

Abstract

The main aim of this thesis is to analyze the decline of the so-called Southern aristocracy in two selected novels by William Faulkner, namely *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Their protagonists are members of rich planter family in the first case, or, as in the second case, descendants of such a family. They all inhabit Faulkner's fictitious Yoknapatawpha County and are considered Southern aristocrats by their fellow citizens. Yet they are not living the life of leisure and luxury often ascribed to people of their rank but facing their own decline instead.

In both novels, the nature of this decline is both materialistic and spiritual; the latter being the beginning of the former. The decline of Southern aristocracy is primarily seen as a conflict of two sets of values or, in other words, as a struggle between the "Old South" and the "New South." Therefore the main cause of this decline is seen in the enormous dependence on the past, which goes hand in hand with the notion of the myth of the antebellum South.

The first two chapters of this thesis constitute a theoretical introduction for the subsequent analyses of the novels, for they discuss the key concepts associated with the South; namely the myth of the Old South in comparison with the actual historical development, and the notion of Southern aristocracy. Together they constitute an attempt to compare the Southern mythical features with the reality of Southernism. The conclusion is that even though in many cases the myth and the reality were far from each other, it is not completely possible to free oneself from the myth, since it constitutes the bases of the distinct Southern worldview, which has its roots in the European medieval culture and has been furthermore supported by Classical education which dominated Southern colleges and universities.

Next two chapters represent the core of the thesis, i.e. the application of the theoretical concepts from the introductory chapters onto the analysis of "aristocratic" characters of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*. The objective is to explore their reactions toward various (mostly unpleasant)

situations they are facing throughout the narrative and to demonstrate that their adherence to seemingly innocent Southern moral code (or, in other words, to the Southern myth itself) is not only false but has also fatal consequences, which could be otherwise easily avoided.

In Chapter 3, the analysis focuses on the character of Thomas Sutpen and his “design,” his children, and also on Quentin and Miss Rosa. The decay of the family after Bon’s murder and its subsequent destruction is seen as a result of the enormous dependence on the Southern moral code with its clear-cut racial division. In case of Quentin and Miss Rosa the Sutpen tragedy gets a new dimension; i.e. of creating a link to the Compsons of *The Sound and the Fury*.

Chapter 4 discusses the members of the Compson family living in the shade of their glorious ancestors. They are torn between the values of the Old South, represented by Mr. Compson and Quentin, and the aggressive New Southern morals of Jason. The central theme of the novel – the decline of an aristocratic family – is being examined through the different reactions to Caddy’s affair with Dalton Ames, and as in the previous chapter, the main reason is attributed to the Southern moral code which is incompatible with the ideas of the New South.

The last chapter constitutes the conclusion which reiterates the main argument of the thesis; explicating it briefly on the conduct of Henry Sutpen, Quentin Compson and their parents who are seen as major figures in this Southern tragedy. It also offers suggestion in terms of further potential expansion of the thesis by proposing another works of William Faulkner, namely his third novel *Flags in the Dust (Sartoris)* and a short story “A Rose for Emily.”

Key words: American South, Antebellum myth, Southern aristocracy, Southern moral code, Southern gothic, identity, decline