop your rotten sack-bag of a body on to a railway line, because when you're feeling that black you can't even move from your chair. Anyhow, I know I'll never get so black as to hang myself, because hanging don't look very nice to me, and never will, the more I remember old what's-his-name swinging from the light-fitting." On Saturday Afternoon, pp. 126-127

"The boy had already stood up. 'Don't go. Sit down,' she said to him. 'Get 'em yourself,' she retorted to her husband. 'The tea I've already put on the table's good enough for anybody. There's nowt wrong wi' it at all, and then you carry on like this. I suppose they lost at the match, because I can't think of any other reason why you should have such a long face.'

He was shocked by such a sustained tirade, stood up to subdue her. 'You what?' he shouted. 'What do you think you're on wi'?'
Her face turned a deep pink. 'You heard,' she called back. 'A few home truths might do you a bit of good.'
He picked up the plate of fish and, with exaggerated deliberation, threw it on the floor. 'There,' he roared. 'That's what you can do with your bleeding tea.'
'You're a lunatic,' she screamed. 'You're mental.'
He hit her once, twice, three times across the head, and knocked her to the ground. The little boy wailed, and his sister came running in from the parlour. . . . " The Match, p. 137

"You see, you can't hang on to your mam's apron strings for ever, though it's a dead cert there's many a bloke as would like to. Jim Scarfedale was one of them. He hung on so long that in the end he couldn't get used to anything else, and when he tried to change I swear blind he didn't know the difference between an apron string and a pair of garters, though I'm sure his brand-new almost-beautiful wife must have tried to drum it into his skull before she sent him whining back to his mother." The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale, p. 139

"'We're gooin' ter raid Sodom today,' Frankie said, when we were lined-up on parade. He did not know the Biblical association of the word, thinking it a name officially given by the city council.
So we walked down the street in twos and threes, and formed up on the bridge over the River Lean. Frankie would order us to surround any stray children we met with on the way, and if they wouldn't willingly fall in with us as recruits he would follow one of three courses. First: he might have them bound with a piece of clothes-line and brought with us by force; second: threaten to torture them until they agreed to come with us of their own free will; third: bat them across the head with his formidable hand and send them home weeping, or snarling back curses at him from a safe distance. I had come to join his gang through clause number two, and had stayed with it for profitable reasons of fun and adventure. My father often said: 'If I see yo' gooin' about wi' that daft Frankie Buller I'll clink er tab-'ole.'" The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller, p. 159

"He pulled his coat collar up because, in the dusk, it was beginning to rain. 'Well, you see, Alan,' he began, with what I recognized now as a responsible and conforming face, 'I had a fight with the Old Man, and after it I blacked out. I hurt my dad, and he sent for the police. They fetched a doctor, and the doctor said I'd have to go to the hospital.'
They had even taught him to call it 'hospital.' In the old days he would have roared with laughter and said: ''Sylum!'
'I'm glad you're better now, then,' I said, and during the long pause that followed I realized that Frankie's world was after all untouchable, that the conscientious-scientific-methodical probers could no doubt reach it, could drive it into hiding, could kill the physical body that housed it, but had no power in the long run really to harm such minds. There is a part of the jungle that the scalpel can never touch." The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller, pp. 174-175

Topics for Discussion

Many stories in this volume take place between the World Wars. What sort of atmosphere does this create? How does it relate to author Sillitoe's overall bleak worldview?

Most stories in this volume feature physical violence at one point or another. What role does physical violence play? When it is used? How does physical violence relate to the author's overall intent with a story? Choose two stories and examples from each to back up your assertions.

What is Sillitoe's view of criminality? Is it a matter of right versus wrong, or is there a gray area? Does society create its criminals, or are there "natural" criminals? Can criminals change their ways, through society's rehabilitation or punishment?

Why does Jim Scarfedale's marriage deteriorate in "The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale"? To what degree is Jim's mother and her upbringing of Jim to blame?

While Smith is running, he ascribes to himself the qualities of honesty, intelligence, and a sense of being alive, while he ascribes the opposite to the governor: dishonesty, stupidity, and deadness. How does Smith justify these choices?

Is there any sense that Fred will end up like Lennox in "The Match"? Are they very different people, or is it just a matter of time until Fred and his family disintegrate?

Why is the narrator of "On Saturday Afternoon" fascinated with his neighbor's suicide, to the point of observing the act and even pushing the chair from under him? What might this fascination express in a more general context of the world Sillitoe presents in his stories?