

# The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner: study guide

## Introduction

This study guide is meant to support students in England and Wales preparing for GCSE exams in English and English literature. It may also be helpful to the general reader who is interested in the stories of Alan Sillitoe. If the guide is used as preparation for a written exam, then all the activities suggested here may be done in writing or orally, as students and teachers wish. Some of the activities here can be used also for assessment in speaking and listening, in original writing and in wider reading.

If you are a teacher, look for the many prompts for activities. Most can be done in speech or writing or using Internet technologies. If you are using this guide on a computer system, then you ought to open the application software you think most helpful for various tasks, as you see the need for it.

## What happens in the story?

### 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, our 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 - 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 one's nose to spite one's face, but is the only way Smith can retain, and know he has retained, his independence.

Smith constantly refers in this section to the way the governor thinks of him as like a racehorse. He suggests that the achievements of such thoroughbreds are determined by, and earn glory for, others: 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”. Later Smith comments on his and the governor's cunning, observing that his is the more devious, as he sees through the governor, but without the governor's seeing his 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, in Smith's terms renouncing theft; 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 implication that only one meaning of “honest ” can be valid (with the further implication that Smith's is the “right ” interpretation) is not very reasonable.

## The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner: study guide

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 past tense, first 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:

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

- 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.
- 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.

## The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner: study guide

Smith's father (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 ("...we'll get him made a Sir").

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.

### Questions for discussion

- What advantages does Sillitoe gain from the first-person narrative method?
- What attitudes does Smith display towards the following
  - the establishment, generally;
  - the police;
  - his own criminal actions;
  - his friends;
  - his parents.
- In what different ways is the story's title apt?
- How fair is Sillitoe's treatment of his subject?
- Does Sillitoe use stereotypes? If so, how does he do this?
- How well, in your view, has this story stood the test of time since its publication in 1959?
- How suitable is this text as a set book to study for exams? Why?
- Consider this story as a socialist moral fable in which the governor and Smith's father are like bad and good angels fighting for the hero's soul.
- How far in your opinion is Sillitoe sympathetic to Smith? Does anything in the author's method encourage sympathy? What is your opinion of Smith, and why?

# The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner: study guide

## 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.

## The characters

There are no real characters (the story is far too short) but Smith tells us about a number of people who have influenced him, or with whom he has a relationship. Sometimes the reader can see these people slightly differently from Smith (Sillitoe intends this to happen). People Smith quite likes are

- his dad,
- Mike and
- his "pal" (mentioned right at the end).

His mum he sees as very weak, though she supports him. The two people he especially hates are

- the policeman who arrests him (eventually) and
- the governor.

Smith is strongly motivated by his dislike of them. But the biggest influence in his life is his dad. We find out about him quite late in the story. In every case the person has been used by Sillitoe to show us something about Smith and his outlook. Try to say what this is.

## The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner: study guide

### Narrative viewpoint

Sillitoe lets Smith tell his own story: in what way is this a strength or failing of the narrative?

In order to answer this question, you should consider the following:

- How Smith sees and how the reader sees (it may be the same or different) Smith's relations with:
  - Smith's and your own view of "out-laws" and "in-laws"
    - his parents;
    - Mike;
    - the policeman;
    - the borstal governor;
    - working-class people, and
    - people of other classes, generally.
- The order in which events happen and the order in which Smith tells them. Smith's claim to be a poor writer. The symbolism of running (for what does the race stand? Whose rules of racing does one obey?)
- How far, at the end of the novella, we like/dislike understand, respect, sympathise with, or feel in any way about Smith, as Sillitoe has "allowed" him to present himself to us.

### Preparing for exams

Before an exam you should try to re-read the whole book. It is not very long. If you are not a good reader, just do half an hour or so at a time. What you need to know is given here in much simplified form. Don't just retell story; answer the question set.

### Review what happens

- We learn first that Smith is in borstal. Why? What made him start stealing?
- For what robbery was he caught, and how did this happen?
- Why did Mike not get sent to borstal?
- Is Mike as good a friend as Smith thinks? Where do we find this out? Why is it not in Part One?
- What is Smith's plan to hit back at his enemies?
- Which person, and why, does he hope to upset?
- What happens when Smith carries out his plan?
- How do we know, at the end of the story, that Smith must have been sent to borstal or prison again?

# The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner: study guide

## Ideas for writing

### Before you start to write

Before you write anything you should have in mind a sense of your subject, your purpose and your audience - for example your subject is health promotion, your purpose is to help smokers quit and your audience is people buying tobacco products in the UK. So what you write is a short warning to appear on the packaging of cigarettes and other tobacco products.

In schools, pupils sometimes write things (or are told to do so) without asking these questions first. This can be fun, but in real publishing (which may have big costs but also can make profits) there is usually more focus. So, in writing his books, Alan Sillitoe thinks of a youth or adult audience, and his direct purpose is to entertain (perhaps) while his indirect purpose is to make enough money to keep writing. (Happily, he has had enough success to be able to write for as long as he feels able and interested, which is good news for his many fans.)

In writing this study guide, I have a very specific audience (or related set of audiences) in mind: students, teachers, trainee teachers and parents or tutors. If anyone else reads the guide, this is a bonus. The purpose is to help the students succeed in their work, while a second purpose is for them to enjoy some parts of it. I have other expectations - I do not expect ANYONE to read this from beginning to end in one sitting. It is set out in sections for users to dip into and pick and choose. (You will, anyway, so I may as well work with this, not against it.)

With some narratives you can add to the story (TV soap operas are designed to make this always a possibility). With others, the writer has already said all there is to say, and trying to extend the story can only harm it. Which kind of story is this one? The ending of this story does imply that there will be consequences in the future, but leaves this open. Will Smith continue to commit crimes, will he become more law-abiding, or will he become more skilful at evading detection? There are many things that one can reasonably do with such a narrative - either to explore particular situations and characters in it, or to adapt it into different forms.

### Changing the form - drama

This story is well suited for making into a script for dramatic performance. It could easily be adapted for television or radio, and could even make a fair stage play, with some slight changes. It has been successfully adapted as a feature film – but you might want to remake it for a more contemporary audience.

For this task, you can produce several linked pieces of writing:

- a letter to Alan Sillitoe, his agent and publishers, seeking permission to adapt the work
- a pitch (proposal) for a TV or radio commissioning editor, explaining how you intend to adapt the drama for the new medium
- an outline of the scenes and episodes into which you will divide the narrative (note that this need not stick to Alan Sillitoe's sequence)
- one or more scenes, including the opening episode of your drama

Several students could work together to write the whole drama. If it is very good, you could even submit it to a production company for real performance. If you develop a stage play, then you could find a theatre company that wants to perform it. Make sure that you find out about the conventions (rules, agreed style) for setting out scripts for the stage or radio and TV (similar but not quite the same).

## The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner: study guide

### Diary entries

Perhaps the governor keeps a diary. We don't know about real diaries (they are private) but we know of fictitious diarists like Adrian Mole and Bridget Jones.

Write a series of entries for diaries kept by the governor. These should be for dates before and after the Blue Ribbon Prize Cup.

In doing this, you can adapt your style to the way you think the governor would write.

### Smith's borstal file

Write a series of reports that might be kept in Smith's record file. These may be written by various officials at various times but should include all of the following:

- A report to the borstal governor at time of Smith's admission (about his home background; his offence, and his conviction; personal details.
- Progress reports (by the governor) on
  - Smith during his training/before the race and
  - shortly/immediately after the race.
- A report supplied by the borstal to Smith's probation officer at time of his release.

Remember to give the officials' opinion of Smith at each point. You may add any other reports you think useful.

### Ideas for speaking

It is possible to combine writing and speaking by creating scripts and reading these aloud. But this section contains ideas for speaking without a script. For some tasks, you may want to have notes (as many real speakers do in situations where they need to recall a structure), cue cards or even an autocue. How do you do this? Put the cues into a text file on a PC. Change the font to a size you can read at a distance (say 72 point) and look at the screen while you speak. If you are being recorded onto videotape, then you can record with your camera beside the PC monitor, so you are looking into the camera, more or less. If you have a larger display (such as an interactive whiteboard, or a screen onto which you can project images from a PC) this is helpful. But you can also ask a friend to hold up cards on which you have written with marker pens!

Ideas for speaking work lend themselves to the use of computer technology and other audio-visual aids. For example, you can use presentation graphics software (such as Microsoft PowerPoint™) to deliver or to support what you do.

### Interview or "hot seat"

In this task a group of students each take on the identity or character of someone in the story or who might have an interest in what happens. (So here, you could add police officers, social workers, prison officers, Smith's family and friends - include people, as your task requires them.)

Other students are an audience who have a reason to listen to the first group. At the most basic, you can do this as if you are a studio audience listening to a broadcast discussion. But you could be a jury, or a committee with some powers to vote, or members of a parliament. Perhaps the most likely group (usually there are three) would be the bench of magistrates, deciding Smith's fate after some future crime.

## The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner: study guide

### Reading tasks

The guidance on this page should help you to read this text with understanding. For some exam courses you may wish to do assessed work in which you compare *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* with some other text, including prose texts written before 1900. Among texts with similar themes are various novels and short stories by classic authors. The following list has suggestions for texts that you could study together with *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*:

- Jonathan Swift – *A Modest Proposal* (looks at class divisions)
- Charlotte Brontë – *Jane Eyre* (episodes which show young people in trouble)
- Charles Dickens – *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations* (episodes exploring crime)
- Arthur Conan Doyle – detective stories from the viewpoint of those solving the crime
- R.L. Stevenson – *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (explorations of criminality and evil)

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