

A Narratological study of Alan Sillitoe’s “Fishing-Boat Picture”

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

Like many first-person narratives, Sillitoe's "Fishing-Boat Picture" is a fictional autobiography. The exponents of narratology stress differently. Taking some clues from major exponents of narratology, the story "Fishing-Boat Picture" has been analyzed. This paper has some limitation still many of the aspects of narrative are touched upon. The main emphasis rests on the technique of narration and the narrative techniques used by the author to press upon her point. Sillitoe intentionally used different narrative techniques while writing about the life of Harry; the protagonist. Harry is a mature narrator who looks back on his past life. Although he is only fifty-two at the time of writing the story, he feels his life is all but over. Like many first-person narrators, he has become not only older but also wiser. Looking back on his life, he realizes that he made many mistakes, especially in his behavior towards his wife Kathy. The story's first-person narrative situation is uniquely suited for presenting Harry's insights about his wasted life.

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With a broad perspective narratological study sets on long narrative yet taking into account the narrator's mind-framework these techniques are also applicable to a short narrative; i.e. to a short story as well. Alan Sillitoe's short story is no exception to it. This paper has some limitation as whole of the perspective of narratology can not be entertained here. Still it is the endeavour of the writer to incorporate much what is pertinent to the study of narratology and other narrative techniques used by the writer. Like many first-person narratives, Sillitoe's "Fishing-Boat Picture" is a fictional autobiography. Harry is a mature narrator who looks back on his past life. Although he is only fifty-two at the time of writing the story, he feels his life is all but over. Like many first-person narrators, he has become not only older but also wiser. Looking back on his life, he realizes that he made many mistakes, especially in his behavior towards his wife Kathy. The story's first-person narrative situation is uniquely suited for presenting Harry's insights about his wasted life.

The story is told in a straightforwardly chronological manner, and its timeline can be established quite accurately. The story's action begins with Harry's and Kathy's "walk up Snakey Wood" (135). Kathy leaves Harry after six years, when he is thirty (136); so, at the beginning he must be twenty-four. Since "it's [...] twenty-eight years since I got married" (135), the narrating I's current age must be fifty-two. Kathy's weekly visits begin after a ten-year interval (139), when Harry is forty. Kathy's visits continue for six years (147), and when she dies, terminating the primary story line, the experiencing I is forty-six. A number of historical allusions indicate that Harry's and Kathy's final six years are co-extensive with World War II (140, 147). The narrative act itself takes place in 1951, six years after Kathy's death.

The story's action episodes focus on Kathy, picking out their first sexual encounter, the violent quarrel that makes her run away, her return ten years later, her ensuing weekly visits, the repeated pawnings of the fishing-boat picture, and her death and funeral. Throughout their relationship, Harry "doesn't get ruffled at anything" (136), and he remains unemotional and indifferent to the point of lethargy. To the younger Harry, marriage means "only that I changed one house and one mother for a different house and a different mother" (136). Although he never sets foot from Nottingham (139), his main idea of a good time is reading books about far-away countries like India (137) and Brazil (139). He cannot even cry at Kathy's funeral ("No such luck", 148). And yet, her ignoble death-- in a state of drunkenness she is run over by a lorry - causes a change in him. Now he cannot forget her as he did after she left him (139-140); the only thing he can do is obsessively review the mistakes he has made. In the final retrospective epiphany, he realizes three things with devastating clarity: that he loved Kathy but never showed it, that he was insensitive to her need for emotional involvement and communication, and that her death robbed him of a purpose in life.

The theme of becoming aware of one's own flaws can be treated well in a first-person narrative situation. Unlike the ordinary well-spoken authorial narrator, who cannot himself be present as a character in the story, Harry's working-class voice and diction is a functional and characteristic feature in Sillitoe's story. His self-consciousness in telling the story ("I'd rather not make what I'm going to write look foolish by using dictionary words", 135) and his involvement in the story support the theme of developing self-recognition. Whereas Harry's story is an account of personal experience, an authorial narrator knows everything from the beginning and cannot normally undergo any personal development (unless this is caused by the act of telling itself).

The theme of recollection and reflection that runs through Sillitoe's story would, however, be well manageable in a figural narrative situation, in which Harry could serve not as a narrator, but as a third-person character (an internal focalizer, a reflector figure) in the act of recollecting his past life. In fact, in a modernist short story, *both* main characters could be used for purposes of variable and multiple focalization, A figural beginning would filter the action

through Harry's consciousness and would begirt media* in re,s, perhaps using an incipit such as the following:

As always, after coming home from his round and lighting his pipe, his glance fell on the wedding picture on the sideboard. As always, the memory of that autumn evening twenty-eight years ago struck him when he had asked Kathy for a walk up Snakey Wood. That day he had landed the job at the P.O. and ..

This is clearly a more immediate beginning than Harry's self-conscious metanarrative commentary ("Take that first sentence", 135); on the other hand, a figural story usually proceeds in a more associative and less controlled manner than a first-person story. Moreover, while a figural story tends to focus on a scenic slice of life, "The Fishing-Boat Picture" spans a story-time of at least .twenty-two years. In fact, *Harry's telling* his own story helps him think about his life and clarify his own thoughts and judgments. A reflector figure, in contrast, is not a narrator, and cannot address a narratee. It is important to Harry not only to tell his story to an anonymous audience but in a sense also to himself. The text's dialogic quality comes out in one of its key passages:

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. (149)

Here Harry explicitly "keeps telling himself, "answer[s]" his own indictment, and "maintain[s]" a position, stressing the self-reflective and auto-therapeutic function of his narrative. In fact, the devastating judgment "I was born dead" takes up Kathy's calling him a "dead-ed" (137) in the quarrel that leads to their separation. Unfortunately, now that he has learned his lesson, it is "too bloody late".

As a working-class story with occasional snippets of slang and dialect, its references to the characters' ordinary lives, their brief bouts of passion, aggression and violence ("this annoyed me, so I clocked her one", 137), Sillitoe's story is neither sentimental nor overly didactic, nor does it offer an idealized portrayal of working-class characters; it certainly does not allow the reader to feel superior. On the contrary, the protagonist's matter-of-fact account creates

a strong sense of empathy, and his reflections on a wasted past and a meaningless future clearly express a general human condition.

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