

James A. Snead

FIGURES OF DIVISION: WILLIAM FAULKNER'S MAJOR NOVELS

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Reviewed by K.J. Phillips

Snead argues refreshingly that Faulkner's style is not just a private "fingerprint" but a self-conscious literary tactic to undermine the rhetorical tactics whereby society perpetuates the myths of inferior women, poor people, and blacks. Society, which fears merging of the races, marks out simplified physical differences to assign internal values, repeats dogma exactly, and omits realities it does not want to face. To challenge these ploys, Faulkner merges characters and plots, repeats stories with subversive differences, dislocates chronology to question causality, and refuses to supply customary endings. While Snead does not hush up Faulkner's sometimes regrettable public statements about blacks (pp. 141, 226), he shows how daringly and open-mindedly "Faulkner's narratives utter a truth of merging across boundaries that his contemporaries found unspeakable" (p. x).

Snead applies his method most successfully to *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet*. Most critics of *Absalom* treat the variant versions of the past either as a problem in epistemology (the difficulty of establishing a "truth") or as an exercise in creating "truths" (which need have no relation to a historical situation, since the versions are all in the mind anyway). Snead, on the other hand, argues that the narrators *have* to change the story, to correct past prejudices. Just as Snead shows how "repetition with a difference" (p. 135) dismantles a fixed line of authority, he insightfully links storytellers' omissions to society's neglect. Shreve prods Quentin finally to face Henry's (and his own) fear of miscegenation and thus "restore[s] the black" to the narrative (p. 126).

Snead illuminates *The Hamlet* too with several original insights. He argues convincingly that inequality in Frenchman's Bend results from its economic system and not from "certain unscrupulous individuals" (p. 158). Snead usefully brings in Aristotle's vacillation about profit as "unnatural" or "natural" to explain the "Eula phenomenon," "the movement wherein rhetoric turns the human objects of exchange (mainly women and blacks) quite literally into 'naturals,' hence suitable for exploitation as livestock" (p. 150). Rumor and storytelling (the retelling related to retailing) become the "narratological equivalent" of "the market": what "everyone thinks" the product is worth (p. 148).

Snead is somewhat less successful with other novels. Just as he persuades us that Faulkner's narrative methods in *Go Down, Moses* can protest prejudice, he contradicts himself on the same page by claiming that these stylistic innovations camouflage prejudice (p. 206). Snead also employs "postmodernism" to no real purpose except perversely to blame Faulkner, instead of his characters in *Light in August*, for murdering Joe Christmas: ". . . Faulkner—no less than Jefferson—shows a conservative compulsion to impose order [i.e., kill off an anomalous character]. . . . In other words, the post-modernist reconciliation in Faulkner culminates precisely in the destruction of that which had seemed to remedy modernism's atomizations" (p. 82). (But Snead has so far been discussing modernist fragmentation and dislocation as positive.) His analysis of *The Sound and the Fury* also illustrates the way Snead sometimes drags in trendy terms and big name critics like Freud, Derrida, or Jakobson without really adding anything to our understanding. To apply Jakobson's "similarity disorder" and "contiguity disorder" to Jason and Benjy (p. 33) does not tell us anything new about these characters, nor about society, which Snead otherwise integrates with literary discussion so admirably.