

SUGARLAND (Thorp Springs Press)

by Paul Foreman

review by Rita Baltar

Sugarland is a reform-oriented novel. The characters are haunted by determinism. Daryl and his friends are all by-products of an unjust economic system. The whole book is No Exit, No Way Out, Point of No Return. The book is full of naturalistic techniques. Men - Animals... the Darwinian survival of the fittest is the novel's kelson/Leitmotif.

Texas emerges as a feudal state with minority owning the land and ruling the people. Daryl, the main hero, isn't a hero at all, but an Outsider who's outside not out of defiance but personal incapacity. He's a Hemingwayesque "Code-Hero". He lives inside the apocalypsis of non-compromising honour, courage, dignity with the FORCES OF DARKNESS. And system-defeated, he stiff-upper-lips it to eventual triumph.

Foreman's characters are outcasts right out of the tradition of Ishmael and Huck Finn. Like H.F., Daryl and Bones survive because they have made a truce with the system they live in.

Obvious parallelism between Captain Ahab and Sugarland's "Major". Ahab defies the elements

to pursue a super-human task and his madness becomes the madness of his crew. Likewise the Major imposes his will on the prisoners without respect for human limitations. Conflict here (again Ahab) is solved by his tragic death.

Old familiar refrains from American Lit here - the battle between MAN - NATURE - MACHINE. Nature is identified with Bones, a primitive identified with the soil, the river, the animals. On the other hand the MACHINE is presented in the prison complex, a Kafkaesque vision of an institution that annihilates and destroys human integrity.

Foreman's style is succinct, straightforward, "Steinbeckish". But it lacks consistency of narrative point-of-view. Daryl is the Character Numero Uno up to his release from prison. But from then on the focus shifts to Bones, the Anti-hero. Why this change? Because, I believe, Foreman wants to develop the Outcast Theme and being Free Daryl no longer fills the Outcast Bill.

The Mississippi is Huck Finn's escape river, here it is the Brazos de Dios. Huck and Bones both seek to escape from institutions. In both cases the "out" is a transcendental "return to (almost Emersonian) NATURE".