

## ANALYSIS

“Wash” (1934)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“‘Wash’ is a taut narrative, violent and self-contained, which depicts the death of Colonel Sutpen at the hands of Wash Jones, a poor white hanger-on who had served Sutpen for decades, had allowed him to seduce his granddaughter not merely with easy consent but even with a sort of pride, but now finally rebels against the arrogance Sutpen displays upon discovering the child is a girl. Only to a slight extent is the story dependent on *Absalom, Absalom!*, where we may learn more fully the reasons for Sutpen’s disappointment at not having a male heir. But the significance of Sutpen’s contempt for Milly Jones and of the ultimate rebellion, the final trace of dignity in Wash Jones—these are fully and bitterly evoked in the story itself.”

Irving Howe

*William Faulkner: A Critical Study*  
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 265-66

“One of Faulkner’s best stories, ‘Wash’ anticipates the subject of his later novel, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), which includes a revised version of the story (284-92) in its treatment of the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen and the mythos of the South. ‘Wash’ deals specifically with the death of Sutpen, although it is Wash Jones, Sutpen’s poor-white handyman, whose disillusionment in Sutpen and the men like him—the brave, the honorable, the members of the Southern aristocracy who gallantly went off to fight in a lost cause—occupies the center of the stage. Having lost his son in battle and his wife as a result of the privations of wartime, Sutpen comes back to his ruined plantation and tries to make enough money to live by running with Jones’s help, a roadside store.

Jones respects and admires Sutpen—‘the Kernel’; though he is Sutpen’s drinking companion, he knows his place in the social hierarchy and does not try to capitalize on Sutpen’s friendship. When Sutpen seduces his fifteen-year-old granddaughter, Milly, Wash is concerned but does not interfere, believing that Sutpen will do right by anything he touches. However, Milly gives birth to a girl, and Sutpen, crushed by his failure to get a male heir to continue his name, offers Wash a merciless insult by his indifference to Milly and his infant daughter. This indifference is given an additional sting by the fact that Sutpen’s mare foaled a colt that same morning, and Sutpen seems more interested in the male foal than in his own female child.

Wash, driven to despair by his realization that Sutpen is not the god incarnate that he had believed him to be, kills him. He then waits patiently for the body to be discovered and Sutpen’s friends to come and take him to jail. When they arrive, he murders Milly and the child, sets fire to the tumble-down shack in which Sutpen had permitted them to live, and brings on his own death by running at the waiting and armed men with a knife.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Sutpen’s implicit comparison of Milly to a brood mare and his similar failure to treat Wash as a human being capable of admiration and disillusion and grief is given additional ironic emphasis by the fact that Sutpen himself had come from a poor-white family and had fought his way to his position in the Southern aristocracy as a result of an unintentional snub given him by a Negro butler when he was a child. Though the entire motivating force of his life was to achieve recognition as an individual by the ruling class, he repeatedly failed to give others that recognition, and thus inadvertently paved the way to the downfall of both himself and the dynasty he had hoped to establish.”

Dorothy Tuck

*Crowell’s Handbook of Faulkner*  
(Crowell 1964) 181-82

Michael Hollister (2015)

