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# “The Whip and the Scythe:” Symbols of Betrayal in William Faulkner’s *Wash*

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## Keywords

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The short story *Wash* that was a source of inspiration for the novel *Absalom, Absalom!* is a subtle representation of the class conflict in the Southern slave system. Beyond that, however, Faulkner also alludes to more intense and deeper human realities: humanity in the face of humiliation and destruction. The use of the symbols is indicative in the construction of the short story. The “whip” and the “scythe”, therefore, come to represent the people who choose to wield them, reflecting not only their social classes but also the roles they fulfill in the story. Thus, if at the beginning the class distribution seems to be in keeping with the slave ideology promoted in the Southern plantation romance, with the whip representing the rich class and the scythe the poor farmers, by the end of the story, the utter inhumanity of the planter is exposed and the dream of the aristocracy is torn apart. The scythe, then, becomes the symbol of revenge and rebellion, the weapon of “Death”. The paper will focus on complex the meaning of these symbols in the context of a revenge story with echoes from the Greek tragedy.

Published in 1934, the short story *Wash* was included in the novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, published two years later, in 1936 and critically acclaimed as one of the most important writings in the Faulkner canon. The novel traces the destiny of Sutpen, a poor white who, through ambition, ruthlessness and cunningness, joins the planter class in the pre-Civil War South and is eventually killed by another poor white, Wash Jones. Though crucial in the outcome of the novel, being the only one to bring down the mighty Sutpen, colonel in the Confederate army and important land and slave owner, Wash Jones remains a marginal character, seen through the others’ eyes, a mere servant, by-stander and observer of the planter’s destiny and his family’s dramas. The short story, however, as the title suggests, is focused on Wash, paying more attention to his own internalization of the events precluding Sutpen’s death and offering a clearer insight into his decision to kill the planter, who had been his idol for a long time.

The story of Wash Jones is apparently simple and for the most part, largely marginal and unimportant: a poor white of unknown origins, he squats on a piece of land at the margin of Sutpen’s plantation, living in a fishing lodge built by the landowner in his bachelor days. This favor is repaid by Wash with an unshakable trust and admiration, as he converts Sutpen into an idol, a symbol of honor and nobility. He stays by Sutpen’s side through thick and thin, in the latter’s moments of glory, before the Civil War, when he is not allowed by Sutpen’s slaves to enter the mansion and during his financial and psychological collapse after the War. He cherishes the image of the land owner, as her rides his black stallion, whip in hand, about the plantation, like

the heroes of old. Wash even allows Sutpen, now a sixty-year old man, like himself, to have a relationship with his own fifteen-year old granddaughter. When she gives birth to a baby girl and destroys Sutpen's expectations of having a son and heir, Sutpen insults her, unfavorably comparing her to his mare that gave birth to a colt and deserves a better stable to live in. This marks the turning point for Wash who loses his faith in Sutpen's honor and cuts his throat with a scythe. The whip and the scythe, therefore, become the commanding symbols of the text, representative for the social status of their wielders and, eventually, for their destinies.

The story had been seen in various manners: as a celebration of "the individual's courage and potential to revolt against dehumanization" (Miles, 2008), a final confrontation between the aristocracy and the poor white trash of the South with echoes from the Greek tragedy (Blanco Outón, 1996), "a parable of Southern history and an indictment of the weaknesses of the Southern social system" (Callen, 1963: 25), or even as a story that "extends beyond an individual tragedy to reveal the delusions and helplessness of the 'poor white trash' in the Civil War South" (Rodden, 2010: 23). The relationship between Wash and Sutpen, both in the short story and in the novel that stems from it, becomes symbolic for the contact between the Southern social classes and for the process of constructing class identity. Moreover, it also reveals the hidden violence and discontent at the core of the Southern white society, showing that aristocratic claims and strict divisions are an illusion maintained with great difficulty.

In Southern literature, in general, as Shirley Callen notes (1963: 25), the relationship between the rich and the poor whites of the South received little critical attention compared to the depiction of racial problems considered crucial in the delineation of Southern identity. Julia Leyda widens the perspective, asserting that "in much of American literary study, and indeed in American culture more generally, class remains an underexamined or taboo issue" (2007: 165). It is clear that such an unbalanced approach cannot render the complexities of the Southern world and Faulkner, while dealing with both racial and social problems in *Absalom, Absalom!*, focuses more on the social divisions and on the processes of constructing the white social identity in the short story *Wash* and is more subtle in rendering the instability of such relationships and the preconceptions regarding the fixed social hierarchy of the Southern plantation. The narrative perspective is very important in this approach since class identity is constructed "through the perspective of the narrators, revealing their own filters and assumptions" (Leyda, 2007: 166). Thus, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Sutpen's destiny is viewed from subjective, white, privileged vantage points: Quentin Compson and his father, members of a rich and influential family, and Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen's sister-in-law, a white, middle-class lady. They all come with their own limited and biased representations of race and class. Wash Jones, the poor white, is a marginal character in the novel, seen from the outside and dismissed as "trash" by the others. In the short story, though, the narrative moves from "undesigned heterodiegetic narrator who starts his narrative with a dialogue between Sutpen and the Black woman who looks after Milly," to Wash who "becomes the focalizer, for the short story is the theatre of an epiphany, that is his realization of Sutpen's evil nature and his human frailty. Mimesis finds its way through diegesis as the third-person narrator gives insights into Wash's un-transparent mind through fragments of narrated or reported monologues or soliloquies" (Buisson, 2008: 1-2). It is Wash, now, who constructs the image of Sutpen and, by comparison, his own against the social and ideological background of the Southern world; he is the one who reflects the Southern hierarchies and tries to find a place for himself in them, but, as Françoise Buisson aptly remarks, it is "a tale told by an idiot"

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as “Wash sees himself centre stage, under the scrutiny of a voyeuristic community who rejects him ideologically. Yet, Wash is doomed to have no say and is faced with the sound and fury of his own discourse” (2008: 2). He, thus, remains a marginal even in his own story, disregarded by white and black alike. Wash is aware of this situation and he reflects on his fate as he waits for Sutpen’s peers to come and punish him. In this context, the scythe, the murder weapon, becomes a symbol of his marginality as it is not even his own weapon: borrowed from Sutpen a few months before to cut the weeds, it lies rusty and useless, just like Wash, until it is turned into a weapon of punishment and revenge.

The whip and the scythe, therefore, become symbolic for the plantation world and its social hierarchies: the whip representing Sutpen and the Southern planter world while the scythe pointing to Wash and to the poor whites, the working class who, in the end, will bring Sutpen down. Françoise Buisson remarks the subtle choice of objects belonging to the two characters: “only a few objects stand out against the gloomy backdrop inherited from the Gothic tradition: Sutpen’s saber and whip, the symbols of his tyranny; the ribbon, which he gives to the young girl so as to seduce and entrap her; Wash’s scythe and butcher’s knife, the instruments of his revenge” (2008: 4), which also indicate the classes to which they belong and the roles they fulfill in the story. It is important to note, at this point, that the symbols are associated, at the beginning, in a very traditional and even stereotypical way to their owners and their expected role and attitudes, while, by the end of the story, the situation is reversed and, in keeping with Faulkner’s nuanced view of the Southern plantation, the real functions of the characters are revealed also by the manner in which they choose and use their weapons.

The beginning of the text is indicative, since both whip and scythe are introduced to the reader, even before a full image of their wielders is created. Thus, Sutpen appears as a mere silhouette carrying a whip: a commanding figure without a face: “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, who lay looking up at him” (Faulkner, 1995: 534). By not clearly describing the characters, Faulkner stresses their symbolic functions in the Southern social system suggesting that their actions are dictated more by social pressures to be and behave in a manner that is expected of them rather than according to their own feelings. As Cristina Blanco Outón notes, “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” (1996: 177). Just a few lines below, even before Wash is introduced to the reader, the scythe is mentioned. It leans “rusting against the corner of the porch” (Faulkner, 1995: 535), passive, unused, waiting, just like Wash who expects to see Sutpen’s reaction at the birth of his daughter. In the end, though, the whip becomes useless faced with the anger and resentment of the one who uses the rusty scythe.

Traditionally considered a weapon, the whip, together with the scepter, the mace and the staff, are attributes of royalty (J. C. Cirlot, 2001: 368, Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996: I, 193). Combined with the idea of authority, it also expresses that of punishment (J. C. Cirlot, 2001:

372, Hall, 1994: 96) which stems from the right of any authority to control the subjects and to enforce laws. As such, the whip handled by Sutpen comes to represent the ideology of patriarchy with which the slaveholders justified their right not only to own slaves, but also to exert their power on others: members of the family, mainly women and children, and poorer whites. Alluding to the representation of a pre-industrial society, “the Southern planter class continued to appeal to the vision of a stable and harmonious society, based on government by traditional elites” in which “freedom would be based on property ownership” (Tracy, 1995: 11). This vision resided in a “shared understanding of patriarchy”, founded on the “patriarchal family which ‘protected’ women, children, apprentices, servants, and slaves [...]. The head of the household, the patriarchal ‘master,’ was invested with gender, generational, and class power as he represented his household in the public sphere” (Tracy, 1995: 12). This entire social construction resided on the preeminence and absolute power of the land- and slave-owning white man, who created the idea of “natural aristocracy,” comprising all those who, “through their education, experience, and wealth were recognized by their communities as outstanding citizens, the natural leaders of society” (Tracy, 1995: 12). Thomas Sutpen, the Southern gentlemen and Confederate colonel, whip in hand and riding his black stallion, appears as the embodiment of this “aristocracy.” Proud, determined, ruthless and cold, Sutpen unflinchingly follows his dreams<sup>1</sup>, discarding and destroying anything and anybody who stands in his path. An aging and poor man, as he is represented in the short story, Sutpen does not renounce his paraphernalia of power, even though they are only outwards masks hiding his failure and despair. Depending on the moral support of Wash, Sutpen’s only power is to fight the ghosts of the past when he gets drunk on cheap whiskey:

Soon 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.

“Kill them!” he would shout. “Shoot them down like the dogs they are!” (Faulkner, 1995: 540)

In those moments of despair, it is Wash who carries him home, guards him through his drunkenness and nightmarish visions and reassures him: “Hyer I am, Kernel. You go back to sleep. We ain’t whupped yit, air we? Me and you kin do hit” (Faulkner, 1995: 540). Whipping, in Wash’s words, would be worse than being killed, it is the ultimate sign of humiliation since only slaves are punished through whipping.

The fragility of these outward signs of power is suggested, in the short story, by a subtle association between Sutpen and his stallion, connection that might appear favorable in the light of Sutpen’s superior position in the Southern society. The hero or the god on horse are

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<sup>1</sup> The novel brings additional information into Sutpen’s background: he comes from the poorest layers of the society and, when he was young, he was humiliated by the slaves of a rich Southerner. This was the moment he decided he would never be humiliated again. Through resilience, determination and ruthlessness, he accomplished his aim and he becomes one of the richest and most important planters in the Yoknapatawpha county. The short story, however, does not mention these details, intensifying thus the social distance between Sutpen and Wash Jones.

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common representations of nobility, heroism and power in literature and art. On the other hand, though, the horse is an animal, controlled by a whip, and so, it becomes “a symbol of the animal in man” (Cirlot, 2001: 311), of the instinctive forces that are ruled by reason. After the Civil War, Sutpen’s despair, that comes from a combination of factors: financial bankruptcy, familial disappointment (he desperately wants a son to carry on his name), a sense of humiliation for having been defeated, is drowned in cheap whiskey. Sutpen, then, becomes delirious and needs Wash’s physical help and moral support:

“Sho, Kernel; sho, Kernel!” Wash would say, *catching Sutpen as he fell*. Then he would commandeer the first passing wagon or, lacking that, he would walk the mile to the nearest neighbor and borrow one and return and carry Sutpen home. He entered the house now. He had been doing so for a long time, taking Sutpen home in whatever borrowed wagon might be, *talking him into locomotion with cajoling murmurs as though he were a horse, a stallion himself?* (underlining mine, Faulkner, 1995: 540)

Sutpen’s sense of defeat is intensified by the fact that his stallion achieves what he cannot: to father a colt and not a filly, a “damn fine colt” who will be “the spit and image of old Rob Roy” (Faulkner, 1995: 535), and not a useless daughter, as he did. Wash’s unintentional irony: “Hit’s a gal, Kernel. I be dawg if you ain’t as old as I am” (Faulkner, 1995: 544), is a clear indication of the utter failure of Sutpen’s design. Eventually, in spite of Wash’s constant reassuring “they kilt us but they ain’t whupped us yit, air they?” (Faulkner, 1995: 539), Sutpen will be eventually “whupped” by Wash, in a duel in which his own whip is no match for Wash’s scythe driven by resentment and disillusionment. The final duel between the two is indicative of Sutpen’s failure in rising up to the image that he tries to embody: that of a powerful and noble man:

“You said if she was a mare, you could give her a good stall in the stable.”

“Well?” Sutpen said. His eyes widened and narrowed... almost like a man’s fists flexing and shutting, as Wash began to advance towards him, stooping a little. Very astonishment kept Sutpen still for the moment, watching that man whom in twenty years he had no more known to make any motion save at command than he had the horse which he rode. Again his eyes narrowed and widened; without moving he seemed to rear suddenly upright. “Stand back,” he said suddenly and sharply. “Don’t you touch me.”

“I’m going to tech you, Kernel,” Wash said in that flat, quiet, almost soft voice, advancing.

Sutpen raised the hand which held the riding whip; the old Negress peered around the crazy door with her black gargoyle face of a worn gnome. “Stand back, Wash,” Sutpen said. Then he struck. The old Negress leaped down into the weeds with the agility of a goat and fled. 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. (Faulkner, 1995: 544)

The ironic choice of words is obvious: Wash does not want to “touch” him, but to “teach” him a lesson. Even though he managed to lash Wash and strike him to his knees, in a gesture that reminds of the old-time whipping of the black slaves, a gesture that seems to be so familiar to men like Sutpen, Wash cannot be brought down in his determination to fulfill his revenge. Thus, this duel between the Sutpen and Wash, the whip and the scythe, is not only a clash between two worlds: master and the servant, rich and poor, authoritative and powerless, but it also hints at the real role destined for Wash Jones, too easily dismissed simply as “white trash” but who becomes the cause of Sutpen’s final tragic fall.

In analyzing *Absalom, Absalom!*, Lothar Hönnighausen reflects on the choice of weapons that contribute to the death (symbolic and physical) of Thomas Sutpen and his comments on Wash’s choice of the scythe is valid for the ending of the short story, as well: “Wash Jones, like the rebellious farmers in the peasants’ war of Luther’s time, uses a rusty scythe, with Sutpen in vain defending himself with his horsewhip and appealing to his status” (2007: 244). The scythe, therefore, has this double role, as tool and weapon, being associated both with agriculture and with the rebellion of the oppressed. In fact, the English language dictionaries define the scythe primarily as an “agricultural implement”<sup>2</sup>, a tool and not a weapon and it was associated with the harvest deities in many cultures (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1995: III, 217, Hall, 1994: 83, Cirlot, 2001: 281). Its connection to Wash who wanted to use it to cut the weeds but, not having one of his own, needed to borrow one from Sutpen, is symbolic for the agricultural system of the Southern economy in which the wealth and authority are associated with the rich white man (wielder of the whip and saber) who rules over the weak and poor: the black slaves and the white “trash.” Wash’s inferiority and dependence are enhanced by the fact that he does not have his own piece of land or home, being allowed to “squat in a crazy shack on a slough in the river bottom on the Sutpen place, which Sutpen had built for a fishing lodge in his bachelor days and which had since fallen in dilapidation from disuse, so that now it looked like an aged or sick wild beast crawled terrifically there to drink in the act of dying” (Faulkner, 1995: 536).

The relationship between Sutpen and Wash, therefore, seems to be a traditional depiction of the Southern social divisions. Wash’s adoring view of Sutpen who is, in his imagination, the epitome of nobility and honor hides his secret dream of being like Sutpen. By living in Sutpen’s lodge, pretending to take care of his plantation while the latter is away fighting in the Civil War, and then, by allowing Sutpen to have a relationship with his granddaughter, Wash does not look for material advantages, but for a psychological sense of worth and importance. According to Wilbur J. Cash, the Civil War had destroyed the South, but “it had left the essential Southern mind and will [...] entirely unshaken” (1941: 193), levelling all in poverty that resulted in a “suppression of class feeling” (Cash, 1941: 110). In this new (and yet not really new) world, the poor white, “faced with the threat from the North, particularly the appalling threat of freedom for the ‘inferior’ group,” “would identify himself even more closely with the planter class and

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<sup>2</sup> Scythe: “an agricultural implement consisting of a long, curving blade fastened at an angle to a handle, for cutting grass, grain, etc., by hand” (*Dictionary Reference*: <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/scythe?s=t>), “an implement used for mowing grass, grain, or other crops and composed of a long curving blade fastened at an angle to a long handle” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/scythe>), “a tool with a long, sharp, curved blade and a long handle held in two hands, used especially to cut long grass” (*Cambridge English Dictionary*: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/scythe>).

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the planter ‘captains’ who had fought to preserve the status quo; as the poor white saw it, to preserve his superiority and well-being. Admiration was all the more acute because the planters continued their paternalism even in their own straightened circumstances” (Callen, 1963: 31). The situation applies to Wash who feels even closer to Sutpen as the latter, impoverished and alone, accepts even more willingly the company of his poorer companion.

Wash’s identification to Sutpen explains very well the reasons for which the poor whites shared with the rich ones the slave ideology and continued to cling to it even after the Civil War, in spite of the fact that their living conditions were far from corresponding to it. According to Wilbur J. Cash, “the aristocracy<sup>3</sup> was selected from the population of the backwoods – those who became known as the poor whites,” while those who remain poor are the uncompetitive, unlucky, unsuccessful, “less industrious and thrifty,” “less ambitious and pushing” and “less cunning” (1941:21). Being a “very wasteful system” that “could be made to pay only on rich soils” (Cash, 1941: 36), it pushed the less fortunate farmers to the less fertile pieces of land. Therefore, the growing difference between the planter and the poor white, in Cash’s view, was created by the slave system. Nevertheless, the frustration and resentment of the poor white is not directed against the rich white, but against the black slave with whom he is forced to enter an unfair competition and who often appears to have a better life standard. In this unequitable world, the poor man prefers to identify with the rich plantation owner on the grounds of the white supremacy: even if he is poor, at least he is racially superior to the slaves and he shares this advantageous position with the rich white (Callen, 1963: 30).

Moreover, compared to Sutpen, Wash has a more relaxed attitude regarding the outcome of the Civil War and his poverty. He had been poor before the War and he had been humiliated by the slaves and patronized by Sutpen. Now, after the War, he feels closer to an impoverished Sutpen, with whom he can more easily identify and share the illusion of lost aristocratic grandeur and white supremacy and so, he chooses to keep wallowing in dreams, replacing the desolate reality with an illusion:

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; so that he could say, as

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<sup>3</sup> As mentioned before, Faulkner makes Sutpen a descendant of the white trash whose rose to power through ambition, proving a keen eye for the reality of the Southern social classes in a novel published before Cash’s seminal study. In fact, John Rodden argues, in his 2010 study, that Wash and Sutpen are the same, they only differ in the reactions they had to similar situations and which steered the course of their lives into opposing directions. As complex and interesting as this view is, it is to be noted that Faulkner nuanced the relationship between Sutpen and Wash in the novel, while in the story written two years earlier, the social difference between the two is kept without further explanations.

though speaking of himself, “A fine proud man. If God Himself was to come down and ride the natural earth, that’s what He would aim to look like.” (Faulkner, 1995: 537-8)

It is obvious that Wash is aware of the difference between his life and that of the slaves but he conveniently chooses to convert “the Christian notion that all men are equal in God’s eyes into a religion of white supremacy” (Miles, 2008). The complications arising from this view are remarked by the critics who have interpreted Wash Jones’ illusion of superiority and admiration for Sutpen in different manners. Carolina Miles (2008), for instance, suggests that “Wash desperately wants to believe in white male fraternity across class lines” while John Rodden argues that “he does possess, however, a sense of how ‘Society’ and the South operate – he respects distinctions of class (whereby he places himself on the bottom rung of the great Southern Chain of Being) and avoids social taboos” (2010: 27). For instance, he convinces himself that he does not enter Sutpen’s house not because he would not be allowed to do so, on account of being mere white trash, but out of a sense of pride and respect for Sutpen: “he had never tried to enter the big house, even though he believed that if he had, Sutpen would have received him, permitted him. ‘But I ain’t going to give no black nigger the chance to tell me I can’t go nowhere,’ he said to himself. ‘I ain’t even going to give Kernel the chance to have to cuss a nigger on my account’” (Faulkner, 1995: 537-8). He, therefore, delineates his position in society: superiority to the slaves, and respect and admiration for Sutpen, which makes him be considerate and attentive to his feelings.

In the light of his admiration for what Sutpen represents and for the world of illusion he creates for himself, it becomes clear that he takes the scythe from Sutpen not because he really needs it, since he does not even try to use it in three months, nor does he attempt to return it: he simply tries to strengthen the sense of fraternity by having something of Sutpen’s. Similarly, “in Wash’s eyes, Milly’s delivery of Sutpen’s child represents, as it were, the physical evidence of the existing union between the Jones and Sutpen families,” and, even if the baby is not a son, as required by the aristocratic inheritance laws, Wash, who does not see the world in aristocratic terms, truly believed that they both have a future through their healthy children in spite of having been defeated (Rodden, 2010: 29-30).

When the illusion is shattered and he abruptly wakes up from the dream he had been living into, realizing that Sutpen is not an honorable man, he chooses the scythe to end Sutpen’s life and not the razor-sharp butcher knife, “the one thing in his slovenly life and house in which he took pride” (Faulkner, 1995: 549) with which he is going to kill his granddaughter and her baby. Sutpen is not worthy of that. When he kills Sutpen, scythe in hand, gaunt and ageless Wash Jones appears as an allegory of Death (Buisson, 2008: 4). The scythe is, in fact, associated both with Death, as it cuts the thread of life short, and with Time (Hall, 1994: 83, Cirlot, 2001: 281). As he never appears to grow old in comparison to Sutpen’s fast physical decay, even though they are the same age, it is as though time and destiny catch up with the planter who had been refusing all his life to bow to their rule.

Wash’s immolation of Sutpen has been most often connected to a process of awakening from the illusory belief in the nobility of the planter class. In fact, it is not Sutpen that he admires, but what Sutpen appears to represent in the patriarchal Southern system: “his loyalty to Sutpen is not built on any kind of financial obligation to him, nor is it gratitude for the meager friendship Sutpen deigns to offer. Sutpen – or rather, the idea of Sutpen – fills a void in the



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desolate world of the poor white, a world that is empty spiritually and emotionally as well as physically. He offers a vision of all the high, chivalrous qualities that can only exist in a feudal world. For Wash, he becomes a kind of alter ego; he can imagine that his own dreary existence is only an illusion” (Jenkins Cook, 1971: 51-2). In this light, Sylvia Jenkins Cook sees Wash as a real aristocrat when he decides to defend his granddaughter’s honor and the principles that he believed in: “the metamorphosis of Wash at the end, from lazy shiftlessness to courageous avenging fury, that he has indeed been ‘teched and changed’ by the virtues he believed Sutpen represented. Though the virtues are false, Wash’s faith in them appears finally to have ennobled this lowly and scorned man” (Jenkins Cook, 1971: 52-53). John Rodden goes even further suggesting that “Wash’s horror at Sutpen’s contemptuous remark to Milly therefore arises not merely from his world-shattering frustration at a moment of apparent victory and celebration, but also from his inchoate sense of basic human worth” (Rodden, 2010: 30).

The ending of the novel is highly disturbing as well as intensely emotional. After killing Sutpen, Wash decides to kill his own granddaughter and her child, burn the house and through himself at those who come to punish him, knowing that he will be shot to death. The murder of his family was seen as a sign of his pride: “a misguided effort to ‘wash’ away the Sutpen filth that has defiled the family. For although Wash is a simple man, he is a proud man” (Rodden, 2010: 33). The fact that he uses for that his knife, the only object he takes pride in, suggests that this final death comes closer to a ritualistic act, even a form of suicide as he kills his own descendents (Blanco Outón, 1996: 182). It appears that Wash wants to erase from the face of the earth all that was touched by Sutpen: his house that belonged to the planter, his granddaughter and himself:

“Better if nara one of them had never rid back home in ’65”; thinking “Better if his kind and mine too had never drawn the breath of life on this earth. Better that all who remain of us be blasted from the face of earth than that another Wash Jones should see his whole life shredded from him and shrivel away like a dried shuck thrown onto the fire.” (Faulkner, 1995: 547)

What is clearly disturbing about the ending is the fact the Wash is a kind and empathic man who was brought up by forces exterior to him to the point of committing the atrocious killing of his family, emptied of feelings and hopes. In his recollection of the past, the reader finds out that he had been there through all through the births in his family, he is happy to see that the baby is healthy and he treats his granddaughter with soothing love and care:

“What was what, honey?”  
“That ere racket out there.”  
“I warn’t nothing,” he said gently. He knelt and touched her hot forehead clumsily. “Do you want ara thing?” [...]  
“Sho now,” he said soothingly. He rose stiffly and fetched the dipper of water and raised her head to drink and laid her back and watched her turn to the child with an absolutely stonelike face. But a moment later he saw that she was crying quietly. “Now, now,” he said, “I

wouldn't do that. Old Dacey says hit's a right fine gal. Hit' s all right now. Hit's all over now. Hit ain' t no need to cry now."

But she continued to cry quietly, almost sullenly, and he rose again and stood uncomfortably above the pallet for a time, thinking as he had thought when his own wife lay so and then his daughter in turn: "Women. Hit's a mystry to me. They seem to want em, and yit when they git em they cry about hit. Hit's a mystry to me. To ara man." Then he moved away and drew a chair up to the window and sat down. (Faulkner, 1995: 545-6)

It cannot be argued that Wash is brought down by his own flawed perception in the world, an illusion that is not his own alone, but shared in the Southern plantation world by planters and poor alike. However, it cannot be denied either that this illusion hides the deep inhumanity and immorality of those who created it. Sutpen is not only far from being a noble man, in spirit and behavior, he falls short of being human altogether in his cold and indifferent treatment of the others. Sutpen must die not because of what he specifically did to Wash and Milly Jones, but for what he represents: the deeply unjust and inhumane system coated in illusions of patriarchy and nobility. Wash must die because he shared this illusion, he supported it and he was stained by it. He also knows that he will be hunted down by people like Sutpen and the injustice will go on forever:

Now he seemed to sense, feel, the men who would be gathering with horses and guns and dogs, the curious, and the vengeful: men of Sutpen's own kind, who had made the company about Sutpen's table in the time when Wash himself had yet to approach nearer to the house than the scuppernong arbor: men who had also shown the lesser ones how to fight in battle, who maybe also had signed papers from the generals saying that they were among the first of the brave; who had also galloped in the old days arrogant and proud on the fine horses across the fine plantations, symbols also of admiration and hope; instruments too of despair and grief. (Faulkner, 1995: 546)

This image of the men who come for Wash, riding their horses and carrying their weapons of oppression, is similar to that of Sutpen, suggestive of the fact that the whole system is corrupted to the core, that being the reason why Wash distrust the system of justice and also prefers to kill his granddaughter rather than trust Major de Spain's promises that they will take care of her. The story opens with Sutpen's silhouette: a man carrying a whip against the morning light and it closes with that of Wash: "the gaunt, furious figure came on against the glare and roar of flames. With the scythe lifted, it bore down upon them, upon the wild, glaring eyes of the horses and the swinging glints of the gun barrel, without any cry and sound" (Faulkner, 1995: 549). Both images have a tint of artificiality, creating the sense of theatricality with characters who "fade into shadows or 'freeze's into masques" (Buisson, 2008: 2). The final tableau, however, alluding to the allegorical figure of Death falling upon mankind, against the background of the fires of hell, is definitely more commanding than the soft aquarelle of the beginning; Wash's humanity and his fury shake the illusions and lies of the plantation nobility.

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