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Marietta Kosma
University of Oxford

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William Faulkner and Mortality; A Fine Dead Sound, by Ahmed Honeini, Routledge, 2021, pp. xi+ 194, \$ 96,00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780367501327.

Marietta Kosma

William Faulkner and Mortality; A Fine Dead Sound is the first full-length study of mortality in William Faulkner's fiction. This book challenges existing scholarship tackling the issue of death in Faulkner's work. Ahmed Honeini, through close-readings of six key works—*The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *A Rose for Emily*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*—examines how Faulkner's characters confront various experiences of human mortality, including grief and bereavement. Honeini argues that the protagonists of these novels—Benjy, Addie, Emily, Joe, Sutpen, and Isaac—ultimately “say yes to death,” succumbing to the trauma they have been subjected to (Honeini 2). What is innovative about this book is that it distinguishes between Faulkner's quest for literary immortality through writing and the desire for death exhibited by the principal characters in the works Honeini analyzes. Honeini is in conversation with Jay Watson's *William Faulkner and the Faces of Modernity*, focusing on mortality, situating himself at the center of Faulkner studies.

One can see Faulkner's preoccupation with mortality as his attempt to deny his own death and achieve immortality through the lasting creation of literary art. Faulkner had a long-held obsession with literary immortality. His primary aim in writing fiction was to uplift man's heart, a completely selfish and personal endeavor which leads to saying “no to death” (Hamblin 4). His stance on death has led critics, most notably Hamblin, to conclude that the key to Faulkner's fiction can be found in his statement, that writing is his way of saying “no to death” (4). Consent of mortality textured and informed Faulkner's work, as he had a heightened sense of mortality that led him to cultivate what Hamblin describes as a fear of death or obliteration, which informs his major works. The denial of death is one of the central components of his aesthetic. His narratives are obsessed with death, of “what the living have to say about the dead and with what the dead have to say about the living and the process of dying” (Honeini 2). One can locate the socio-historical origins of saying “no to death” in the early twentieth century, as one can see through chaos and most of life after World War I and Faulkner's timely reflections about death.

The book adopts as its central line of inquiry the ways in which Faulkner's characters respond to and negotiate the traumas which death creates. Death is viewed as anathema to ideas of prosperity, longevity, and any sense of personal and emotional stability within one's life. Honeini makes the case that this ambivalence towards death that Faulkner's characters exhibit in these works actually drives them towards finally accepting and saying “yes to death” (Honeini 2).

The book consists of five chapters in which Honeini does a close reading of one or two novels of Faulkner, following the chronology of their publication. In Chapter 1, “A fine dead sound’: Quentin Compson’s suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*,” Honeini examines Quentin’s final day before committing suicide. Through a close reading of *The Sound and the Fury*, Honeini proves that every action in which Quentin engages during his final day could be viewed as a ritualistic burial preparation. The mundane tone of his monologue highlights Quentin’s liminal position between life and death. Honeini argues that there is no point in understanding the motivation behind Quentin’s fictional suicide. He views his suicide as reflecting a lack of voice.

In Chapter 2, “Living Was Terrible: Confrontations with Mortality in *As I Lay Dying*,” Honeini analyzes the posthumous monologue of Addie Bundren, the Bundren’s matriarch. Emily gives a first person account of her life through her posthumous monologues. Honeini offers an innovative reading of the monologues, explaining why Emily’s existence is in effect a preparation for her inevitable death. She voices her explicit final judgment against the words of her father, the demands of her father, her family, and the suffocating pressure of her community. All these domains have caused her life to function as an unrelenting figuration of death.

In Chapter 3, “Burying the Fallen Monument: The Death of the Old South in ‘A Rose for Emily,’” Honeini analyzes the conflict between two distinct opposing generations within the Rose family - the industrializing modern South as represented by the anonymous narrator and the old and the morally decayed antebellum aristocracy as embodied by Emily. The new generation demands supremacy over the modern space of the south in the decades following the civil war in order to vanquish the disgraced monuments of the death sentence past. During his account of Emily’s life, the narrator of the story tries to justify why such a vanquishing must take place. By doing so, he effectively transforms Emily’s voice into a dead sound which speaks to the resistance of her generation.

In Chapter 4, “A Bloody Mischancing of Human Affairs: Murder and Violence in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*,” Honeini examines two of the most infamous murders in Faulkner’s oeuvre in conjunction with one another. Honeini puts into perspective Percy Grimm’s murder of Joe Christmas in *Light in August* and Wash Jones’s murder of Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, moving from examining death in private spaces to examining death in collective spaces.

In Chapter 5, “Ah’m Goan Home: Narration, Homegoing, and Whiteness in *Go Down, Moses*,” Honeini examines the use of third person narration in stories of *Go Down, Moses*. This chapter “outlines the distance that Faulkner places between himself as a white, southern author, his implicitly white readership, and the African American protagonists in both stories who are unable to express feelings of mourning and bereavement in their own words” (Honeini 144). Honeini concludes that one always filters bereavement down in a white perspective.

William Faulkner and Mortality offers a new paradigm for reading Faulkner’s oeuvre and adds an alternative voice to a debate within Faulkner scholarship long thought to have ended. It constitutes an alternative to the Hamblin model that Honeini fully elaborates and then departs from. Overall, Honeini’s arguments are straightforward and convincing. Honeini’s study ventures to fill a critical gap by acknowledging and elaborating upon a significant aspect of Faulkner’s work that the author himself actively ignored and downplayed throughout his career. The book aims to counteract the critical complicity of Faulkner’s aesthetic endeavor of

saying “no to death” (Hamblin 4). It calls for a shift in scholarship away from Faulkner’s foul play of immortality for writing and towards emphasizing the acceptance and desire for death that many of his characters convey. The works Honeini studies within the book position death in a liberating context through which one confirms the trials, stipulations, and injustices that result from life.

Works Cited

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