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FAULKNER AS A
PSYCHOLOGICAL WRITER

Joyce Anderson

An understanding of William Faulkner's significance as a psychological writer begins with some knowledge of psychology itself. Perhaps no theory is as compatible with Faulkner's writings as Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which has in recent years led to an almost entirely new conception of man. This conception reveals man not as a god or a devil, but merely as a human being. According to it, all men are all things, brave and cowardly, fearful and expectant, humble and arrogant. Taking this conception as a starting point, we can see that all men are capable of acts and ideas that would be defined by the more traditional concept as bad or abnormal. Psychoanalysis has explored and defined many aspects of the unconscious in man's behavior, and has emphasized the view that every man has within himself various abnormal tendencies.

Faulkner, in his writings, has placed much emphasis on abnormality. In the light of psychoanalytic revelations, however, we can see that "abnormality" is itself the norm. Thus Faulkner's characters are not isolated individuals in a "good" society; rather they are representative of all men, moving in a society which is neither good nor bad.

Freudian theory places the source of primitive, unsocialized impulses in the Id, which is dominated by the Ego or rational mind. The Ego supposedly seeks to control the Id by suppressing it into the unconscious depths of the mind. Abnormality, as Faulkner sees it, is the failure of the Ego to keep the Id where it belongs. Thus it breaks through into the conscious mind, and with it come the most primitive impulses in man. Faulkner is probably trying to express himself rather than attempting to affect his readers psychologically; his hold over them can be explained by such an effect.

Assuming that all men have primitive, antisocial, "abnormal" tendencies, Faulkner's power may be said to lie in the fascination his readers find in seeing their own suppressed impulses expressed overtly through his characters. Faulkner makes good use of the psychoanalytic concept of the universality of abnormal impulses! He has, theoretically, punctured his readers' Egos and wormed his way into the innermost depths of their minds.

This phenomenon is very much in evidence wherever he uses his stream-of-consciousness technique. It seems to presuppose the fact that all humans have, during their lifetime, common experiences, common perceptions, and common sensations. Too few readers realize, however, that they have ever perceived the world as did the idiot Benjy, or the Id-dominated perverts such as Popeye, Wilborune, and
the others. Faulkner, with his skill as a psychological writer, can overcome this obstacle. He simply forces his readers to regress. Regress to what? To understand the rambling, irrational reveries of Benjy, the reader must regress to early childhood! Most events of early childhood are not remembered by the conscious mind, but psychoanalysis has shown that they exist, very powerfully, in the unconscious. Supposedly long-suppressed because of their pre-socialized, primitive nature, the perceptions of this phase of life can be recalled through a weakened Ego. The feeling of “having felt this,” “having done this,” and “having been here before” as he sees the world through Benjy’s mind, can thus be explained to the reader. And then it dawns on him that he did, long ago, perceive the world with an irrational mind! It can be a very disturbing psycho-emotional experience.

Seldom in his profound psychological novels does Faulkner set his characters in concrete situations. Rather, they seem to move in a surrealistic world dominated by the Id. Possibly the only identification the reader can form is that which arises from having had similar “experiences” in the unexplained, often terrifying dream world. Here, according to Freud, the Id slips past the dozing Ego and gives vent to its stored-up impulses and desires in relatively harmless dreams. Theoretically, then, every human being has “lived” in an Id-dominated world.

William Faulkner, in his passion, has placed the sins of our time and our world on the microcosm which is man. We begin to feel that his anger is aimed at the helplessness with which man must bear his burden. His books are peopled with victims, if we may so call them, of the evils and disorders of this day; victims representative of all humanity. Faulkner implies that while man is doubtless endurable, he can also look forward to an existence which may not be worth living.

Andre Gide once said that not one of Faulkner’s characters has a soul. This could be psychologically analyzed as meaning that Faulkner does not look at his people as men, but as soul-less objects, as machines. Yet we notice that Faulkner himself has survived, not only the real, rational world, but the struggling, tragic world of his own creation. And we do not give up hope.