

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner

Part one

The first part of this long story contains little in the way of conventional narrative: it is more in the nature of a manifesto. We learn that Smith, the narrator, is in borstal, but we must wait until we reach Part Two to discover why he is there. This section draws up the lines of battle. Smith elaborates his theory of “them” and “us”, otherwise characterised as the “In-laws ” (the law-abiding property-owning majority) and the “Out-laws ” (the substantial minority who have no stake in this system). The “In-laws ” are principally embodied in the person of the borstal governor, who is not so much a three-dimensional character as a representative type. The archetypal “Out-law” is Smith, the narrator.

Smith views life as a battle of wits, in which he confronts the forces of the establishment. His aim is to frustrate their efforts to make him conform, and thereby to assert his integrity. Smith's one great talent - his ability in running - is both a symbol for this struggle as it persists throughout his life, and also the means by which he hopes to disappoint and deceive the governor. By training hard and appearing eager to win the Blue Ribbon Prize Cup (as he can do if he wishes) he causes the governor to anticipate the credit this will reflect on his pretended humane outlook. In fact it is because he runs alone, that Smith (so he tells us) has learned to think clearly enough to devise this strategy. To win the race would be to accept the values and outlook of the governor and all his kind. To lose the race may seem to be cutting off his nose to spite his face, but is the only way Smith can retain his independence, and know he has retained it.

Smith constantly refers in this section to the way the governor thinks of him as like a race-horse. He suggests that the achievements of such a thoroughbred are determined by, and earn glory for, others: for the trainer, rider and owner. Just so, Smith is trained for a competitive race, and valued for the prestige his expected victory will win for the governor and the “enlightened ” regime in his borstal.

Smith's pessimism is declared on the first page of the story - not that “them ” and “us” don't “see eye to eye”, but that “that's how it stands and how it will always stand”. (The pessimism is not in his sense of two classes, but his belief that this can never change.) Later Smith comments on his and the governor's

cunning, observing that his is the more devious, as he sees through the governor, while the governor's does not see through Smith's intentions.

He passes next to the discussion of honesty: the governor has told him to be “honest”, but he protests that he is more honest than the governor. The governor is talking of honesty as respect for others' property (renouncing theft - not stealing things). Smith takes “honesty” to mean being true to one's principles, personal integrity. The intelligent reader will see that most educated speakers of English use the word in both senses without confusion. The suggestion that only one meaning of “honest ” can be valid (with the further implication that Smith's is the “right ” interpretation) is not very reasonable. At the end of this section the running metaphor becomes explicit as Smith thinks every run to be like “a little life”. He ends with a pessimistic statement of how, sooner or later, one is “always tripped up”. This leads naturally into the second section with its account of the events that have led to Smith's being in the borstal.

Part two

Part Two is more conventional narrative. It is in the past tense and the first grammatical person, and deals with a simple series of events: the death of Smith's father and the spending spree provided by “insurance and benefits”, leading to the robbery of the bakery and the arrest of Smith.

In this narrative we note some characteristic attitudes:

1. the stereotype of the Tory politician whom Smith finds so comic,
2. the concern of Smith for his accomplice, and his pleasure (not jealousy) at Mike's escaping punishment, and
3. the depiction of the policeman.

Conveniently, this character is stupid, bullying and authoritarian. That this officer is truly stupid (rather than merely being thought stupid by Smith) is made clear in two places.

1. First, when Smith mentions money, the policeman thinks he has caught him out by his apparent knowledge of what has been stolen. But he has referred four times to money already in his questioning: his initial failure to see this shows how simple he is.
2. Later, when the stolen money is washed out of the drainpipe where Smith has (also rather foolishly) hidden it, the policeman takes a long time to work out what is happening and what it means.

We note also that the policeman (as does the borstal governor) says “we” instead of “I”, unconsciously identifying himself with the oppressive majority

whom he represents. Smith dreams of a revolution, as in Hungary, in which the policemen will have the tables turned on them. The police are especially despised because they originate from the working class (the one in this story clearly does) yet they sustain the ruling classes in power - thus they are seen as treacherous and unnatural. Those in power are merely selfish; those who keep them in power have betrayed their own kind.

Part three

Part three has a more sophisticated narrative method. It is principally an account of the race, but even in this Sillitoe switches from the use of the past to the use of the present tense (and back) to give certain passages greater immediacy. Worked into this is a more detailed account of the death of Smith's father (briefly related in Part Two).

We see how Smith confronts temptation as the Governor shows him the prospect of material wealth and social status that his running can give him. Like Jesus in the gospels he undergoes a long period of privation, after which the tempter invites him to use his unique powers, against the dictates of conscience, for worldly gain. This is more a parody of, than a parallel to, the gospel story: what Smith is offered is really not much and he easily rejects the temptation, though he pretends to be eager to win the race. Although Smith has earlier vilified the police he now, somewhat contradictorily, shows respect for the policeman's "honesty" (in being spiteful to Smith's mother) in not pretending to bogus sympathy, as the governor does. Smith also briefly considers running away from the borstal but realises he would then forfeit the pleasure of witnessing the governor's disappointment and humiliation. Smith's father (supposedly a paragon of honesty) is contrasted with the governor, who, Smith imagines, will take the credit for Smith's expected victory, and will represent this as a vindication of his enlightened methods, thereby securing at least admiration and at most a knighthood.

Near the line Smith fears that the next runner may be too far behind for him to lose properly, but he decides that, if need be, he will stand still in front of the winning tape, just as his father, in refusing hospitalisation, remained true to his beliefs in spite of pain. At last another runner arrives, to overtake Smith before the tape. The story concludes with an account of the governor's expected punishment of Smith. Contrary to the governor's intentions, these have helped Smith further. Six months of tiring menial work cause Smith, on his release, to go down with pleurisy, which enables him to avoid National Service.

We learn, finally, how borstal has made Smith a more skilful burglar, rather than a reformed character. To give the work a veneer of authenticity Sillitoe

concludes with Smith's comment that he is writing his story in a book, which his "pal" can have published, should Smith be convicted again. If this does not happen, Smith is sure his "pal" will not betray him. Typically, Smith makes a concluding observation that the governor (presumably because he lacks "honesty") will not understand the book, even if he reads it. As we are reading the apparently now-published work, we must assume that Smith's fatalistic fear of his inevitable return to custody has now been realised - and the pal has kept his word. (Quite how this person would get such an account published is not clear.

The theme

Smith likes his friends from the same class and background as he is. He hates policemen, who come from the working-class but help those in power. In a different way he hates those who own property and those who run the country (the middle classes and the upper class). He has a very simple view of society. Is it right? Sillitoe (the writer) wants to show how such a person tries to fight against the system, and how he can succeed, but only by hurting himself. He does this in Smith's theory of "in-laws" and "out-laws".

Make sure you can explain this and quote to support your view. Sillitoe also does it by the symbolism of a race: Smith thinks he is treated like a race-horse (not a person) but less well; he is running against the system (people in power and their way of running the world); he cannot win the race, but he must keep running; when he stops, it will mean he is dead. Sillitoe makes this symbolism or metaphor more vivid in that Smith is also literally running a race, against other borstal inmates. He loses the real race, while keeping going (not losing) the metaphorical one.

1. **Smith** -Smith is the protagonist and narrator of this, the longest story in the collection. He stole money from a baker and was sentenced 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.
2. **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.
3. **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.

4. **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.
5. **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.
6. **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.
7. **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.
8. **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.
9. **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.
10. **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.

For reference.

<https://literariness.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Alan-Sillitoe-Loneliness-of-the-Long-Distance-Runner-Hunter-Publishing-1985.pdf>

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