

Four novels of oppression and revolt

By Teddy Baker

CLASS oppression — one social class dictating terms of existence to another — is portrayed in all of these four well known novels*. Revolt against oppression is not. *Germinal* portrays class war in 19th century France. In *Love on the Dole*, set in 1930s Salford, workers are depicted as beings incapable of revolt.

Several types of oppression — physical, religious, sexual and political — are portrayed in these novels, as well as bodily, spiritual and cultural starvation. The texts follow a line of historical progression. *Germinal* shows workers without rights at the dawn of the labour movement. *Strumpet City* portrays pre-World War 1 Dublin workers defending their right to organise a union. *Love on the Dole* anatomises workers at their most helpless, unemployed and despairing in the great slump. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* depicts a working class materially affluent in 1950s Nottingham but stultified by spiritual and cultural poverty.

In *Germinal* oppression is naked and brutal. Miners and their families live and work like animals: "It was the end of another day, the toilers had staggered from table to bed, overcome by exhaustion and food..." Repeatedly Zola contrasts them with their leisured, gluttoned, employers. The "miserable ugliness of the un-fed" children is shown alongside "the warm room of the cosy bourgeois".

Or contrasts youth and age:

"She buxom, plump, and pink from the long days of well-fed idleness of her race, he blown out with dropsy, hideous and pathetic like some broken-down animal, ravaged by a century of toil and hunger passed down from father to son."

Zola believed in Physiological Determinism, the theory that a person follows the same hereditary course as his ancestors, altered but not determined by circumstance and environment. He describes the two people as if they were beings from different species. Comparison to a broken down animal equates Bonnemort to the coal-carrying horses he cares for.

Zola assimilates the strike to Greek and Roman mythology. By way of images



1913 Dublin lock-out strikers and their families wait at the docks for ships bringing food from British workers

and comparisons he infuses a relatively modern story with the quality of myth. This description of the mine owners could be that of the Cretan Minotaur: "...some inaccessible tabernacle, where dwelt unseen the gorged and crouching deity whom they all appeased with their flesh". Here, the grand mechanism controlling events as the gods were once thought to, the force which traps all the characters and devours some of them, is the market economy. It is this 'hidden hand' of a hungry, capitalist god which brings tragedy after tragedy on both the miners and, when Cecile is strangled by Bonnemort, on their masters. When, following the shooting down of workers, the mine collapses: "The evil beast sated... had drawn its last long heavy breath".

DESCRIBED by one critic as "perhaps one of the angriest books ever written", *Germinal* is a damning indictment of the class system. Zola sides openly with the 'toilers'. "It was a mockery to call them free — yes, they were free to die". Yet, ultimately, Zola blames neither side. No one is intrinsically bad: "...it's everybody's fault". The root evil is the social system; but Zola sees only one class, the working class, as capable of replacing it. In the final passage, Zola, describing the min-

ers digging in the pit, compares the growth of their movement, which will change society through revolt, with the scientific growth of plants:

"Men were springing up, a black avenging host was slowly germinating... the harvests of future ages. And very soon their germination would crack the earth asunder".

Oppression is less brutal but no less disgusting in Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*:

"You gave a week of your life, every week, so that you might have a hovel for shelter, and insufficiency of food and five bob left over for to clothe yourself and the missis in shoddy".

Here too, life is devoted to work or gnawed away by unemployment. The use of the colloquial 'shoddy' indicates the informal atmosphere of the novel. There is little of the trumpeted grand overview which abounds in *Germinal*. Where Zola's style never lets you forget that the hard drudgery of life is connected to an economic system which allows the Hennebeaus to feast while the Maheus starve, Greenwood does not make this connection as often and never as clearly.

Greenwood too attacks the social system by showing how it inverts traditional

**Germinal*, Emile Zola; *Strumpet City*, James Plunkett; *Love on the Dole*, Walter Greenwood; *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Alan Sillitoe.

moral values. All the traditional 'decent' standards associated with a respectable way of life are stood on their heads. Sam Grundy, the back street 'bookie', is looked up to and envied. Unemployed Harry virtuously refuses to rob a shop with other unemployed young men. Arrest leads one of them indirectly to a job on the buses. So the moral — do not steal — is reversed. Crime pays. Sally Hardcastle's conventionally shameful decision to live as Sam Grundy's 'kept woman' brings much benefit: she will be cared for, her parents will get money, her brother gets a job, is able to support his wife and child and regains his self-respect. Thus the moral taint of prostitution is ridiculed. Sally uses her sexuality as a commodity: sex becomes work, comparatively high paid work. This is sexual exploitation. But, essentially, it is no different from conventional alienated work performed only for the wages. Sally revolutionises both material conditions and social conventions.

Here Greenwood illustrates the old socialist maxim that capitalism subverts and inverts all the age-old values: "All that is Holy is profaned", as the *Communist Manifesto* said.

Strumpet City, an account of the eight month Dublin strike and general lockout of 1913-14, explores the religious oppression employed by the rich against the poor. Dublin's workers too live in slums and are unsure of their next meal. They are deeply religious: "Finding no outlet for ambition or reason for hope on earth, Keever had long ago fixed Heaven with acquisitive and unflinching eyes". Then they organise a trade union and fight to change *this* world. At first, Father O'Connor, the tortured young middle-class priest who feels only disgust for the poor his religion tells him to love, inclines to neutrality between capital and labour. He is like the priest Abbé Joire in *Germinal*, who does nothing "so as not to upset either workers or employers". For O'Connor the fight was "not his business". But later, when the workers have banded together, led by Jim Larkin, a socialist, he takes sides. He fears socialism because "it uproots his (a worker's) confidence in the hierarchical order". Using "the voice of the pulpit" to denounce the mutiny of the poor, O'Connor also withholds charity from strikers' families. Plunkett's people are, as Catholics, constrained to obey priests, who represent God. With the priests against them the enemy is within their heads, working with the enemy without who is starving their children. Thus they suffer a uniquely religious form of oppression. Striking Catholics risk the fires of Purgatory or eternal damnation in Hell.

Much as Zola does, Plunkett demonstrates the power of working-class unity, even against the church whose power over

people in Ireland then is hard to imagine now. The 'Larkinite' workers will not surrender.

The zealot O'Connor is balanced by an older priest, Giffely, who sympathises with the strikers and dislikes the "young fool" O'Connor for his snobbery and his repugnant mixture of piety and pride. God is not to blame: "They are being led away from us... do you know whose fault it is? Ours... because we've watched in silence while others turned them into animals". This is a deeply Catholic novel. It promotes Catholic, or just plain, decently humane morals — solidarity, helping the sick, self-sacrifice are among the qualities the workers embody. Fitz helps a sick Father O'Connor. Fitz and his wife give away their savings (the fare for their children's escape from the starving city) so that a comrade and friend can be buried in Catholic decency. In contrast, a Catholic bourgeois couple let a faithful servant go, sick and paralysed, to die in the degrading workhouse. The Catholic Plunkett concludes: "The world — not Christ — trampled on the weak".

BY contrast, *Germinal* dismisses religion and the "empty heavens... why do you need God... can't you make your own happiness in this world?" In Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* religion is dismissed unceremoniously, without regard, contemptuously; it is something so unimportant that it must share an absentminded sentence:

"They turned on to Hartley Road, between a church and a school, both buildings standing deserted like unwanted corpses".

Set in booming Fifties Britain, where there are no dole queues, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* portrays the seemingly least oppressed workers. The struggle between rich and poor is at its least frenetic. Sillitoe shows workers enjoying relative wealth, far from Greenwood's cold, crushed, sterile, passively suffering workers. The novel is in the third person narrative, but seen from the viewpoint of Arthur Seaton, a worker in a bicycle factory. His and the narrators' observations often informally blur into one another. In contrast to Greenwood's Harry Hardcastle — who begged and sent his family into debt for one 'posh' suit — Arthur owns — at 1950s' values — two hundred pounds' worth of clothes. He drinks practically every night.

There is still hardship. Arthur shares a bed with his brother, who suffers from bronchitis; his job gives him acne. The past is looked on like a dark nightmare: "The difference between before the war and after didn't bear thinking about". His father is from a different era. Emotionally scarred from the extreme poverty of the Thirties,

he possesses a television looking "like something plundered from a spaceship". He is like father Hardcastle, or Bonnemort in *Germinal*, or Rashers, the ageing tramp in *Strumpet City*. Scared by poverty, he doesn't belong in such affluence:

"...Now he had a sit-down job at the factory, all the woodbines he could smoke, money for a pint if he wanted one..."

Is this the utopia the miners of *Germinal* dreamed of? "...a golden age when work and food would be shared by all"? The time that the hungry Dublin workers foresaw when the "class would not be starved forever"? No! Sillitoe depicts material prosperity blighted by the cultural poverty of the working class.

Arthur's job is monotonous, as is his life; his general culture is at a rudimentary level. He is concerned only with drinking, copulating and fighting. He has no purpose. "He had expected to find... friends at the bar. To be alone seemed a continuation of his drugged life at the lathe". Here a comparison is made between drinking and work. Both are equally pointless.

After a fight he collapses, "...feeling the world pressing its enormous booted foot on to his head, forcing him away from the lights down into the dark comfort of grime, spit and sawdust on the floor". This description is a metaphor for Arthur's life. The weight of life kicks him down to the 'dark' solace of booze and adultery.

Sillitoe's novel introduces a uniquely modern form of oppression created by the prospect and dread of nuclear war. It is something Arthur knows about, and the expectation of total annihilation must play some part in determining his hedonistic lifestyle:

"It was no use saving year after year... you never knew when the yanks were going to do something daft like dropping the H-bomb on Moscow then you could say ta-ta to everybody..."

The flippant way in which he visualises complete destruction is characteristic of his outlook on life. He rejects saving, action for the future, he sees only the present, because he doesn't believe there *is* a future.

CHARACTERS revolt, directly, as in *Germinal* or *Strumpet City*, indirectly as in *Saturday Night*... Why do they do not revolt in *Love on the Dole*? An explanation may be found in the character and behaviour of the autodidact Larry Meath, possibly the alter ego of Walter Greenwood. He fulfils a similar role to that of Etienne in *Germinal*; that is, he is sufficiently removed from other workers to have a critical overview: "He seemed out of place". But his view differs as much from Etienne's as Greenwood's from Zola's.

At one point he expounds a Marxist analysis of labour as “the source of all wealth”, and he is politically active. Yet he lacks the spirit of Etienne or of the numerous ‘troublemakers’ in *Strumpet City*. Something is missing in Meath.

Larry has contempt for his class: “...It’s driving me barmy to live among such idiotic folk”. This could be merely a flippant remark, but it runs in the same vein as Greenwood’s sometimes nonsensical portrayal of working class people.

Sally is portrayed as a sharp, intelligent, sensitive, self-reliant and ultimately unconventional woman. But Sally is like Mary in *Strumpet City*, who couldn’t see “what attracted him (her husband) in the speech-making and upheavals”. Sally, who might plausibly disagree with Larry’s politics, is — though her wits are sharpened by love — portrayed as simply unable to understand them. At the Labour club where “they spoke politics, arguing hotly about somebody named Marks [sic]” she cannot follow them. Her invincible ignorance of politics flatly contradicts her intelligence in the rest of the novel. One feels that she is like this to artificially enhance Meath.

More, Greenwood ignores the great political events of his novel’s setting in time and place. For example, the General Strike of 1926 — a recent event when the novel begins — and the labour struggles on Salford Docks — physically close to Hanky Park and possibly alluded to by the occasional mention of a “hoot from a ship’s siren” — are deliberately omitted. In a work of art, this is the author’s prerogative. But the picture these omissions paint is that of a working class with neither spirit, spirituality nor a living labour movement. In fact, Larry *is* the labour movement. He does the street meetings, he expounds socialist economics, he is the only man with any sense when the workers break out in a muddled, aimless, street skirmish. He tells the hot-headed revolutionary: “Oh don’t talk so damn daft man. Get something done”. Unlike the hot-head — a stereotypically stupid, essentially unreal character — Larry favours working within the existing society to achieve his goals, by co-operating with the police. Larry Meath is ‘above’ those he would lead. Greenwood is himself an autodidact who has risen above his class and is evidently contemptuous of it, much like his reformist creation.

In *Germinal*, before the tragedy of the shooting, Etienne is described thus:

“Gradually his vanity at being their leader and the constant necessity of doing their thinking for them was setting him apart and creating within him the soul of one of the bourgeois he hated so much.”

This is Meath and quite possibly Green-

wood. As Sally says: “He was the superior”. The workers don’t need to think or dream, Larry will do it for them: “You don’t know the misery of dreams... be glad they don’t plague you...”. This is the Fabian, middle-class account of working people (which presumably was intended for a largely middle-class audience). They are dumb objects, not as in Zola and Plunkett, self emancipators, struggling. ‘Superiors’ like Meath will reform things from above. This is the ideology of Rasseneur in *Germinal*.

Greenwood’s workers suffer, but cannot revolt. In Dublin, “they fight the bosses to a standstill. There was no defeat in the faces he passed”. In *Germinal*, ultimate victory is certain: “That would be the big day... that monstrous idol... gorged with the flesh of poor creatures who never even saw him, would instantly perish”. In *Saturday Night*... “One day they’ll bark and we won’t run into a pen like sheep”. By contrast, in *Love on the Dole*, there is neither fight nor hope.

IN the novels, women are exploited as wage labourers — like the men (for example in *Germinal*) and in narrow domesticity, servicing present workers and (in all the novels) rearing the next generation. Here they have no independent income, and thus have even less control over their own lives than the men of their class. This can be seen in the soured but, in practice, unbreakable marriages of Winnie and Brenda in *Saturday Night*... They have affairs, but they are psychologically and sociologically conditioned to accept their stale marriages. They are “penned in by Jack and Bill” like animals. Madame Hennebeau is in exactly the same position in *Germinal*, despising her husband, and having an affair with his nephew. In *Strumpet City* Mrs Bradshaw too, lacks control over her own life, unable to resist her husband’s decision to consign their faithful servant to the workhouse, although she knows that this is wrong. This subservience to husbands is common to rich and poor women. It is gender, not class, oppression. In *Germinal* Mahaude ends up the breadwinner of her family, sharing a fleeting similarity with Greenwood’s Sally.

The worst example of the helplessness of women is that of Mrs Muldoon in *Strumpet City* who has to feed six kids. She is saddled with an unemployed and perhaps unemployable husband. Unable to work because she is a woman, and unable (because of ignorance and the convention forbidding birth control) to limit the growth of her family, she is trapped into scabbling around for whatever she can find to feed a roomful of starving children. This is the “promiscuity of poverty” described in *Germinal*, where Mahaude

performs similar feats to feed her children. This grinding poverty is real oppression, the majority of it falling on women as “the slaves of the slaves”.

While containing little recognisable politics Sillitoe’s novel has far more in common with the other two novels, in its overall view of the ability of the oppressed to revolt than has Greenwood’s work. Arthur is an unfocused rebel, reacting to alienation from his work, seeking excitement — “...grabbing for an extra pint, doing women at the weekend...” — to compensate. He does in fantasy — he wants “to blow up the factory” — what Souvarine does in reality in *Germinal*, sabotaging the mine. However, unlike the selfless anarchist, his maxims — “It’s a good life, if you don’t weaken” and “Don’t let the bastards grind you down” — indicate a strong sense of self-preservation.

His resolution — as he edges towards marriage — to concentrate his rebellious nature on the “vast crushing power of government” indicates an evolving crystallisation of his politics: he is in process of abandoning a simple visceral-anarchist reaction. In a 1961 interview Sillitoe once said: “If one were to continue the story of Arthur Seaton... what he would do about it [his previous unfulfilled life] is to become a communist or socialist or a trade unionist”. Arthur, then, is Etienne in embryo; certainly not a Larry Meath. Arthur’s imagining and hoping for the future are more akin to the workers in the white heat of revolt in *Germinal* and *Strumpet City*, than *Love on the Dole*’s doomed populace.

Essentially, the crucial thing the working-class characters in each of these four novels lack is control of their own destiny, their lives. In *Strumpet City*, Fitz knows that “people he did not know and would never meet decided...” his fate. But this sense of powerlessness, this feeling that you have to fight just to stay alive, is best expressed by Sillitoe’s Arthur, summing up his life:

“Born drunk and married blind, misbegotten into a strange and crazy world, dragged-up through the dole and into the war... when they let you out, you sweat again in a factory working with rotten guts and an aching spine, and nothing for it but money to drag you back there every Monday morning”.

They all feel this impotence, but respond in different ways. There is Sally’s docile way — “meditating resentfully on her own impotence against the frustration of all her dreams” — or there is Arthur’s way, determined, unyielding:

“I’m a bloody Billy goat trying to screw the world... because it’s trying to do the same to me”.