

# WILLIAM FAULKNER'S «WASH»: A STUDY OF THE LAST DAYS OF THE OLD SOUTH

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Most of the scholars that have studied this short story have pointed out that its main theme is the confrontation between the aristocracy and the poor white, or white trash.<sup>1</sup> Sure enough, the narrative constitutes an excellent analysis of the decadence of a feudal organization that is being replaced by a pre-industrial system, guided exclusively by money and mercantilism. According to Ward L. Miner:

The end of the nineteenth century witnessed in Yoknapatawpha county the loss of the planter's code and the values it stood for. The only values to take its place are the money values...<sup>2</sup>

This conflict is even more complex if we consider it in the context of *Absalom, Absalom!*, where Thomas Sutpen appears as a self-made man who started his career from the same position as Jones. Notwithstanding, the narrative makes no reference to this fact and Faulkner himself did not make a special point of the idea when he was asked about it:

Q. Mr. Faulkner, what was the particular significance of having Wash Jones, a very humble man, be the instrument through which Sutpen met his death?

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1. James G. Watson points out that this is *the* subject of the short story: «The theme of the story, symbolized by Wash's subsequent attack on Sutpen with a scythe, involves the destruction of the Old Order in the South by Time...» («Faulkner: Short Story Structures and Reflexive Forms,» *Mosaic* 11 [1978]: 135).

2. Ward L. Miner, *The World of William Faulkner* (New York: Cooper, 1963), 135.

Does that relate back to the social stratum from which Sutpen himself came and have there a sort of ironic effect? Just what was the idea of that?

A. In a sense. In another way Wash Jones represented the man who survived the Civil War. The aristocrat in the columned house was ruined but Wash Jones survived it unchanged.<sup>3</sup>

Both this defeated aristocrat and his friend and murderer Jones are divided by what Walter Taylor defines as «the tragic gap between Mississippi's two white classes». This social fragmentation -which also plays a relevant role in short stories such as «Barn Burning» and «A Rose for Emily»,<sup>4</sup> is represented here through another image of alienation: the betrayal of a supposed friendship which is really little more than an illusion. Although apparently friends, the main characters of the narrative finally destroy each other in an apotheosis that is reminiscent of classical tragedy.<sup>5</sup>

Sutpen is a tragic hero, the modern Agamemnon who sacrifices everyone in order to achieve his own purposes, and ends up being punished for his arrogance.<sup>6</sup> The same as Abner Snopes in «Barn Burning», this character is alienated from everything

3. *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-58*, eds. Frederick L. Gwynn & Joseph Blotner (Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 1959), 74-5.

4. *Faulkner's Search for a South* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1983), 89.

5. See Warwick Wadlington, *Reading Faulknerian Tragedy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987), 57.

6. See Lennart Björk, «Ancient Myths and the Moral Framework of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*», *American Literature* 35 (1963-64): 197-98. In his study of the character as existentialist hero, William J. Sowder compares Sutpen with another mythological figure, Egistus. This leads him to state that the protagonist of the short story is searching for his own death («Colonel Thomas Sutpen As Existentialist Hero», *American Literature* 33 [1961]: 499).

This mixture of ancient myths and historical events is typical of the faulknerian universe in which time is duration, flux, a constant movement («time is a fluid condition... There is no such thing as *was* -only is») (*Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962*, James B. Meriwether & Michael Millgate, eds. Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1980, 1ª edición 1968, 255) which eludes any kind of subjection or categorization (See also Conrad Aiken, «William Faulkner: The Novel as Form.» en *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays* [Englewood: Prentice Hall, 1966], 48). This conception was taken from the French philosopher Henri Bergson, whom the american Nobel quoted as a source of inspiration: «I agree pretty much with Bergson's theory of the fluidity of time. There is only the present moment, in which I include both the past and the future, and that is eternity» (*Lion in the Garden*, eds. Meriwether & Millgate, 70). To study the influence of Bergson's ideas in William Faulkner's writings see: Thomas L. MacHaney, «The Elmer Papers: Faulkner's Comic Portraits of the Artist.» *Mississippi Quarterly* 26 (1973), 297-98; Donald M. Kartiganer, *The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Forms in Faulkner's Novels* (Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1979), 161-67; Carolyn Porter, *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1981), 257-59; Kiyoyuki Ono, «Life Is Motion: An Aspect of William Faulkner's Style,» in *Faulkner in Japan*, ed. Thomas L. MacHaney (Athens: Georgia UP, 1985), 28-44.

and everyone because of a single project based on a demonic pride («rushing a sky in color like thunderous sulphur» [p. 543]).<sup>7</sup> Sutpen is so obsessed by the idea of getting a descendant that may inherit his properties and perpetuate his lineage that he feels no remorse in seducing a fifteen-year-old adolescent, using her as a mere bearer of his would-be son. The cruelty of such an attitude becomes obvious when he compares the circumstances of these human beings with those of his horses which, ironically, he treats better than Milly and her daughter:<sup>8</sup> «`Well, Milly,' Sutpen said, `too bad you're not a mare. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable'» (p. 535).<sup>9</sup> Sutpen's brutality is also highlighted through the description of his attitude towards Milly:

Sutpen stood above the pallet bed on which the mother and child lay. Between the shrunken planking of the wall the early sunlight fell in long pencil strokes, breaking upon his straddled legs and upon the riding whip in his hand, and lay across the still shape of the mother... (p. 535).

Through this scene, in which both figures appear framed in linear shadows that evoke the bars of a prison cell, the narrator seems to suggest that both Sutpen and Milly are prisoners of a rigid social structure represented by the whip Sutpen uses to address the girl. Male sexual power, patriarchal authority and the arrogance of the landowner are the ideas gathered both in such an emblematic object and in the character marked by it. The frustration the landowner feels when he finds out that the newborn baby, whom he also points to with the whip («he indicated the pallet with the hand which held the whip» [p. 535]) is «a mare», reminds him of better times and a horse, Rob Loy, that was actually able to have a male descendant. As a matter of fact, as James B. Carothers points out,<sup>10</sup> Sutpen seduces Milly by giving her economic rewards, something very desirable in this period of poverty after the Civil War. The reckless use the Colonel makes of this adolescent also constitutes a betrayal of her grandfather, Wash, who ends

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7. *The Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989, 1<sup>a</sup> edición 1950).

From this point onwards all references made to the stories will be taken from this edition.

8. According to Ilse Duso Lind, Faulkner's works show «contempt for men who flee the responsibilities of parenthood» and «moral disapproval of males who deny their own children like Thomas Sutpen» («The Mutual Relevance of Faulkner Studies and Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Inquiry,» in *Faulkner and Women: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha 1985*, eds. Doreen Fowler & Ann J. Abadie [Jackson: Mississippi UP, 1986], 37).

9. *The Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989, 1<sup>a</sup> edition 1950). From this point onwards all references made to the stories will be taken from this edition.

10. «Faulkner's Short Story Writing and the Oldest Profession,» in *Faulkner and the Short Story: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha 1990*, eds. Evans Harrington & Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: Mississippi UP, 1992), 51.

up becoming a victim of the egotism of the aristocrat too. The narrator tells us that the «friendship» that apparently links the two male protagonists is based on meetings in which Sutpen treats Wash as a servant and the latter responds to the Colonel's requirements with the hope of obtaining some sort of reward:

... he and Sutpen had spent more than one afternoon together on those rare Sundays when there would be no company in the house. Perhaps his mind knew that it was because Sutpen had nothing else to do... (p. 538).

Obviously, the principles that guide this relationship, advantage-seeking and class-difference, have nothing to do with the generosity normally attached to friendship. That is why, before the war, Sutpen treats Wash haughtily:

... the two of them would spend whole afternoons in the scuppermong arbor, Sutpen in the hammock and Wash squatting against a post (p. 538).

After the war, both characters share some whisky (which -as the narrative points out [p. 359], is now of an inferior quality), which they drink in order to cope with defeat and the lost dream of a victorious South («they kilt us but they ain't whupped us yet, air they?») [p. 539]). Notwithstanding, even after being reduced to the position of a modest shopkeeper, the former landowner still considers Wash an inferior: «They both sat now, though Sutpen had the single chair while Wash used whatever box or keg was handy...» (p. 539).

It is no wonder that, with such precedents, the end of the relationship between both characters should be suggested in a scene in which Sutpen is not able to bear Wash's stare knowing that the latter is trusting him with his most desperate hopes:

«... And I know that whatever you handle or tech, whether hit's a regiment or a ignorant gal or just a hound dog, that you will make hit right.»

The landowner breaks the biased bond of friendship, admiration and confidence which Wash tries to reassert when he reminds his poor tenant that he is nothing but a subordinate who has to obey his orders. In destroying Wash's dream, the character is also destroying his last opportunity to fulfill his needs. Apart from egotism and rashness, Sutpen's main sin is pride, the most typical fault of Faulkner's heroes. Pride estranges the character from a world in which he no longer plays a relevant role: the same as the disappointed Gulliver, Sutpen ends up becoming absorbed in the world of horses and stables, which functions here as a substitute for the devastated and chaotic society the landowner is trying to ignore and forget. The recurrent identification between Sutpen and his steed, «the fine proud stallion» (p. 542), on the one hand, underlines the aristocratic nature to which the character desperately clings and, on the other, links him

to that compendium of «potency, virility, male fertility, freedom, bravery, and strength» this animal stands for in our tradition.<sup>11</sup> The irony of such an equivalence lies in the fact that the landowner no longer belongs to any of these fields and shows his complete alienation from reality in his desperate attempt to preserve a social glory and a sexual power that already belong to a lost past:

who had... galloped in the old days arrogant and proud on the fine horses across the fine plantation -symbols also of admiration and hope; instruments too of despair and grief (p. 547).

As was the case with McLendon in «Dry September», the frustration of the character is shown in his violent urge to destroy, often enhanced by alcohol:

... Sutpen would reach that stage of impotent and furious undefeat in which he would rise, swaying and plunging, and declare again that he would take his pistol and the black stallion and ride single-handed into Washington and kill Lincoln, dead now, and Sherman, now a private citizen (p. 540).

Thus through impotence and frustration Sutpen is led to invent a fictitious vengeance (whose unreality is pointed out by the omniscient narrator) which takes him back to a glorious past and in which he becomes completely alienated from those around him and the world he inhabits.

Wash is afflicted with a similar derangement. He is the representative of the most impaired social class within the Southern organization. Here the black characters, who are traditionally considered the lowest stratum in the Southern social structure, openly show their contempt toward Wash:<sup>12</sup>

«Git out of my road, niggers.»

«Niggers?» They repeated; «niggers?» laughing now. «Who him, calling us niggers?»

«Yes,» he said. «I ain't got no niggers to look after my folks if I was gone.»

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11. Neil D. Isaacs analyses this aspect of the role of horses in «Wash» in «Götterdämmerung in Yoknapatawpha.» *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 8 (1963): 49. James Ellis also deals with the identification between the horse and male sexual potency, and he finds out that this association was already present in the works of Faulkner's mentor, Sherwood Anderson («Sherwood Anderson's Fear of Sexuality: Horses, Men and Homosexuality,» *Studies in Short Fiction* 30 [1993]: 600).

12. Stephen M. Ross points out that, consequently, «Wash's speech must be heavily stylized to lower it to its appropriate level 'beneath' black speech» (*Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner* [Athens: Georgia UP, 1989], 109).

«Nor nothing else but that shack down yon dat Cunnel wouldn't *let* none of us live in.»

Now he cursed them; sometimes he rushed at them, snatching up a stick from the ground... (p. 537).

This scene, in which Wash rushes at «inferiors» who remind him of his unfortunate situation, anticipates the final one in which the protagonist will attack his «superiors» with a much more harmful artifact than a stick from the ground. But Wash's frustration is caused not only by the scornful treatment he receives as a member of a certain social class but also by his assumed cowardice in not participating in the Civil War. These two different symptoms of failure have as an antidote the same dream, the same lie: that of the friendship and trust of a man who represents for Wash everything he admires:<sup>13</sup>

When Colonel Sutpen rode away to fight the Yankees, Wash did not go. «I'm looking after the Kernel's place and niggers,» he would tell all who asked him and some who had not asked -a gaunt malaria-ridden man with pale, questioning eyes... This was *a lie*, as most of them -the few remaining men between eighteen and fifty- to whom he told it, knew, though there were some who believed that *he himself really believed it*, though even these believed that he had better sense than to put it to the test... (p. 536, my italics).

This infatuation is also ambivalent because Wash not only deceives himself in thinking that he is Sutpen's friend but also in believing that the latter is an honourable character. His delusion is such that the character ends up believing that his painful situation is nothing but a bad dream and that the fantasy in which he succeeds is real:

It would seem to him that that world in which Negroes, whom the Bible told him had been created and cursed by God to be brute and vassal to all men of white skin, were better found and housed and even clothed than he and his; that world in which he sensed always about him mocking echoes of black laughter was but a dream and an illusion, and that the actual world was this one across which his own lonely apotheosis seemed to gallop on the black thoroughbred, thinking how the Book said also that all men were created in the image of God and hence all men made the same image in God's eyes at least; (p. 538).

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13. In his analysis of the idea of division in Faulkner's narrative, James A. Snead mentions Wash who, according to this scholar, «views Sutpen as the apotheosis of lower class dreams» (*Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* [New York: Methuen, 1986], 110).

This contradictory interpretation of the Bible is as consistent as Wash's admiration for Sutpen. Notwithstanding, W. J. Cash tells us that this kind of veneration was very frequent in the South:

We must begin here from the Civil War. Out of that ordeal by fire the masses had brought, not only a great body of memories in common with the master class, but a deep affection for these captains, a profound trust in them, a pride which was inextricably intertwined with the commoners' pride in themselves.<sup>14</sup>

As a matter of fact, in this short story we verify that the above-mentioned pride is not limited to the landowner but is also shared by his poor companion. When confronted with a common plight of impotence and frustration («impotent and raging» [Wash, p. 537]; «»impotent and furious» [Sutpen, p. 539]), both adopt an attitude of feigned superiority. Sutpen is always riding a thoroughbred and Wash is fully drawn by his appearance:

... on weekdays he would see the fine figure of the man-... on the fine figure of the black stallion, galloping about the plantation. For that moment his heart would be quiet and proud (p. 538).

Besides, Wash is actually proud of a single object, the weapon with which he will kill his own family when he realizes of his granddaughter's dishonour and his own: «the butcher knife: the one thing in his slovenly life and house in which he took pride, since it was razor sharp» (p. 549).

Apart from pride, Wash and Sutpen share a dream connected with it, that «their» South has not been defeated yet. If the landowner's obsessive wish to perpetuate his lineage is destroyed when Milly gives birth to a girl, Sutpen's rejection of this last female descendant of his kills Wash's expectations. The relevance of the moment in which both characters become disillusioned is pointed out, as usual, through repetition, as this scene is used both to open and close the short story. Once again, Sutpen's inner processes are hidden from the reader, who is only given Wash's emotions: «He heard what Sutpen said, and something seemed to stop dead in him...» (p. 544). What dies within Wash is that alienating admiration that used to reduce him to servility. Once this subjection is overthrown, Wash decides to destroy the figure who, at the same time, annihilates and constitutes his only reason for living: Sutpen. Ironically, it is the landowner's scythe that puts an end to the landowner's life. Sutpen's pride and egotism have provoked his own death at Wash's hands and the poor white finally sets himself up

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14. *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage, 1969, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1941), 113.

as the avenger of all the injustices and deceptions he has suffered. Even at this critical moment, the aristocrat tries to master the poor white who, in this final attack, rises never to fall again:

Sutpen raised the hand which held the riding whip;... «Stand back, Wash,» Sutpen said. Then he struck... Sutpen slashed Wash again across the face with the whip, striking him to his knees. When Wash rose and advanced once more he held in his hands the scythe which he had borrowed from Sutpen three months ago and which Sutpen would never need again (p. 545).

Again, these two characters, who apparently could have been linked by a reciprocal support and understanding, end up secluded from each other. As Joan S. Korenman sustains,<sup>15</sup> the narrative insists on the idea that Sutpen is defeated by time while Wash seems to remain exempt from its scars («Wash was there... unchanged: still gaunt, still ageless» [p. 539]). This difference would have made perfect allies of these two characters. Nevertheless the unsurmountable social distance together with the demonic arrogance of the landowner destroy all possibility of such an alliance. The result is a common desolation evinced in a common fate. If Sutpen dies, thus ending his lineage, Wash confronts a certain death after killing his own descendants. Thus, the end of the old Southern aristocratic order is represented. The two social classes depicted in the story appear at the same time as irreconcilable opposites and inseparable foundations of the unachievable dream of the edenic South. The poor finally rebels against the one that exploits him in a desperate, lonely and suicidal attempt to kill injustice. As William Van O' Connor points out, this is the way in which the short story finally turns upon itself:

«Wash» remains a masterly piece of compression, the action seeming to move inside locally accepted notions of caste but *suddenly whipping about*, a peripety that destroys Sutpen and elevates Wash Jones to a position of great dignity (my italics).<sup>16</sup>

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15 . «Faulkner and 'That Undying Mark,'» *Studies in American Fiction* 4 (1976): 84.

16. William Van O'Connor, *The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner* (New York: Gordian Press, 1968), 89.