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**Decline of Southern Aristocracy
in the Selected Novels of William Faulkner**

Úpadek jižanské aristokracie
ve vybraných románech Williama Faulknera

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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

Abstrakt

Hlavním cílem této práce je analyzovat úpadek takzvané jižanské aristokracie ve dvou vybraných románech Williama Faulknera, jmenovitě v románu *Absolone, Absolone!* (1936) a v románu *Hluk a vřava* (1929).¹ Jejich protagonisté jsou v prvním případě členy bohaté plantážnické rodiny, nebo, tak jako v druhém případě, potomky takovéto rodiny. Všichni společně obývají Faulknerův fiktivní Yoknapatawphský okres a jsou považovány svými spoluobčany za příslušníky jižanské aristokracie. Přesto přese všechno si neužívají pohodlný život v luxusu, který se jim často připisuje, nýbrž stojí tváří v tvář svému úpadku.

V obou románech je povaha úpadku jak materiální, tak duchovní, přičemž ten druhý je považován za počátek prvního. Na úpadek jižanské aristokracie je především nazíráno jako na konflikt dvou protichůdných souborů hodnot, jinými slovy jako na zápas mezi „starým“ a „novým“ Jihem. Z toho důvodu je za hlavní příčinu tohoto úpadku považována enormní závislost postav na minulosti, která jde ruku v ruce s představou mýtu předválečného Jihu.

První dvě kapitoly této práce představují teoretický úvod pro následnou analýzu románů, neboť se v nich rozebírají klíčové koncepty, které jsou spojovány s americkým Jihem, jmenovitě mýtus „starého“ Jihu, který je srovnán se skutečným historickým vývojem, a pojem jižanské aristokracie. Společně potom představují pokus o srovnání mytických rysů Jihu s jeho realitou. Závěr je takový, že přestože v mnohých případech od sebe mýtus a realita stály daleko, není možné se od tohoto mýtu zcela odpoutat, neboť jeho základy tkví ve specifickém jižanském pohledu na svět majícím kořeny v evropské středověké kultuře, který byl ještě navíc přizívován klasickým vzděláním převládajícím na jižanských vysokých školách a univerzitách.

Následující dvě kapitoly představují jádro celé práce, tj. aplikaci teoretických konceptů a poznání z úvodních kapitol při analýze aristokratických

¹ Doslovný překlad názvu zní „hluk a zuřivost“, jelikož ale román vyšel v českém překladu manželů Rudolfa a Luby Pellarových pod názvem *Hluk a vřava*, bude v českém textu nadále používán tento název.

postav z románů *Absolone, Absolone!* a *Hluk a vřava*. Záměrem je prozkoumat jejich reakce na různé (převážně nepříjemné) situace, kterým po celou dobu čelí, a ukázat, že jejich lpění na zdánlivě nevinném jižanském morálním kodexu (jinými slovy na samotném jižanském mýtu) je nejen nesprávné, nýbrž s sebou nese i fatální dopady, kterým by se byli jinak postavy lehce vyhnuli.

V kapitole 3 se analýza soustředí na postavu Thomase Sutpena a jeho „plán“, na jeho potomky a taktéž na Quentina a slečnu Rosu. Úpadek rodiny Sutpenových po smrti Charlese Bona a její následná zkáza jsou chápány jako dopady jižanského morálního kodexu s jeho jasným dělením lidí podle rasové příslušnosti. V případě Quentina a slečny Rosy dostává sutpenovská tragédie nový rozměr, tj. představuje odkaz k rodině Compsonových z románu *Hluk a vřava*.

Kapitola 4 se zabývá členy rodiny Compsonových, kteří žijí ve stínu svých slavných předků. Rodina je rozdělena mezi hodnotami „starého“ Jihu, které jsou zosobňovány panem Compsonem a Quentinem, a agresivními principy „nového“ Jihu, které ztělesňuje nejmladší syn Jason. Ústřední téma románu – úpadek aristokratické rodiny – je zkoumán z pohledu různých reakcí na Caddyin poměr s Daltonem Ameseem, a stejně tak jako v předchozí kapitole je hlavní příčina prisuzována jižanskému morálnímu kodexu, který je neslučitelný s představou „nového“ Jihu.

Poslední kapitola představuje závěr, který opakuje hlavní myšlenku celé práce a stručně ji znovu ozřejmuje na jednání Henryho Sutpena, Quentina Compsona a jejich rodičů, kteří jsou spatřováni jako hlavní aktéři celé této jižanské tragédie. Také nabízí možnost eventuálního rozšíření práce o další díla Williama Faulknera, a to o jeho třetí román *Prapory v prachu (Sartoris)* a povídku „Růže pro Emílii“.

klíčová slova: Americký Jih, mýtus předválečného Jihu, jižanská aristokracie, jižanský morální kodex, jižanská gotika, identita, úpadek

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0. Preliminaries

0.1. Note on the Used Terminology

Considering the proper term applicable for Southern *élite*; there has been a general consensus to call them *Southern aristocracy*. As C. Brooks says, in spite of his wish to use more modest terms, such as “squirearchy” or “the planter class,” the term “‘Southern aristocrat’ is probably now too well established to change” (Brooks, 1990b, p. 283). Therefore this term will be used throughout the thesis interchangeably with “the slaveholders,” “Southern gentility,” and “the planter class.”

As for the reference to the slaves, nowadays, the term “Negro” (or “nigger”), or even “black,” is considered to be highly offensive and racist (cf. the recent dispute over Mark Twains’ *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* which led to the publication of an edited edition, where the word “nigger” had been replaced by “slave”). Nonetheless, the politically correct term “African American” seems far too contemporary for the topic of this thesis; moreover, it does not even fit very well into the historical settings. Therefore, the usage of the terms “Negro” (“nigger”), and “black” in this thesis is without any racist or derogatory meaning.

0.2. Note on the Structure

The chapter concerning *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) was put on the first place, followed by the analysis of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), even though it would be chronologically correct to put them vice versa. There are two reasons for that. The first one is the matter of historical perspective – the story of Sutpen takes place in the antebellum, and shortly in the post-bellum South, whereas the plot in *The Sound and the Fury* occupies the first third of the 20th century. The other reason for the reversed order is of interpretative nature; the decline in *Absalom* is presented mostly as external – being familiar to other inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha County – and subsequently transforming into a kind of a local legend, whereas the decline of the Compsons is predominantly internal (i.e.

happening inside the family circle). The aim was to proceed from the outside to the inside; from the visible crisis of the Sutpens to the outwardly decent and respectable-looking family of the Compsons, yet inside deeply corrupted and in a state of decay.

0.3. Note on the Capitalization

Same as New England or the American West, the South is not only a geographical area but primarily a complex socio-economic unit possessing many characteristic traits which make it a distinctive part of the U.S. This is the reason for my capitalization of the word “Southern” whose usage specifically refers not only to geography but more prominently to the concepts associated with the American South, e.g. *Southern aristocracy* or *Southern moral code*. If somewhere in this thesis words “south” or “southern” occurs without being capitalized, it is only in case of quotations, where the minuscule form of the original source is preserved.

1. The South in (Un)historical Perspective

In the eyes of Southern people all Confederate veterans are heroes. It is you who preserve the traditions and memories of the old-time South—the sunny South, with its beautiful lands and its happy people; the South of chivalrous men and gentle women; the South that will go down in history as the land of plenty and the home of heroes. This beautiful, plentiful, happy South engendered a spirit of chivalry and gallantry for which its men were noted far and near.

– Ethel Moore, “Reunion of Tennesseans: *Address of Welcome by Miss Ethel Moore*”²

1.1. The Image of the South in our Minds

The extract from Ethel Moore’s *Address of Welcome* to the Confederate veterans, which appeared in a journal called “The Confederate Veteran” in 1898, constitutes a perfect example of the Southern myth.³ Since the Civil War until nowadays, the antebellum South has been perceived as a great land ruled by King Cotton (even though other crops were planted, such as tobacco in Virginia, indigo and rice in South Carolina), inhabited by genteel people living in manor houses with antique columns, which were surrounded by the fields on which the happy Negroes were singing while picking cotton.

The Master was a gallant and educated man – a cavalier, the Mistress used to be a little coquettish, but after she married the Master, she became docile wife, loving and caring mother, possessing the capabilities to manage the household with the help of her “house niggers.” There was no violence, no mulatto children hanging around the plantation, no isolation from the world beyond the fields – everything was simply marvelous. As far as work was concerned, there was not

² Quoted from Gaston, P. M. (1989). The New South Creed. In P. Gerster, & N. Cords (Eds.), *Myth and Southern History* (Vol. 2: The New South, pp. 17-32). Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press. pp. 21-22

³ The crucial thing when writing about any kinds of myths is to define the meaning of this term. There are various definitions by historians, sociologists, anthropologists and other scholars. In this thesis I have adopted a definition formed by Henry Nash Smith who defines myth as “an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into image” (Smith H. N., 1950, p. v), since all myths are primarily matters of emotions. Nonetheless, this does not mean that I neglect the importance of truth and falsehood concerning myth-making.

any. After having established a successful plantation, the Master and his family could enjoy the life of leisure. It is clear that this image cannot represent the actual truth due to its tremendous idealization and generalization – the two main features responsible for myth-making.

Such texts as the one of Ethel Moore's together with various novels and Hollywood movies taking place in the South before the Civil War are responsible for our distorted view of the antebellum Southern society.⁴ The pleasant image of the South has been presented predominantly since the Civil War, which ended tragically for the Confederacy. But even before the destructive Civil War there were voices which attempted to criticize the Southern way of life – the Abolitionists.

Because of the fact that most of them were logically of Northern origin, they pointed at the negative features of life in the states below Mason-Dixon Line. The “happy Negroes” were put into more realistic role of sufferers under oppression from the white *Old Marster*,

who became arrogant, haughty, imperious potentate, the very embodiment of sin [...who] maintained a seraglio in the slave quarters [...who] bred Negroes like cattle and sold them down the river to certain death in the sugar mills, separating families, if that served his purpose, while Southern women suffered in silence the guilty knowledge of their men's infidelity (Tindall, 1989, pp. 5-6).

All these horrible images presented to the sympathizing Northerners passed into fiction, which proved to be the most useful tool in the abolitionist cause. How else to explain that the publishing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*⁵ by Harriet Beecher Stowe was an instant success?

⁴ An excellent (and also a classic) example of such text is a novel *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, which was later turned into a high-budget epic motion picture, starring Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, and won several Academy Awards.

⁵ The book was published in 1852 and its whole title is *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*. The important fact is, however, that even she succumbed to the plantation myth. The principal villain of the novel is not a Southerner, but Simon Legree – a greedy Yankee from Vermont. According to William R. Taylor, “she [Harriet B. Stowe] adopts the familial pattern for portraying the institution of slavery just as she accepts many of the Southern arguments

Despite the fact that the myth and the reality were in many cases far from each other, it is very difficult to free oneself from the images, which are deeply rooted in our minds. As P. Gerster and N. Cords write in their “Introduction to the Second Edition” of *Myth and Southern History*, “many historical myths are factually false and psychologically true at one and the same time” (Gerster & Cords, 1989, p. xi); and considering the position of the South, “even though southern myths may well emanate from historical inaccuracies, they are deeply imbedded in the fundamental explanations the South continues to hold about the mandates of its traditions” (*Ibid.*).⁶

1.2. Historical Development of the Southern States

To distinguish the myth and Southern reality, it is necessary to know some facts concerning Southern history. The necessary thing to realize is that the colonization of the South was almost identical to the colonization of New England (Cash, 1989, p. 83).⁷ Although the primary reasons were different, at the beginning both societies comprised mostly of small farmers; the image of society composed of entrepreneurs on the one hand and aristocrats on the other appeared much later.

The first British settlement in what would later become the United States was founded on Roanoke Island (present day’s North Carolina) in 1587, where “117 settlers arrived, including women and children, under the leadership of

concerning the intellectual and cultural limitations of the slave” (Taylor, 1963, pp. 288-289). Similar to Harriet B. Stowe, the villains of Sarah Hale, another popular Northern writer and poetess, are also Northerners. Her Southerners are “marked for victim[s]” (*Ibid.*, p. 111) because “the debilitating South had bad air” (*Ibid.*). Later on, Taylor suggests that “Harriet Stowe’s sharpest barbs are not, finally, aimed at either Northerners or Southerners as such, but at the ruthless masculine world of business enterprise” (*Ibid.*, p. 289), which obviously a plantation constitutes.

⁶ Relatively recently, a new approach to *Southern Studies* appeared at the American universities. The discipline is called *New Southern Studies* and its aim is to critically re-evaluate the position which the South once held in the overall context of the United States. The representatives of New Southern Studies regard the South not as an exception deviating from the common American model, but as an integral part of the American (and also global) culture. They put a large emphasis on interdisciplinarity, thus combining History, Sociology, Literature, African American Studies and other disciplines in their scholarship (Smith & Richardson).

⁷⁷ Of course there were some “true” aristocrats (e.g. minor squires and their sons), but according to Cash, they constituted a minority as to the origins of the later Southern aristocracy (Cash, 1989, p. 83).

Governor John White” (Tindall & Shi, 1997, p. 24) only to find their death some years later (*Ibid.*). Next attempt of colonizing, and more successful one, was realized during the reign of the Stuarts, when in 1607 “about 100 men reached Chesapeake Bay after four storm-tossed weeks at sea” (*Ibid.*, p. 25) and in Virginia, named after Queen Elizabeth I, they established a settlement called Jamestown.⁸ After some initial struggles in the unknown land (climate, skirmishes with native population), the colonists managed to create a permanent English settlement on the American shore. And finally, in 1619 the Dutch ship dropped off 20 Africans; officially the first people of black color known to have reached the English colonies in America (*Ibid.*, p. 28), which promoted the start of the *peculiar institution* (i.e. slavery) in the American South.

After Virginia, other Southern colonies were established, such as Maryland, the Carolinas and Georgia. In the meantime, the North developed as well. In 1620 the Pilgrim Fathers arrived to Massachusetts Bay and founded Plymouth. However, their reason for leaving Europe was different from the founders of Jamestown. While the Puritans saw the New World as a suitable place to create their Christian commonwealth – a society based on strict religious principles, for their predecessors from Virginia America was a place to get rich; “they had come to find gold, not to establish a farm settlement” (*Ibid.*, p. 25). Thus the base for the later striking contrast between the Southern way of life and the Northern one was established.⁹

After the Revolutionary War the difference between the South and the North started to grow. Prior to the War, the South had been regarded as the very embodiment of Jeffersonian ideal of the independent yeoman farmer; after the War the aristocratic society based on inhuman system of slavery, thus

⁸ There are some literary sources from that period of American history, such as writings of Captain John Smith, which together with other reports constitute the beginnings of American literature.

⁹ These two parts of the English America were divided by the Dutch colonies, which were, however, acquired during the 17th century, and the English territory was thus formed into a continuous stripe of settlement along the coastal line. As the time went by, most of these “new colonies” become part of the North, with one possible exception of Delaware, which, in spite of sharing the same governor with Pennsylvania, practiced the slavery.

resembling almost oriental despotic societies, outshined the idyllic picture of yeoman farmers.

Before the establishment of slavery, the system of indentured servitude had been long practiced in the South. It used to be profitable, because most of the men pursuing their happiness in the New World were not able to pay for their voyage. Hence, as an exchange for their free voyage to America, they were turned into a kind of serfs for some time (usually four to seven years). After the years passed, they became free again and as every new colonist they received fifty acres of land to start their farms. Nonetheless, this system later proved to be inefficient, because as the population grew, the amount of accessible land was shrinking (natural barrier of the Appalachians), and the small farms were being purchased by wealthy farm owners and merged into large parcels of arable land, thus creating the first plantations.¹⁰ These plantations required many hands to work on, to which the amount of indentured servants was not sufficient. The solution for this difficulty was quickly found in nearby plantation societies emerging in Latin America and The West Indies; since that time the import of black slaves from the Slave Coast of the Gulf of Guinea had been deeply imbedded in the Southern worldview.¹¹ The enormous number of imported slaves during the 18th century, sometimes labeled as the greatest involuntary migration in the history of mankind, together with their high birth rate, had created a large racial minority. According to John R. Alden, “they [the Negroes] made up a full 30 per cent of the population of Maryland and North Carolina, 40 per cent of that of Virginia” (Alden, 1989, p. 73), and in South Carolina, they constituted a majority (*Ibid.*). This fact has been usually seen as main reason for the low

¹⁰ The main reason for that was, especially in Virginia and Maryland, the quick exhaustion of the soil from the tobacco. Therefore having more fields, where to grow corn, or to leave fallow, was considered an advantage. Also the unstable prices on the market were better compensated, when having a large-scale production (Tindall & Shi, 1997, p. 61).

¹¹ At the beginning of slavery in America the captured native Indians were used as slaves. This practice, however, ended very soon. Because of the physical constitution not suitable for all-day hard work on the field, the Indians were quickly exhausted, and proved inefficient. The other factor for their replacement with blacks was their excessive reaction to diseases, that the colonists brought with them from Europe, such as measles or smallpox, which proved to be fatal for the native population because of their lack of immunity.

immigration to the South; the blacks constituted, in a sense, a discouragement for the white European colonists.¹²

The other reasons for the low immigration were the ship lines. Most of the immigrants disembarked on the Northern coast in New York or Boston, where they either chose to stay, and thus increased urbanization and later on helped in creating industrial society, or set off further West, but almost never down to the South. It was exactly the low immigration which handicapped the Southern position within the whole United States. The stagnation of the Southern white population enabled that the development started to lag behind the North; low population density, inclining more toward agricultural than industrial production,¹³ allowed that the power and the most fertile parcels of land were in hands of a few wealthy families whose members had been advocating in the U.S. Congress the existence of the *peculiar institution* until the secession and creation of the Confederate States of America in 1861.

¹² See (Alden, 1989, p. 73) and (Tindall & Shi, 1997, p. 429), who state that “the prospect of competing with slave labor was unattractive to immigrants.”

¹³ The image of the rural, agrarian South and the urban, industrial North has prevailed despite the industrialization of the South at the turn of the 19th and 20th century; cf. the Agrarian movement of the 1920s and 1930s whose members contributed to the revival of Southern literature (*Southern Renaissance*); their ideas are manifested in a collection of essays called *I Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. Their “stand” is another evidence of the Southern myth’s capacity to allure, even though they are more interested in the plain folk and not in the aristocracy.

2. Southern Aristocracy

“Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?”

– Mr. Compson to his son Quentin; *Absalom, Absalom!*

“He wasn’t a gentleman. He wasn’t even a gentleman.”

– Miss Rosa’s reproof to Thomas Sutpen; *Absalom, Absalom!*

2.1. A “Minor” Component of the Antebellum Society

The basic view of the Southern society before the Civil War assumes its bipolarity; the aristocracy on the one hand and the slaves on the other. Other class mentioned in fiction or depicted in motion pictures is the so-called *White Trash* (i.e. the poor whites), because they easily form a contrast to the educated and chivalric aristocracy. Traditionally, they have been considered the lowest class, occupying the social position even below the slaves, who themselves often considered superior to the “po’ buckra”, as they sometimes called them (Tindall, 1989, p. 5). Yet the majority of white population in the South was formed neither by the aristocracy, nor by the White Trash, but by small yeoman farmers, which were, because of their relative poverty, often mistaken for the White Trash by visitors from the North and overseas.¹⁴ And even if they had not been so poor, and had been recognized by other classes, unless they would have managed to become wealthy and successful planters, thus assuming the position of aristocrats, they “seemed to be neither romantic nor outrageous enough to fit in[to the myth]” (*Ibid.*). Therefore we must bear in mind that Southern

¹⁴ Sometimes it was really difficult to distinguish the White Trash from the poor yeoman farmers. Take, for example, the case of Thomas Sutpen. He was born in the Appalachians in today’s West Virginia into the family of Scotch-Irish descent. These people were usually conscious of their own freedom and proud of their independent existence. Yet after the death of Sutpen’s mother, the family moves down to Tidewater, where the father begins to work for the local planter, and thus becoming a sort of a vassal; without their own land, the family fully depends on the prosperity of somebody else’s plantation. Together with their subordinate position and their degraded morals (father an abusive drunkard, daughter gives birth to a child out of wedlock), they represent the embodiment of the notion of the White Trash.

gentleman and Southern lady are not the majority inhabitants of the South, but that they rather represent the ideal, toward which Southern yeoman farmers were attracted and which some of them managed to reach.

2.2. Attitude Towards Work, Leisure & Chivalry

As explained in “The Historical Development of Southern States,” the early colonists in Virginia and later on in other parts of the South, as one historian wrote, “were not generally Cavaliers in their origin but also that they did not spring up to be aristocrats in a day” (Cash, 1989, p. 83). Yet in the first half of the 19th century there is a group of planters, who think of themselves as gentlemen and of their wives as ladies. How come that from the ordinary Southern farmers they managed to become Southern aristocrats?

Firstly, it is extremely important to realize that the aristocrats were in fact nothing more than “ordinary” businessmen, and that a plantation was nothing more than an enterprise. The prices of crops on the British market were not stable, therefore having a plantation belonged to the riskier kinds of business. In order to profit, the Master had to actively participate in maintaining the plantation, which often resulted in traveling to the few Southern cities (Charleston, New Orleans) for negotiating on various issues, such as prices, business contracts, etc. The goal was the same as in the North – to be a Master of a successful and profitable enterprise, but the working ethic was different. For Yankees, labor was a means to show their religious (Puritan) stance, which was deeply connected with the idea of *community*,¹⁵ therefore for them labor had a social value; for Southerners, on the other hand, “it produced idleness with plenty and was intermittent according to seasonal necessities” (Woodward, 1989, p. 43). The motive for labor “was individual aggrandizement [...] not social purpose or community aims. They established plantations, not cities, and cultivated staples,

¹⁵ The Puritans “thought of themselves as small societies before they established communities” (Bertelson, 1967, pp.40-41); quoted from Woodward, C. V. (1989). *Southern Ethic in a Puritan World*. In P. Gerster, & N. Cords (Eds.), *Myth and Southern History* (2nd ed., Vol. 1: The Old South, pp. 41-66). Urbana & Chicago: Illinois University Press. p. 43.

not trade. The result was dispersion, fragmentation, and chaotic self-aggrandizement” (*Ibid.*).

In the South, the characteristic far more appreciated than diligence was leisure. As opposed to Puritan New England (and the Middle states), the members of the aristocracy regarded work almost as many Catholics would – a necessary evil which distracts people from the maximum devotion to God or, as in Southern case, from the maximum devotion to life of leisure. This leisure was the factor which attracted many of the potential aristocrats-to-be; however, as they found very quickly, once having a plantation, it requires much work to make it profitable.¹⁶ Therefore the life of leisure was, in fact, rather characteristic of the offspring (Southern Beaux & Belles) and sometimes also of spouses than of the Master himself.

This ideal of *life of leisure*, as well as Southern moral code (honor, pride, hospitality),¹⁷ has its roots in England. The planters saw themselves as the ancestors of English gentry; their mission being the implementation of chivalry, gallantry and *noblesse oblige* into the American environment. The literature, be it medieval or of contemporary romantic writers, such as Sir Walter Scott,¹⁸ had a large influence on the formation of this Southern moral code. Chivalry, originally medieval concept, became the very basis of the Southern manners. The Southern aristocrats saw themselves as landlords dominating their particular lands with the help of their overseers; while their black slaves represented serfs working for the benefit of their “Lord.” In other parts of the World, Romanticism was only a desperate and *unfulfilled* longing for the idealized past,¹⁹ quickly swept off by the

¹⁶ See the example of Thomas Sutpen in Chapter 3.

¹⁷ See Fox-Genovese, E., & Genovese, E. D. (2005). *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. p. 332: “To idealistic Southerners, aristocratic virtues included gallantry, contempt for money-grubbing (but not for money), classical education, polished manners, and a high sense of personal and family honor – virtues frequently evoked in publications, on the stump, and in speeches at public celebrations and college commencements.”

¹⁸ Quentin Compson makes an allusion to his poem “Marmion” in *The Sound and the Fury*.

¹⁹ This was the case of almost every European national literature, yet – as usual – there is an exception; namely of Greece. Because of her continuity during the Middle Ages as the Byzantine Empire until the fall of Constantinople in 1453, there was no “true Middle Ages” of knights and ladies. The imitation of Western Romantic literature was seen as something foreign and unwanted. Therefore the turn toward Greek folklore (or *laografia*) is associated with Realism, and not Romanticism as elsewhere in Europe.

progress of the Industrial Revolution, but in the South because of its agrarian character and society, which was at the beginning of the 19th century still relatively young and in a state of flux, the past could be revived. Exactly this image of the South gave birth to the myth and its stereotypical concepts of Southern Gentlemen & Southern Ladies – “once it was *different* down there” (Taylor, 1963, p. 320).

2.3. Southern Gentlemen & Southern Ladies

A typical representative of Southern gentleman or Southern lady must have possessed the traits prescribed in the Southern moral code touched upon in the previous subchapter which dealt mostly with the general position of Southern aristocrats within the society. But to have a complete understanding of them it is necessary to look at the Southern aristocracy from different and more subtle angle, i.e. to realize the tremendous importance of family and education in forming the future generations of Southern cavaliers.

The traditional Southern family was highly paternalistic. The father, as the Master of the plantation, was the utmost authority not only to his subordinates (overseers, slaves) but also to the family members. His primary role was not supposed to be a shrewd businessman (this was considered a Yankee attitude), but rather the amiable neighbor who engages in local politics and takes part in various activities, such as deer hunting.²⁰ His outdoor activities, however, did not prevent him from exercising his domestic authority. For instance, in the eyes of young boys, the father and other male ancestors were mighty role models. As Wyatt-Brown writes, very often sons had to accept “the formidable challenge of living up to almost mythological heroes from the family past” (Wyatt-Brown, 2007, p. 118).²¹ As far as girls are concerned, the paternal authority was similar

²⁰ This inability to be an “amiable neighbor” is among the reasons for Thomas Sutpen’s failure. Despite the fact that he invited male Yoknapatawphans to Sutpen’s Hundred for hunting and drinking, he was feared, not liked.

²¹ Another issue, which Southern sons had to face, was the often problematic generational transition. As in other societies, the fathers had to deal with the matter of transferring their property to their sons, which sometimes transformed into “near chaos by generational disputes” (Wyatt-Brown, 2007, p. 118).

with a difference concerning their “education,” which was usually managed by mothers.

The future Cavaliers and Belles were raised almost identically until the age of four, when the child could communicate, and thus express his/her own opinion. On that occasion, known as “clothing” the boys were given their first breeches – “an early sight of manhood” (Wyatt-Brown, 2007, p. 144). Their early childhood was different from their counterparts in the Puritan Northeast.²² As opposed to strict obedience and calmness, they were encouraged by their parents and their mammies to express their vigor, often in outdoor activities and by disrespecting orders and making a mess. Their obstinacy was regarded as a manifestation of a strong will, which will be essential characteristic of an independent man in advancing his interests, and also a sign of his virility. After the “clothing” stage, the main task was to suppress these fiery reactions and to turn them into more subtle forms – game hunting, horseback riding, or sometimes even duels (the noble image of two men fighting with each other not as savages, but as gentlemen for the honor of their beloved). Then followed the education (rather in its classical notion – physics, metaphysics, Latin & Greek etc.; see footnote 17), the tour around Europe, and finally, if the young man’s father was interested in the future profit of his plantation, the initiation into business matters. During whole childhood the boys were in close contact with the slave children of the same age and often engaged with them in children’s plays.²³ This, however, did not prevent them from realizing that their social status is above the black children.

As written in the previous paragraph, girls were raised much the same way as boys. They too enjoyed the opportunity to show their free will in screaming, breaking toys, and they also participated in outdoor activities; yet after the boys were given their first breeches, their mutual upbringing was

²² “Whereas fathers in Northern and evangelical households tended toward distance and reserve, and mothers worried lest they allow maternal indulgence to jeopardize God’s favor upon the small one, Southern parents were almost too devoted to their children” (Wyatt-Brown, 2007, p. 131).

²³ See *The Sound and the Fury*, where the Compson children are in close contact with the children of their black servants (e.g. Dammudy’s funeral); or *Absalom, Absalom!*, where Henry and Judith almost certainly know that the mulatto Clytie is their half-sister, and she herself has, in a sense, a distinct status in the family, even though lower than that of the white members.

divided into two separate ways. As in any traditional Western society, the role of women was to be a good and obedient wife to her husband, which was manifested in giving births to their (male) successors. Nonetheless, the possession of “women skills,” such as mending, sewing, playing the piano, and household managing, did not mean that from now on they would sit on verandahs and read; quite the opposite – “‘many of the young ladies could ride as well as their brothers, and not a few of them could handle firearms with great accuracy and skill.’ Fathers took their girls fishing. Sometimes they went on hunting trips, too” (Wyatt-Brown, 2007, p. 232). But once they married and had children, these activities were soon put to an end – from the carefree Belles they now became rather settled and respectable Ladies.²⁴

Both parents highly contributed to their children’s *Weltanschauung* by inculcating them with the Southern moral code. The role of the father in forming (especially) younger male personality was crucial. It was the father, through whom the son absorbed the important notion of *honor* and other gentlemanly values with regard to family, women, etc. In view of this fact, the relationship of Mr. Compson and his son, Quentin, is nothing more than extremely exaggerated version of this kind of fatherly influence.²⁵ The young man is taught to preserve these values and to make every possible attempt to defend them.

As to mothers, there was an almost mythical cult of Southern motherhood.²⁶ In fact, the only respectable role of a woman was to be a “mother of great men” (Fox-Genovese & Genovese, 2005, p. 303), and thus the women’s task

²⁴ Despite the often lonely life on the plantation, far from other neighbors, women could engage in the management of the property; the Master often needed to leave the plantation for some time due to his business activities in town (goods transfer, bargaining about the prices etc.), thus in fact leaving the wife in charge of the whole plantation. Other, and more visible, option for women to become the “Master” of the plantation was the death of her husband. Often with the help of other male family member (brother, son), the society tolerated her as the sole owner of the business. Nonetheless, in both of these options the profit of the business was the thing that matter the most, not the emancipation of women.

²⁵ For more elaborate discussion see Chapter 4.

²⁶ Southern ladies were, of course, not only mothers, but also spinsters. The latter possibility was seen, as in any other traditional society, as a disadvantage, since women are meant to be mothers. In fact, there was no other alternative to marriage; “spinsters, unless milliners or dressmakers, seldom started a firm on their own. Unlike their Northern sisters of comparable education, Southern women could not even teach school without feelings of guilt and self-consciousness” (Wyatt-Brown, 2007, p. 229); let alone participate in some political activity.

was to get as close as possible to Cornelia – a mother of the Roman Gracchi Brothers,²⁷ and also a Southern role model concerning motherhood. This resulted in either too much worried mothers, or in the exact opposite; especially in the wealthy families, where the Mistress had to command an “army of domestic slaves,” she simply did not have much time to raise the children on her own. Therefore most of the plantation children were raised by their mammies – black nannies occupying the highest position among the domestic slaves (the right hand of the Mistress) and also having a special status in the planter’s own family.²⁸ If there was no such mammy, the elder siblings had to take care of the younger ones, resulting in a serious confusion of roles. This is the case of the Compson family, where Caddy serves as a mother to Benjy, because the neurotic Mrs. Compson is not able to fulfill her role.²⁹

As seen in this chapter, the phenomenon of Southern aristocracy is a complex matter; hence this chapter represents only a concise attempt to summarize its social, psychological and gender roles and characteristics. Let us move from the “(un)historical perspective” of the first two chapters toward Southern “literary perspective,” which constitutes the core of the thesis – the analysis of aristocratic characters of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*.

²⁷ Cornelia, “... staunch and faithful [...], who as a widow refused an offer of marriage from King Ptolemy and chose to raise her children by herself” (Fox-Genovese & Genovese, 2005, p. 303), is reported to reply when asked about her jewels that “her jewels were her sons (*Haec ornamenta mea sunt*)” (Fox-Genovese & Genovese, 2005, p. 302).

²⁸ For a typical notion of the Southern “black mammy”, see Parkhurst, J. W. (1938). *The Role of the Black Mammy in the Plantation Household*. Retrieved June 4th, 2012, from JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2714687>.

²⁹ For further discussion see Chapter 4.

3. *Absalom, Absalom!*, or the Doomed Sutpens

“So it took Charles Bon and his mother to get rid of old Tom, and Charles Bon and the octoroon to get rid of Judith, and Charles Bon and Clytie to get rid of Henry, and Charles Bon’s mother and Charles Bon’s grandmother got rid of Charles Bon. So it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen, dont it?”

– Shreve’s conclusion of the Sutpen saga, *Absalom, Absalom!*

According to many critics, *Absalom, Absalom!* is Faulkner’s best novel and his masterpiece (Brooks, 1990a, p. 295). But it is also a novel which has been constantly suffering from misreading and false conjectures from readers since its very publishing in 1936.³⁰ There is no doubt that structurally it is the most difficult of Faulkner’s novels and every reader must, in a sense, struggle with its form through the various strata to get into the core of the story.³¹ Yet, the whole plot is rather a simple one; the strength of the novel lies elsewhere.

Estella Schoenberg in her analysis of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* points out that “the Sutpen material in *Absalom, Absalom!* is “immaterial” and also “inadequate for even short fictional units, with the exception of the story of Sutpen’s death, and possibly the architect hunt with its exposition of the origin of Sutpen’s design” (Schoenberg, 1977, p. 135).³² Therefore, in order to make Sutpen story the center of his novel, Faulkner had taken advantage of utilizing contemporary modernist techniques (the most prominent being stream of consciousness in Quentin’s chapters), to enhance the importance of the form. It is the form which we must penetrate to get to the core

³⁰ Even among scholars there are more or less obvious mistakes concerning this novel; cf. Lind, I. D. (1963). The Design and Meaning of *Absalom, Absalom!* In F. J. Hoffman, & O. W. Vickery (Eds.). *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism* (pp. 278-304). New York and Burlingame: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., who writes that it was Quentin’s grandfather who told Quentin about Bon’s Negro blood.

³¹ For instance, Cleanth Brooks finds six of them (from A to F) in the novel (Brooks, 1990b). In addition, Brooks created a table of various conjectures about Thomas Sutpen and his life; see Brooks, C. (1990a). *William Faulkner: the Yoknapatawpha County*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. (pp. 429-436.)

³² The story of Thomas Sutpen and his death was dealt with in short stories as well (see “Evangeline” and “Wash”).

of the novel – the story itself. Exactly because of this story we endure the very often exhausting repetition and the endless hypothesizing about the nature of the repudiation and fratricide, and about the doom of Sutpen’s clan.

For the endless repetition and the maybe-not-so-obvious lack of *plausible* facts, the story becomes a legend and it is hard to say what had really happened and what is just the construct or conjecture of the narrators. The only one of them who had known Thomas Sutpen personally is Miss Rosa, and yet she seems to be the most unreliable just for the reason that he had once figured in her life. As to why Henry repudiated his family and later killed Charles Bon at gates of Sutpen’s Hundred she does not know. Even Mr. Compson does not know the real reason, although he knows about the octoroon mistress (which Miss Rosa did not know about). Nonetheless, he cannot force himself to believe that the murder was because of her and her child: “It’s just incredible, it just does not explain” (p. 80). But for the time being it is the most credible explanation for him. Not until the last chapters does he find that the reason for killing Bon is a drop of Negro blood in his veins, which possessed for Henry greater significance than the other possibility; i.e. the incest, which Bon would commit by marrying Judith – their sister. Whether Bon really was a son of Thomas Sutpen and partly a Negro is just a question which we will probably never be sure about. What might seem as credible facts are rather hypotheses of the narrators, originating especially in Quentin and Shreve’s youth and romantic idealism.

Despite the frail credibility on which the whole *Sutpen saga* is constructed (especially concerning the information about Charles Bon), my analysis will be based precisely upon it. Donald M. Kartiganer writes in his essay on *Absalom, Absalom!* that “according to Hyatt H. Waggoner, [the narration of Quentin and Shreve] somehow attains ‘plausibility’ and ‘meaning’ although lacking ‘solid proof’ ” (Kartiganer, 1965, p. 300). The assumption that Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon were brothers and the latter also partly black seems a reasonable and plausible explanation of why the one must have murdered the other. By negating this “theory” we will find ourselves in a dead end, “left with only the code of Sutpen” (*Ibid.*) and thus negating the story of Sutpen’s children which, in

my opinion, constitutes a very important part of the novel, for it is through Sutpen's children that the tragedy descends upon his "design" and his dynasty.

3.1. Thomas Sutpen: Life, Personality & His "Design"

Before discussing the character of Thomas Sutpen there is a need to deal with the question whether he can be considered as an example of the "typical Southern aristocrat." There are contradictory views to this question among Faulknerian scholars. For instance, Cleanth Brooks is opposing the fact, creating a parallel between Sutpen's design and the notion of the *American dream*, stating that "[Sutpen's] doctrinaire fixation of this sort has a very wide general reference," and that "in fact, it is a characteristically 'American' aberration" (Brooks, 1990b, p. 299). Later on he compares his "innocence" with that of Jay Gatsby's and Christopher Newman's to support his argument. On the other hand, many scholars chose to see the character of Thomas Sutpen as the very embodiment of the Southern myth or, to put it in more poetic words, as "a mirror image of the South" (Vickery, 1995, p. 93). As written in "Historical Development of Southern States," most of the future Southern aristocrats were at the beginning just yeoman farmers and frontiersmen,³³ including the Sartorises and the Compsons; as the years had passed, they managed to get close to the stereotypical image of Southern aristocracy's lifestyle, i.e. by the large amount of time spent in leisure activities, such as lying "in a barrel stave hammock between two trees, with his shoes off" (p. 184).

If we choose to look at Sutpen as a representative of universal American ideas, we will find, as C. Brooks have found, many traits which correspond more to the Yankee than to the Southern planter, namely Sutpen's puritan ethic of labor, dependence on reason, his devotion to his "design" (realized by nothing more than a cold calculation), etc.³⁴ Sutpen is both American and Southern; for

³³ M. Backman aptly notes that the only thing to do is to "scratch the veneer of the aristocrat of the Deep South and you would find a frontiersman" (Backman, 1965, p. 598).

³⁴ For a view of Sutpen as a representative of universal American ideas, see Brooks, C. (1990b). *William Faulkner: toward Yoknapatawpha and beyond*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. (pp. 283-300).

the purpose of this thesis I have chosen to see him more as a representative of the latter. Among my reasons is that he chose to realize his dream in the Yoknapatawpha County, a community which is distinctly Southern; moreover, he accepted the idea of a Southern plantation society by joining the rows of the other planters and slaveholders, and, at last, it was exactly the Southern myth, or its strong assertion of racial purity, which destroyed not only Sutpen's visions but also his family.

Thomas Sutpen, although we might say that he is the protagonist of the novel, is rather a mysterious character. Same as Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, he is never depicted directly, but his actions are always reported to us. Everything we know about him is either from the memories of Miss Rosa or from the narration of other characters (Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve). There are very few lines of his actual "direct speech" (spoken through the narrators, of course); the lack of his speech and other accurate information helps to increase the mysterious aura around him, and thus makes him more blurred and obscure for us as readers. E. Schoenberg makes a very good point when saying that "he [Sutpen] is presented from the first pages of the novel as a shadow, a shade" (Schoenberg, 1977, p. 75).

He is seen as ruthless, unscrupulous, and as a manipulator of his own family so that his "design" could be fully achieved. For most of the time, this "horrible" image of his is being imposed upon us especially by Miss Rosa. It seems a strange fact that the only one who knew him and came into contact with him is the least to be trusted, but it may not be so strange after one gets to know about Sutpen's proposal, or rather "a proposition" (Brooks, 1983, p. 203) to Miss Rosa that we realize the real reason for her sometimes almost hysterical narration.

In the eyes of General Compson, Sutpen possessed the "innocence," not the "brutishness" or "ruthlessness" with which he "begot his two children—the son who widowed the daughter who had not yet been a bride—and so accomplished his allotted curse to its violent (Miss Coldfield at least would have said) end" (p. 7). Born in the Western Virginia mountains into a family of yeomen where people "lived in log cabins boiled with children" (p. 179), "the only colored people were

Indians” (*Ibid.*) and “the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say ‘This is mine’ was crazy” (*Ibid.*), he lived there until the death of his mother, when together with his father and his siblings went down to the Tidewater region of Virginia. There he realized that the world can be different, that there exist rich planters, possessing black slaves who work for them “while the white men sat fine horses and watched them [the slaves]” (p. 182) but more importantly that there is a “difference between white men and white men” (p. 183).

After having been rejected by the “monkey nigger” at the front door and ordered to come to the back door, he suddenly realized his “innocence”; i.e. his *naïveté* with which he will later attempt to bring his “design” to life (Brooks, 1990b, p. 299), and decided – as many critics have said – that the best possibility to beat them is to join them. After this painful “initiation into symbolism and the realization that he lacks the status to command power over language and symbols” (Cullick, 1996, p. 51), his goal is to accomplish his “design”; i.e. “money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife” (p. 212).

The main problem of Thomas Sutpen is his attitude toward money, values prescribed by the Southern moral code and, at last but not least, toward people.³⁵ Before he set out for Haiti, where he successfully suppressed a slave rebellion and married Eulalia Bon, he told General Compson that he used to go to school. However, his education constitutes for him only the first step toward his “design.” After he learns what he needs to learn about the West Indies, he simply leaves for the Caribbean. His family ties are not so strong, either. He does not live a happy family life of leisure; instead, he is often found overseeing his plantation, discussing with Wash Jones about what needs to be done. His only “leisure” consists in the fights with his “wild niggers.” Cleanth Brooks is right, when he writes that as far as “we are vouchsafed glimpses of his family life, his relations

³⁵ See Cullick, J. S. (1996, March 1). “I had a Design”: Sutpen as Narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!* *Southern Literary Journal*, pp. 48-58. and Brooks, C. (1990b). *William Faulkner: toward Yoknapatawpha and beyond*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, pp. 283-300. Cullick writes that “he [Sutpen] utilizes others as his resources” (Cullick, 1996, p. 50).

are coldly formal” with the only possible exception of Judith (Brooks, 1990a, p. 292). Ellen Coldfield Sutpen – that “butterfly” – is not very active and strong woman, rather the opposite; she is enjoying her role as a wife of a rich planter, most of the time ignoring the sinister and strange facts and gossips concerning her husband. To Sutpen, she is the instrument for gaining *respectability* in the eyes of Jefferson community. His son Henry is most of the time very similar to his mother but with the appearance of Charles Bon, his “Sutpen genes” start to come to the surface. Judith is, on the other hand, very similar to her father. While she watches with serene face Sutpen’s fighting his black slaves, Henry vomits and is disgusted. To none of them Sutpen shows any kind of love, they are just pieces which when assembled together, create his “design.”³⁶

As to Sutpen’s values and code of honor, he accepts them as a part of his “design.” From Mr. Nobody he becomes a respectable citizen of Jefferson and the whole Yoknapatawpha County. Much later on he is promoted to Colonel, which constitutes his ‘shift in class outlook’ (Martin, 2008, p. 409)” and furthermore serves as a means of recognizing not only his influence in the society of the Yoknapatawpha county but (more probably) his wealth. However, when he first arrived to Jefferson, Mississippi, with his group of “wild niggers,” the attitude of the townspeople toward him was rather the opposite.

The objection toward Thomas Sutpen was aptly summed into one sentence by Miss Rosa. Her personal objection (and, in a sense, the objection of the biased Yoknapatawphans, especially those of female sex) was that “he wasn’t even a gentleman” (p. 9). As she tells us further:

He came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before, knew for certain was his own anymore than the horse was his own or even the pistols, seeking some place *to hide himself*,³⁷ and Yoknapatawpha County supplied him with it. (*Ibid.*)

³⁶ There might be one exception to that, namely the scene of the reunion of the father and the son in the tent at the end of the Civil War which will be discussed later.

³⁷ Highlighted by myself

From her utterance it seems that Sutpen was guilty even before he appeared in town – he had to “hide himself.” But what was his crime then? His turning up in the place where the other people, such as the Compsons or the Sartorises, turned up a generation before? Or was it his physical appearance which showed that he was sick, but “not like a man who had been *peacefully*³⁸ ill in bed” (p. 24), but more like a man “who had been through some solitary furnace experience” (*Ibid.*), with his “short reddish beard which resembled a disguise” (*Ibid.*) and in whose “ruthless and reposed” (*Ibid.*) face which “had the appearance of pottery” (*Ibid.*) dwelled that *sinister something*, which was hard to name? Again, if we think about his description, either by Miss Rosa or Mr. Compson, it is highly subjective and only manifests in itself the prejudices of the community into which Thomas Sutpen arrived one Sunday morning in 1833.³⁹

Northern Mississippi was at that time nothing more than the famous American *Frontier*. Sons of established Virginia or Carolina planters were setting off to gain themselves the land and the wealth their ancestors had gotten some generations before in the coastal area of the South. The border among the classes was penetrable, people could (and many of them did) be born in a log cabin and die in canopy bed in their luxurious plantation houses surrounded by their family and their black servants. Take, for example, the president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davies, who was born in one of the mentioned log cabins in Kentucky, yet he was considered to be a Southern aristocrat (Brooks, 1990b, p. 283). But the problem with Thomas Sutpen is that he does not show a hint of wish to belong to the community. As Louis D. Rubin, Jr. has aptly put it, “Thomas Sutpen lives *in*, but is not *of*, the community of Yoknapatawpha” (Rubin, 1977, p. 175). He simply does not care to meet their requirements; they simply have to endure him, because after he married Ellen Coldfield and gained respectability, and acquired wealth from Sutpen’s Hundred, he cannot be ignored anymore. By the changing community attitude toward Sutpen, the hypocrisy of the Yoknapatawphans is clearly presented, since, as we have seen, there are no *objective reasons* for them to exclude him from their community save their false morals and preconceptions.

³⁸ Highlighted by myself

³⁹ See *Chronology* at the end of the novel.

Mr. Compson tells us that “he was not liked (which he evidently did not want anyway) but feared, which seemed to amuse, if not actually please, him” (p. 57).

3.2. Charles Bon, or the Threat to Sutpen’s “Design”

The twist in the novel comes when Henry, who in the meantime went to the newly founded University of Mississippi, returns to Sutpen’s Hundred for Christmas and brings together with him his new friend Charles Bon.⁴⁰ All of a sudden,

... the destiny of Sutpen’s family which for twenty years now had been a lake welling from quiet springs into a quiet valley and spreading, rising almost imperceptibly and in which the four members of it floated in sunny suspension, felt the first subterranean movement toward the outlet, the gorge which would be the land’s catastrophe too, and the four peaceful swimmers turning suddenly to face one another, not yet with alarm or distrust but just alert, feeling the dart set, none of them yet at that point where man looks about at his companions in disaster and thinks *When will I stop trying to save them and save only myself?* and not even aware that that point was approaching (p. 58).⁴¹

The appearance of Charles Bon, the lost and mysterious son of Thomas Sutpen and his repudiated wife Eulalia Bon, was a lightning bolt from a clear sky. Even though we are not aware of any relation whatsoever between Sutpen and Charles in the beginning, once looking back it definitely constitutes a turning point of the whole story. By his appearance at the threshold of Sutpen’s Hundred the whole tragedy begins.⁴²

⁴⁰ As to the sole character of Charles Bon, we must bear in mind that he “is a product of a purely imaginative act” (Kartiganer, 1965, p. 300), and that the only real fact is that he once existed and played some part in Sutpen story (e.g. he had written a letter to Judith). As to the nature of his actions, we must trust Quentin and Shreve; i.e. “we must accept the truth of imaginative act” (*Ibid.*, p. 301). From that premise he will be dealt with.

⁴¹ Italics by Faulkner

⁴² There is a striking similarity between Charles Bon and his father Thomas Sutpen in terms of their appearance in Yoknapatawpha County; cf. “He [Bon] came into that isolated puritan country household almost like Sutpen himself came into Jefferson: apparently complete, without background or past or childhood ...” (p. 74).

When Henry meets him for the first time, he is completely charmed. “Little too old to be still in college ... three hundred miles from that worldly and even foreign city which was his home” (p. 58), Bon managed to “seduce him as surely as he seduced Judith” (p. 76). In his “frenchified cloak” (*Ibid.*) he represents a striking contrast with Henry’s provincialism and his “countrified clothes” (p. 77). Soon after the two of them meet, Henry starts to imitate Bon’s speech and his manners in clothing – for him he is *like a brother* which he “does not have.”

After the first Christmas visit at Sutpens, Bon is invited to spend a couple of days there in summer. Thomas Sutpen is not there; he left for New Orleans, though no one save Clytie or General Compson knows about his business there (p. 55). It is after this summer visit, that Ellen starts spreading the news about Judith and Bon’s betrothal, though the whole matter is at least very strange because “there was no time, no interval, no niche in the crowded days when he could have courted Judith” (p. 77). It is apparent that the engagement was the initiative of Ellen Sutpen, her desire, because as Miss Rosa says, “We deserve him” (p. 60). Again it is Ellen who is driving around the town and making preparations for the wedding. For her (and especially for her sister, Miss Rosa) Bon is the means of salvation and regaining the position of a once respected family, exactly because of his gallantry, sophistication and the air of foreignness. Nonetheless, the wedding is postponed during Christmas by Sutpen, who had in the meantime returned from Louisiana.

As to what was the real cause of Sutpen’s preventing the marriage between Judith and Bon, we will probably never be sure. For Miss Rosa, it was Sutpen’s demonic nature, for Mr. Compson the existence of the octoroon mistress and the child, and finally for Quentin and Shreve the (non-)recognition of a once repudiated son of mixed blood. At least, one event actually took place. After Sutpen summoned Henry to the library and told him about the octoroon, or more probably that Charles Bon is Henry’s older brother, and therefore he cannot marry Judith, their sister, Henry and Bon left that same night in a rush Sutpen’s Hundred for New Orleans.

The role of Charles Bon in the “fall of the House of Sutpen” is crucial. He is the “mistake” in terms of Sutpen’s values and morals accepted from the Southern myth. He is the doom of Sutpen’s “design,” more precisely, his mixed blood. Exactly because of his blood, he cannot be the heir, and despite the fact that it could be easily disguised from others, it would never be in accordance with Sutpen’s or Southern principles, respectively. As Henry believes at first, Bon cannot marry Judith because of the incest. Despite the fact that Henry is at last reconciled with this idea (e.g. his constant referring to the Duke of Lorraine), he secretly hopes that “maybe the war will settle it and we wont need to!” (p. 273), which is the reason for his “probation.” However, the war did not “settle it” and as Bon wrote in the letter to Judith, “I now believe that you and I are, strangely enough, included among those who are doomed to live” (p. 105).

To prevent the marriage, because of miscegenation – “that word, more terrible even than incest” (Vickery, 1995, p. 92) – Sutpen decides to use his “last trump”; i.e. to tell Henry about Bon’s Negro blood. He knows that Henry, who grew up in accordance with the Southern values Sutpen had chosen to integrate into his “design,” might be able to overcome the incest but will definitely not be able to do the same in case of miscegenation. In spite of his former repudiation of his birthright, and together with it, of his own family, he has been won back to Sutpen’s scheme.

The scene depicting the events discussed above, no matter how cruel and planned by Sutpen for some time it may seem, bears a trace of intimacy and love. Henry has been summoned by now Colonel Sutpen into his tent in order to prevent the marriage of his brother and sister. At first he is oblivious, standing and saluting there mechanically just like a machine, and he does not recognize his father until

they embrace and kiss before Henry is aware that he has moved, was going to move, moved by what of close blood which in the reflex instant arrogates and reconciles even though it does not yet (perhaps never will) forgive, who stands now while his father holds his face between both hands, looking at it.

—Henry, *Sutpen says*, —*My son* (p. 282).⁴³

To those who object that Sutpen has no “human face” this scene proves the opposite. Even though we must bear in mind that it is highly influenced by Quentin and Shreve’s youth and their vivid and romantic imagination, it shows the melodramatic side of Sutpen’s “design.” For the first time Sutpen is presented as “the baffled, limited and compulsive mortal that he is” (Lind, 1963, p. 289). For despite the rational calculation of how to bring the “design” into success, the “design” itself is built on very romantic ideas – moreover the whole Southern myth has its romantic roots.⁴⁴ The stress on racial purity has no logic from our contemporary point of view. But once in the South it had, and again, the insurmountable dependence on the past is presented. The tradition had been that whites are the free ones and blacks are the slaves, and thus the heir of Sutpen’s Hundred simply cannot be even partly black. It is nothing more than that Sutpen – even though formally living “outside” the community – is in fact deeply trapped in the traditional values (i.e. the Southern worldview) of the community which he ignores. After having been told about Bon’s Negro blood, Henry is obedient and even though he once might have faced a tragic dilemma, now he knows what he has to do.

3.3. The Fratricide & Its Aftermath

It is Bon’s stubbornness which eventually leads him to his voluntary death. All the time he has been waiting for his father’s recognition of him, but it never happened. At the university, Henry represents a contrast between his “*flesh and bone and spirit which stemmed from the same source that mine [Bon’s] did*” and Bon’s which “[*Sutpen*] *sprang in hatred and outrage*” (p. 254).⁴⁵ When he agrees to visit Sutpen’s Hundred, he thinks only of how he sees his father and “that flash, that instant of indisputable recognition” (p. 255) that he is Sutpen’s son. However Sutpen never gives him this “flash.” Had he given him that, Bon would

⁴³ Italics by Faulkner

⁴⁴ See Chapter 2.

⁴⁵ Italics by Faulkner

have demanded nothing from his possession, not even his formal acknowledgment:

*He need not even acknowledge me; I will let him understand just as quickly that he need not do that, that I do not expect that, will not be hurt by that, just as he will let me know that quickly that I am his son (p. 255).*⁴⁶

Because Sutpen does not recognize him, Bon voluntarily chooses his death. As he says to Henry, “I gave him the choice. I have been giving him the choice for four years . . . Now I am thinking of myself” (p. 285). When Henry tries to avoid their fate (i.e. the fratricide and the destruction of the Sutpens, respectively) by appealing to Bon that they are brothers, Charles’s reply signifies nothing more than his own death sentence: “*No, I’m not [your brother]. I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister. **Unless you stop me, Henry***” (p. 286).⁴⁷ Even though Henry is emotionally struggling with the idea of becoming a murderer and is putting it off until the very end, he knows that he must prevent the marriage. Finally he kills his beloved brother at the gates of Sutpen’s Hundred, and thus makes his sister a widow “before she had even been a bride” (p. 15). Again, as to the importance of race and incest, the racial myth prevails. By killing Bon, Henry believes he kept the Southern code of honor and saved the family, but instead of saving it, he doomed it to destruction.

Shortly after the fratricide, Sutpen returns from the war. He survived, his death would be simply impossible as Miss Rosa tells us, “every man in our armies would have to fall before bullet or ball found him” (p. 10). His “design” is in ruins – his heir vanished God knows where and the only other man present is Wash Jones. At the age of 59 Sutpen starts from scratch. First he proposes to Miss Rosa and she accepts despite her objections toward him. However when he, in Shreve’s words, “suggests that they breed together for test and sample and if it was a boy they would marry” (p. 144), she furiously leaves, insulted, and never returns to Sutpen’s Hundred until the September night in 1909.

⁴⁶ Italics by Faulkner

⁴⁷ Emphasis mine, italics by Faulkner

After this “unsuccessful attempt” Sutpen moves to the grand-daughter of Wash Jones, his companion living in an abandoned fishing camp at Sutpen’s grounds. But not even she is capable of providing him a new male heir. Sutpen’s words of bitter sarcasm prove to be his fatal action. Same as his first-born son, he is killed by his friend and companion “in a fury of humiliated disillusionment” (Jehlen, 1976, p. 67). The symbolism of the murder instrument – a rusty scythe – is apparent. It constitutes not only the association with Death, but it has also more literal meaning. As scythe cuts weeds from the ground, by killing Sutpen it cuts off his “design” and its dependence on the past, respectively. From now on, Sutpen family faces its own decay, aptly manifested in the dilapidating mansion, and after the death of Henry in 1909, there is no “aristocratic” Sutpen left.

3.4. Judith, or the Power of Endurance

Judith plays an indisputable part in the whole love triangle of the young people as Sutpen’s daughter and Henry’s sister. She is “driven into marriage” with Charles Bon by her mother Ellen. Because of her passivity concerning her fate she seems to be an easy object for manipulation by others at the first sight. She does not protest against the betrothal to an almost unknown man, since the whole engagement comprised of “two holiday visits as her brother’s guest and which periods Bon seems to have spent either in riding and hunting with Henry or as acting as an elegant and indolent esoteric hothouse bloom” (p. 77). On the contrary, she accepts her mother’s decision and later on we are under the impression that she really loved Bon, or taught herself to love him. Nevertheless, her destiny was not to be a respected wife of a respected Southern gentleman, but to be a victim of both her father’s past mistake and Henry’s Southern racial preconceptions on the background of the Civil War.

After the marriage was forbidden and Henry left the house together with Bon, she does not protest or inquire about the reason of the prohibition because “even if she had known it, it would have made no difference to her” (p. 96). And as she (or as Mr. Compson constructs) says later, “*something has happened*

between him and my father; if my father was right, I will never see him again, if wrong he will come and send for me; if happy I can be I will if suffer I must I can” (*Ibid.*).⁴⁸ As I have written on pp. 26-27, while Henry has more traits of his mother, in case of Judith, she resembles more her father. She is strong, capable; she possesses certain Sutpen’s stubbornness, yet she is likeable and we tend to sympathize with her. She voluntarily endures the long time of separation, or the “probation” as Henry has put it, knowing that her destiny is not in her hands. She embodies the goodness and humanity whose large amounts her father lacks. Though at first she might be seen as an emotionally cold person, she has emotions – she just does not manifest them openly (e.g. over the death of Charles Bon). She never knew the reason why Henry killed her lover, yet she is reconciled, there is no hatred – in her eyes it simply must have been so. It is exactly her story where the strong fatalism of the novel is manifested. After she finds the picture of the octoroon and the child, which as Shreve tells us was there to say to her “*I was no good; do not grieve for me*” (p. 287), she buries Bon, and later on invites the octoroon and the child to Sutpen’s Hundred. Furthermore, when the octoroon dies, she fetches Charles’s son – Charles Etienne de Saint Valery Bon – from New Orleans and together with Clytie takes care of him until he voluntarily leaves and marries an ape-like “full-blood negress” (p. 309).

Her role as a guardian of Charles’s son might be disputable. Despite her looking after him, she maintains the level of distance between them by the sleeping arrangements. As we are told, the little Charles Etienne sleeps in between Judith and Clytie in a trundle bed which constitutes “an accurate indication of Etienne’s position as a part-Negro, his trundle bed being higher than the half-Negro Clytie’s, yet lower than the fully white Judith” (Kartiganer, 1965, p. 299).⁴⁹ This arrangement highly contrasts with Judith’s attempt to “wash the smooth faint olive tinge from his skin” (p. 161), which is demonstrated more literally in his supervision by Clytie so that he does not have anything to do

⁴⁸ Italics by Faulkner

⁴⁹ This view is contradicted by Cleanth Brooks, who says that trundle bed is a “white child’s bed” and that it was Clytie who “insists upon sleeping on a pallet on the floor” (Brooks, 1990a, p. 442). However, if we consider the circumstances and Southern mores, which are Judith’s own as well, I believe that Kartiganer’s explanation serves better to my purpose.

with the blacks. She again fails when she tells him to go to the North where he can pass as white. However it is her who, at last, takes care of Etienne again, when he catches yellow fever, for which she is “rewarded” by death.

Her mental strength is depicted in the ability to make sacrifices when needed. The situation is desperate, and so are the decisions. As opposed to Miss Rosa, she has no romantic ideas about the war; she sees the sacrifices which are to be made. She is not frivolous and fragile like her mother, she is the opposite – a strong woman who knows that now, when the war is in full rage and even after it ends, there would be no Old South with cavaliers and ladies, but just the question of how to make at least a decent living. But still, when we see her in her “dress made of flour sacks, holding the handles of a plow as she walks behind her mule, she is still a *lady* by the *definition of her society*” (Brooks, 1990b, p. 290).⁵⁰

The abstract notion of the declining South after the lost war is manifested in her destiny. Though at first passive and submissive, later on she becomes one of the characters able to adapt to new conditions, but who, alas, constituted a minority in her circles. It is her ability not to look into the past but into the present and the future, respectively, which enables her to overcome the blows she has suffered.

As opposed to Judith, her brother Henry is not independent and open-minded; in a sense, he is the instrument of his father’s will. Through his actions Sutpen’s decisions and plans are carried on. In fact, he is the instrument of destruction of the whole Sutpen’s “design.” By killing Bon and escaping afterward, he abjures his rights as the heir apparent to Sutpen’s legacy, and thus forces his father to start all over again with his scheme. The important thing is that his previous sensibility, which is, in a sense, a weakness too, is rejected by his burdensome decision to kill his brother Charles.

3.5. The Meaning of the Sutpen Tragedy: Haunted Past & Reconciliation

⁵⁰ Highlighted by myself

The fratricide represents for Henry his ability to overcome his weakness, and to prove his strength, the thing which Quentin Compson is not able to do. The incest and the miscegenation is, after all, his and Shreve's explanation of why Henry killed Charles Bon. But it is only "Shreve [who] recognizes that the story that they have jointly created is only poetically true . . . Quentin, on the other hand, is unable to maintain aesthetic distance to distinguish the *symbolic from the literal*" (Vickery, 1995, p. 92).⁵¹ The parallel is obvious; Quentin is trying to find the solution for his own "difficulties" with Caddy, or to use his own words, "to save the Compson honor," in the story of Sutpen's children. But as we know from *The Sound and the Fury*, his effort proves useless. He is not able to overcome his obsession with his sister's virginity and to "save the Compson honor," and later chooses the only suitable solution for him – the suicide.⁵² When he finds dying Henry in Sutpen's Hundred, he cannot put the picture off his mind. From now on there will be "nevermore of peace" (p. 298) for him. By having seen and spoken to Henry, the long-vanished past has penetrated into his life, increasing the unbearable agony of his struggle to possess or to be in charge of (for him) the abstract notion of Caddy's virginity.

If for Quentin the Sutpen story represents in his corrupted mind a "possible solution" to his current struggle, in which he fails, for Miss Rosa is has a completely different meaning. For her the narration conveys a form of coping with the haunted past. It is her who summons Quentin in one of the "hot weary dead September afternoon" (p. 3) to tell him about Sutpen and his progeny. Even though she offers various different solutions as to why she wants Quentin to know the story, in fact, she asks him for his assistance and help, which he can provide. Moreover, as Quentin himself aptly puts it, "it's because she wants it told" (p. 6).

Miss Rosa is a relic of the vanished past. We can see it not only from the description of her look and personality, but also from the house, wherein she

⁵¹ Highlighted by myself

⁵² For a good analysis of Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* see Schoenberg, E. (1977). *Old Tales and Talking: Quentin Compson in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Related Works*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

lives. This almost claustrophobic tomb-like place, full of heat, bears the resemblance of a mausoleum, and therefore creates an appropriate setting for the Gothic story of Sutpen and his offspring. It is there, where she tells her long litanies and accusations of Sutpen, and thus helping in creating a dark, sinister atmosphere. As I have written on pp. 22-23, she is the only one who knew Sutpen in person, but exactly because of this fact her narration needs to be regarded with great circumspection.

Most of the critics have seen her as an old spinster with romanticized views, full of hatred because of her deprived childhood (she was born late, to which she is constantly referring) and motherhood. All of this is doubtlessly true, but we must bear in mind that save her, there would be no one willing to tell the story, and whatever objections we have against her, she is simply indispensable for us. Recent studies, influenced by feminist theories, see her more as an unacknowledged voice of the community, which is neglected exactly because of her age, gender and “inexperience.”⁵³

Once deprived of mother’s love, she is raised by her aunt and, partly, by her father Goodhue Coldfield, a local merchant and a local Methodist authority who, after the aunt had eloped with her lover and the war had started, closed his store and “mounted to the attic with his hammer and his handful of nails and nailed the door behind him and threw the hammer out the window” (p. 65). Again, deprived of her youth and pleasures associated with it, she has to accept the role of an adult woman, teach herself various kinds of housework and, in addition to it, nourish herself and her father – “the man whom she hated” (*Ibid.*) – as well. Later on when she offers Judith to teach her housework, which she has learned so painfully by her own mistakes, she is mocked. Exactly in this experience lies the foundation of her bitterness and grudge.

⁵³ Cf. Lazur, E. P. (2009). “A Literary Motherhood: Rosa Coldfield’s Design in *Absalom, Absalom!*” *Mississippi Quarterly*, 62 (3/4), pp. 479-496, where the author sees Rosa Coldfield’s narrative as a form of coping with her deprived motherhood, and as a “catalyst that revives her chances to fulfill, at long last, her desire for legitimacy, belonging, and voice in the community” (Lazur, 2009, p. 479).

Miss Rosa's narration is a powerful litany against Sutpen. Her diction comprising of stylistically distinguished words and poetic imagery⁵⁴ further supports her role as a local poetess laureate, who was once composing Odes to the Confederate Army, while her father disapproved of the cause. Even though Miss Rosa was not born until Henry and Judith had been born, it is she who gives us the first information about Sutpen and about the "courtship" of her sister Ellen, toward whom Rosa feels highly superior. She has never seen Charles Bon; and yet she somehow "fell in love" with the Southern gentlemanly qualities associated with him. Her major objection, and the objection of the Yoknapatawpha community as well, toward her brother-in-law is his having no past (or, at least, his willingness not to tell anything about himself), which is strikingly contrasted with her father, who

knew who his father was in Tennessee and who his grandfather had been in Virginia and our neighbors and the people we lived among knew that we knew and we knew they knew we knew and we knew that they would have believed us about who and where we came from even if we had lied, just as anyone could have looked at him [at Sutpen] once and known that he would be lying about who and where and why he came from by the very fact that apparently he had to refuse to say at all (p. 11).

For her, Sutpen is the "ogre-faced demon" of her childhood who ignored her all the time and came to her only to renew his "design," and who, by having suggested the proposal concerning the sex of the unborn child, deprived her not only of her chance to fulfill her role in motherhood, but also to live her own life. From now on, her life is the "what-might-have-been" and not what "is." Until her death, she will be the "old lady that died of outrage in 1866 one summer" (p. 142). Her hysterical "*Dead? You? You lie; you're not dead, heaven cannot, and hell dare not, have you!*" (p. 139),⁵⁵ when she learns about Sutpen's death, is nothing more than a cry of a desperate companion who knows that now it is only her who will

⁵⁴ Cf. her talking about the grand-daughter of Wash Jones as the "female flesh in which his [Sutpen's] name and lineage should be sepulchred [sic]," (p. 107), or "the same sphinx face which she [Clytie] had been born with," (p. 109), or "the cold Cerberus of his [Sutpen's] private hell," (*Ibid.*). For other examples, see Chapter 5 of *Absalom, Absalom!*

⁵⁵ Italics by Faulkner

carry the burden of their mutual past. She has waited for a very long time to cope with this “living past”; yet by narrating the story to Quentin and by their visit to Sutpen’s Hundred, she finally achieves to put the past to an end and to reconcile with it. By seeing Henry she accomplishes the triumph over Thomas Sutpen. He is long dead, but she has witnessed the fall of his “design,” and it is precisely that which brings her to reconciliation.⁵⁶

From what I have discussed in this subchapter, the story of Sutpen and his family constitutes an important link to the family of Compsons whose decline is the central theme of *The Sound and the Fury*. Even though *Absalom* was written and published later, its principal themes are the same. Moreover, because of its historical nature the novel may be understood as a kind of introduction to the complexity of the Southern aristocratic ethics challenged in both novels. For Quentin and Miss Rosa, the Sutpen tragedy is not just a part of Yoknapatawpha’s local color concerning the rise and the fall of one Southern prominent family; the main quality lies in its unique meaning for both of them. The important thing is that neither of them is a detached observer, they both are Southerners deeply involved in the history of their region. Thus the Sutpen legend has a tremendous impact on their personalities, and in a sense, foreshadows the future inglorious end of the Compsons.

3.6. The End of the Saga: Decline and Extinction

Thomas Sutpen’s attempt to start a new powerful dynasty of Southern planters did not survive even two generations, and yet the Sutpens managed to gain an important position among the families of the Yoknapatawpha County. However, it was not because of their ability to adapt to the new social and economic conditions (cf. the Sartorises). Sutpen’s attempt to start again and have

⁵⁶ In terms of “witnessing”, there is a striking similarity between Miss Rosa and the Negro servant Dilsey from *The Sound and the Fury*. Dilsey’s words from the last chapter, “I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin” (p. 185), aptly fit into Miss Rosa’s role of an observer in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The main difference, of course, is the emotional background. For Dilsey, those are the words of sadness and pity; in Miss Rosa’s case the words of satisfaction for her life full of deprivations.

a new male heir proved unsuccessful and with his death and Henry's escape, the plantation changed into a decrepit farm inhabited by Judith and her mulatto half-sister Clytie. The family story slowly became a local legend full of mystery about what had really happened between the son and the father, and why the son killed the future husband of his sister, which was – as the time went by – nearly forgotten until Miss Rosa summoned Quentin to her house to tell him about it.

The main theme of the story, the decline of a wealthy Southern family, was a typical Southern situation occurring after the lost Civil War, during the Reconstruction. Many of the old planter families were not able to adapt to the new social and economic conditions, thus ending up in a state of poverty; the “carpetbaggers” and more adaptable Southerners replacing their position. The difference in case of the Sutpens is that the decline could have been prevented, if it had not been for the antebellum Southern moral code and its strict racial division. The family would have faced the dire economic situation but eventually they would have overcome the obstacles and follow the case of the Sartorises. But there was the racism, deeply rooted in Henry's Southern mind, which was the fatal thing that eventually destroyed all aspirations of the Sutpens. By killing Charles Bon, Henry has voluntarily chosen that the family would face its own decay, and finally its own extinction.

4. *The Sound and the Fury*, or the Loss of Values

“I’ve seed de first en de last,” Dilsey said. “Never you mind me.”

“First en de last whut?” Frony said.

“Never you mind,” Dilsey said. “I seed the beginning, en now I sees de endin.”

– Dilsey’s words after the Easter service, *The Sound and the Fury*

Faulkner never really believed that *The Sound and the Fury* would be “THE book” (Faulkner, *Selected Letters*, 1994, p. 218) which will make him famous. In his mind this place was occupied by his previous novel *Flags in the Dust*, which was, however, firstly rejected, and after many obstacles eventually published by Harcourt, Brace & Company in an abridged version under the title *Sartoris*.⁵⁷ After the struggles concerning publishing of *Flags in the Dust*, Faulkner resigned to write for publishing, and began to write for enjoyment. As he writes in one of the two introductions to *The Sound and the Fury*, “One day I seemed to shut a door between me and all publishers’ addresses and book lists. I said to myself, Now I can write” (Faulkner, *An Introduction for The Sound and the Fury*, 1994, p. 227). And thus one of his greatest novels was brought to life.

Considering the starting point of the novel, as Faulkner himself many times said and wrote,

It began with a mental picture [...] of the muddy seat of a little girl’s drawers in a pear tree where she could see through a window where her grandmother’s funeral was taking place and report what was happening to her brothers on the ground below (Faulkner, *Interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel*, 1994, p. 233).

Candace, the most courageous of all Compson children, climbed up the pear tree, thus unintentionally allowing her brothers and the Negro children to see her muddy drawers, the portent of her future shame. This picture and its symbolism is the central theme of the whole book; out of it the whole unhappy story of the Compsons unfolds. It is a story about a “beautiful and tragic little girl”; about Faulkner “heart’s darling” (Faulkner, *An Introduction for The Sound and the*

⁵⁷ The unabridged version with the original title *Flags in the Dust* was not published until 1973.

Fury, 1994, p. 228), (Faulkner, *Class Conferences at the University of Virginia*, 1994, p. 236).

The first three sections are in fact Caddy's portraits based on her brothers' reaction to her loss of virginity, and her giving birth out of wedlock. By comparing them we achieve the true depiction of the central figure of Caddy Compson.⁵⁸ For Benjy, she is the only one capable of loving him; the ethereal motherly figure who "smelled like trees" (p. 27). Quentin sees her and her virginity as a bearer of the Compson honor that he is to protect; when he fails, and is unable to stand the omnipresent "odor of honeysuckle" (p. 81) – the symbol of Caddy's defloration – he chooses to end his life. As for Jason, Caddy represents his promised job in Sydney Herbert's bank which was never carried out because of the "premature" birth of little Quentin. Deprived of the portion of his share,⁵⁹ he finds consolation in fury and hatred of his own sister, which is subsequently manifested in his despicable treatment of his niece Quentin, and in stealing of her money.

After bringing the whole Compson family into dishonor, Caddy is banished from the Compson Mile, and told to never come back, leaving her infant daughter in care of Mr. and Mrs. Compson. Her name is not mentioned in the house, thus allowing especially Mrs. Compson to maintain the family reputation in the eyes of the Yoknapatawphans. Yet it is only the reputation of once a noble family that has remained. Starting with Benjy's pasture, which had to be sold so

⁵⁸ As André Bleikasten writes, "Of Caddy nothing remains but a series of snapshots, vivid and unreal, in which her fleeting image is forever fixed ..." (Bleikasten, 1994, p. 424). This statement of his aptly sums up how Caddy is treated in the novel. Although being very close to the main protagonist, we are offered only short glimpses of her in a few scenes, transmitted to us by the recollections of her brothers (cf. Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!*, who has, nevertheless, more space in the book than Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*). Despite being "literary nowhere, Caddy is metaphorically everywhere" (*Ibid.*, p. 425), for she is the pivot around which everything turns; her defloration and subsequent "shame" being the touchstone of Compsons' ethics and morality (Vickery, 1995, p. 48).

⁵⁹ Cf. Mrs. Compson's whining about Jason's loss of prospects, "When they began to sell the land to send Quentin to Harvard I told your father that he must make an equal provision for you. Then when Herbert offered to take you into the bank I said, Jason is provided for now, and when all the expense began to pile up and I was forced to sell our furniture and the rest of the pasture, I wrote her [Caddy] at once because I said she will realise that she and Quentin have had their share and part of Jason's too and that it depends on her now to compensate him. I said she will do that out of respect for her father. I believed that, then. But I'm just a poor old woman; I was raised to believe that people would deny themselves for their own flesh and blood" (p. 164).

that Quentin may have gone to Harvard and Caddy could marry, the Compson property is continually shrinking and the house is slowly being absorbed into the growing town of Jefferson, until it merges completely and there are no Compsons left.

To fully understand the decline of the Compsons, it is essential to pay attention to the individual characters and to the values and principles they believe in. Therefore the structure of this chapter is composed in accordance with the structure of the novel (discussion of Benjamin, Quentin, and Jason) with the exception of the analysis of Mr. and Mrs. Compson, for they are seen as one of the main reasons for their children's corrupted nature. Caddy, and her prominent role in the lives of her brothers, is further discussed in subchapters dedicated to her brothers.

4.1. Parents' Guilt

Similarly as in *Absalom, Absalom!*, those responsible for the "beginning of the end" are the parents. It is both Jason Richmond Lycurgus Compson III and his wife Caroline, née Bascomb, who contributed to the very end of the House of Compson, which had already been in a state of decline for some time. But only by their inability to fulfill their parental roles the once wealthy and still respectable family vanished entirely from the Yoknapatawpha County.

To find the trigger of future problems we have to look as far as their marriage. This matrimony was not "morganatic" in a European sense of that word, but it was definitely case of a Southern aristocrat marrying a girl from a less aristocratic family, which we are constantly reminded by Mrs. Compson in her attempts to accentuate that her family (i.e. the Bascombs) are on the same social level as the Compsons. Her need to say that "my people are every bit as well as born as yours" (p. 28) and Quentin's "do you think so because one of our forefathers was a governor and three were generals and Mother's weren't" (p. 65) only confirms that her family must have been of lower social rank. Throughout the whole book she is not able to overcome that difference, constantly reproaching

her husband for ridiculing her good-for-nothing brother Maury and preferring Jason over her other children because as she tells him, “you are a Bascomb, despite your name” (p. 114), which means nothing more than he does not waste his time in philosophizing about concepts of pride and honor and other chivalric virtues, as his brother Quentin together with his father do. The Compsons are seen by her as elitists exactly because of their “fondness” of preferring the spiritual before the material, and even more because of the exclusion of others from their “fondness.” The fact that among Mr. Compson, Quentin and Caddy there is no place for Mrs. Compson and Jason is the main source of mother and son’s reproaches and irritation. At the first sight, Mr. Compson appears to be “almost the responsible parent but [at the same time] playing his favorites” (Kartiganer, 1994, p. 332).⁶⁰

The main responsibility for (especially) Quentin’s decadence and his corrupted mind lies on the shoulders of his father Jason R. Compson III. As M. Millgate writes, Mr. Compson “fails him [Quentin] utterly in all his roles of progenitor, confessor, and counselor” (Millgate, 1994, p. 304) and becomes “Quentin’s principal enemy, his cold and even cynical logic persistently undermining the very basis of all those idealistic concepts to which Quentin so passionately holds” (*Ibid.*).

Although by profession a lawyer, Mr. Compson is not a man of profession; he is a man of philosophy and his kind of stoicism and nihilism has a fatal impact on young Quentin.⁶¹ His words about wasting time in fighting “because no battle is ever won” (p. 48) and that “victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools” (*Ibid.*) immensely contribute to the disarrayed psyche of his oldest son. He himself cannot be a match for his glorious ancestors (e.g. his father who was a Confederate general and is mentioned in *Absalom, Absalom!* as Sutpen’s closest companion), which results in his withdrawal, passivity and alcoholism, to which he later falls victim. The glorious past is a curse on all Compsons, but by taking

⁶⁰ Italics by Kartiganer

⁶¹ Despite his philosophy, even he is deeply affected by Caddy’s “misdemeanor,” resulting in his excessive drinking, as we are told by Caddy in Quentin’s recollections, “Father will be dead in a year they say if he doesn't stop drinking and he wont stop he cant stop since I since last summer ...” (p. 79).

his stoic stand, Mr. Compson does not help a bit, but only makes matters worse by engaging young and sensitive Quentin into his private worlds of spiritual decadence. After Caddy's first sexual experience, when he sees its impact on Quentin, his words of "consolation" about women never being virgins and purity being a negative state (pp. 73-74) are pronounced too late to stop Quentin from killing himself.

The person who is often seen as a cause of disruption of the family is the mother, Caroline Compson. According to C. Brooks, she is the "curse upon Quentin and the rest of the Compsons" (Brooks, 1994, p. 292). Constantly whining and self-pitying, she is not able to fulfill her role as a mother of Compson children. She often asks questions such as "what have I done to have been given children like these" (p. 65), constantly blaming her husband for not loving her because "they have never loved anything with that streak of Compson selfishness and false pride" (*Ibid.*), and worrying about the youngest Jason, her favorite one, as to when "this Compson blood begin[s] to show in him" (p. 66). Nonetheless, she is not able to be a real mother and give her love even to Jason, as proposed by one critic, forcing him to look for it elsewhere, and since he "finds Quentin in Caddy's arms and Benjy in her bed [...] he comes to depend on his grandmother for the attention he has been refused elsewhere" (Matthews, 1994, p. 375).

Mrs. Compson is deeply trapped in the family to which she does not belong. She believes she is paying for the sins of Compsons who "always have found excuses for [their] own blood" (p. 66); her mentally disabled son Benjamin being God's punishment. Since she is not able to be a real mother, from carefree Southern Belle she has instantly become a grievous neurotic old woman, completely skipping the stage of Southern lady and its ideals of motherhood based on Roman example of Cornelia⁶² – "the only roles Mrs. Compson can play [are] premarital coquetry or postmaternal grief. Between her childless adolescence and her child-complicated middle age no other viable script has become available to her" (Weinstein, 1994, p. 431).

⁶² See Chapter 2.

For her oldest son Quentin she is a hollow figure. In his words “*If I could say Mother*” (p. 60)⁶³ he realizes his *motherlessness*. Furthermore, she becomes the “dungeon” (p. 109), the symbol of darkness and inaccessibility, as she confines herself to her room and her bed, so that she “*can be sick*” (p. 41),⁶⁴ as Caddy aptly says, thus giving her sickness a new meaning as a role to which Mrs. Compson is assigned. For Benjy, because of his living in a “timeless present” (Brooks, 1994, p. 291), Mrs. Compson is an indifferent person. She does not show any significant emotions to him, she is, in a sense, even distancing from him. When given an opportunity to make a close contact with Benjy, she insists that he not be put in her lap and that he stand up instead. When she sees Caddy carrying him, the first thing that occurs to her is that Caddy will “look like a washerwoman” (p. 40). Similarly with Caddy calling him Benjy, Mrs. Compson shows that the most valuable thing for her is the social appearance (Williams, 1977, p. 70):

“Candace,” Mother said. “I told you not to call him that. It was bad enough when your father insisted on calling you that silly nickname, and I will not have him called by one. Nicknames are vulgar. Only common people use them. Benjamin,” she said. (p. 41).⁶⁵

In the last two sections of the book, i.e. Jason’s interior monologue and third-person narration, Mrs. Compson repeats this un-maternal pattern in relation to her granddaughter Quentin. When Quentin asks her for help because of Jason’s treatment, Mrs. Compson tells her that she need to respect and to obey him because “he is the nearest thing to a father you’ve ever had” (p. 162). Quentin’s reaction to the rejection of help aptly sums up the whole gloomy and prison-like atmosphere of Compson household, “I wish I was dead. I wish we were all dead” (*Ibid.*).

⁶³ Italics by Faulkner

⁶⁴ Highlighted by myself

⁶⁵ Mrs. Compson’s concern for a good reputation is also manifested in Caddy’s marriage; for it is her who arranges the marriage with Sydney Herbert Head, a wealthy Indianian, whom they met at French Lick during their vacation, after Caddy had gotten pregnant with Dalton Ames. By this marriage the state of decency is again restored; the marriage bringing also an extra credit in form of a job for Mrs. Compson’s favorite son, Jason. Again, when Herbert learns about the pregnancy and divorces Candace, it is Mrs. Compson who banishes Caddy from the house simply because in her world of social respectability such things simply cannot be tolerated.

As we have seen, Jason and Caroline Compson are simply not able to act their roles as good and responsible parents. The first seeking consolation in stoicism and nihilism among a “decanter of whiskey and a litter of dogeared Horaces and Livys and Catulluses” (Faulkner, *Appendix: Compson 1699-1945*, 1994, p. 207), the latter in her clinging to the Compson image in Jefferson society and in her conviction that she is a lady⁶⁶ punished by God for something she does not know. They both, by not being able to love, help with inner struggles, and to forgive, helped to orchestrate the fall of their own family.

4.2. Benjy’s World of Timelessness

One could say that the youngest of the Compson children, Maury (later renamed Benjamin) is the happiest of all. And, to some extent, he would be right. Despite the vague sense of void, created by the loss of Caddy, he is relatively happy, for because of his mental handicap and the lack of speech he is “locked almost completely into a timeless present” (Brooks, 1994, p. 291). It simply means that for him his memories are not memories but repeatedly relived present – it is “as though Caddy had only departed a few seconds ago: her trace is forever fresh, and the merest sensation lends her absence agonizing immediacy” (Bleikasten, 1994, p. 424).

His “timeless present” consists of a series of flashbacks; their start being triggered by various words, images, sensual experiences, and actions that Benjy encounters during April 7th, 1928, the day of his thirty-third birthday.⁶⁷ From those flashbacks we first learn about the Compson family – the gentlemanly father, whining and hypochondriac mother, caring and loving Caddy, contemplative Quentin, and already mean Jason, who’s “going to tell” (p. 25). Also the starting point of the whole book, the little girl climbing the pear tree in her muddy drawers is presented here. To sum up, Benjy’s section gives us the

⁶⁶ Cf. her reaction to Miss Quentin’s elopement, when she thinks that Quentin killed herself just like her uncle, “I’m a lady. You might not believe that from my offspring, but I am” (p. 186)

⁶⁷ For instance, on the very first page of the book we are trapped into Benjy’s reliving of Christmas, when he and his siblings were little children; the whole memory being triggered by the nail in the fence, on which Benjy had snagged.

first impression of what it is to grow up in the Compson family. Its advantage over Quentin's and Jason's sections is that it is relatively objective, for Benjy possesses the ability to perceive but not to further analyze the facts he had perceived. Therefore we can judge by ourselves and not be influenced by the evaluations of others; being imposed on us, such as in case of Quentin and Jason's sections, for each of them believes in his own worldview.

Exactly because of his inability to analyze and because of his "timeless present," Benjy can react only to sensations, as opposed to his brothers who can react only to abstract concepts (Quentin), or act in terms of material logic (Jason) (Vickery, 1995, pp. 30-31).⁶⁸ If Caddy's defloration symbolizes the loss of the Compson honor, or the loss of a promised job, for Benjy it is the loss of the "smell of trees." He does not suffer silently, as Quentin, but manifests his pain in his weeping and bellowing, as in the day of Caddy's wedding, "Caddy put her arms around me, and her shining veil, and I couldn't smell trees anymore and I began to cry" (p. 26). However, when she washes off the perfume in the bathroom, everything is again restored to its original state,⁶⁹

I went to the bathroom door. I could hear the water [...] I listened to the water. I couldn't hear the water, and Caddy opened the door [...] Caddy smelled like trees. "We dont like perfume ourselves," Caddy said (p. 27).

As to the family relations, among critics it was often pointed out that Benjy's role is to represent some kind of a "touchstone" which would serve to prove the humanity of the whole Compson family (Millgate, 1994, p. 301), (Vickery, 1995, p. 48).⁷⁰ However, the humanity has vanished from the House of Compsons. For Mrs. Compson, Benjy represents a "punishment [...] for putting aside [her] pride and marrying a man who held himself above [her]" (pp. 65-66). When it was obvious that his condition would not improve, his name was changed from Maury (i.e. the name of his uncle Maury Bascomb, the brother of Mrs. Compson) to

⁶⁸ Furthermore, as O. Vickery points out, "Quentin's section is very close to Benjy's, for although he performs the gestures expected of him by other people, his world is essentially as isolated and irrational as his brother's" (Vickery, 1995, p. 30).

⁶⁹ Cf. the parallel to the very end of the novel, when Luster takes Benjy for a ride to the graveyard.

⁷⁰ O. Vickery also puts Caddy into this category.

Benjamin so that there was no clear relation whatsoever with the Bascombs. Same as Mrs. Compson, even Quentin cannot think of Benjamin as his little brother. For him, Benjy is only “Benjamin, the child of mine old age held hostage in Egypt” (p. 108), an allusion to the Old Testament story of Joseph and his brothers, who sold him to Egypt; Benjamin being the youngest one of them. As everything in Quentin’s mind, even Benjy is regarded in terms of an abstract notion. Considering Jason, he sees Benjy simply as a nuisance who would be put into state asylum in Jackson immediately, were it not for Mrs. Compson’s self-pitying and Dilsey’s care.⁷¹ The only persons who can see Benjy as he truly is, i.e. as a grown-up child, who needs to be loved even more than others because of his condition, are Caddy and the black cook Dilsey. It is just because Caddy assumes the role of a mother that he feels secure and calm. When he loses her, he can feel the void, symbolized by the “dark place on the wall where the mirror used to be” (p. 160), which her absence created, but is unable to realize that Caddy will never return. Still, he will be waiting every day for Caddy to come back home.

4.3. Quentin’s World of Southern Principles

From the very beginning Quentin assumes the role of a protector of the Compson honor, the concept which will finally destroy him. Already in Benjy’s section, Quentin, who sees that Caddy soiled her drawers, slaps her because in his eyes she has already lost her purity; furthermore, she did not pay any attention to it. Although being only a child, the literal has already become the symbolic (Vickery, 1995, p. 92), and Caddy and her virginity the embodiment of Compson honor, which Quentin, as a true Southern gentleman, believes he needs to protect. Exactly this is Quentin’s major problem – his entrapment in the extreme variant of the Southern moral code of the past, and its notion of female honor, which every male relative simply must protect. He is under a great influence of his father, which has a tremendous impact on his young mind.

⁷¹ Jason’s opinion is shared by his niece, Miss Quentin, who sees Benjy in the same light. Cf. her words that “He needs to be sent to Jackson [... because] how can anybody live in a house like this” (p. 45), or “Has he got to keep that old dirty slipper on the table [...] it’s like eating with a pig” (*Ibid.*).

Nevertheless, Mr. Compson, instead of helping him, rather inoculates young Quentin with his stoic philosophy of passivism, thus rejecting to help Quentin with his inner struggles concerning Caddy's virginity, Compson honor, and Caddy's promiscuous behavior.

His last day on earth starts as an ordinary sunny day in Massachusetts. Yet from the beginning, he is reminded of time, his principal enemy; for time flows, and therefore gives consolation to any kind of pain, even of that caused by Caddy's misdemeanor. Time is represented by the grandfather's watch, which was given to him by Mr. Compson, telling him that "I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you may forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it" (p. 48). Despite his father's great emphasis, Quentin does the exact opposite; he tries to "conquer it" so that the time would stop and there was no future. The only thing that matters for Quentin is the past, and the desperate gesture of breaking the watch is the symbolic evidence of that. Quentin cannot bear that everything will someday sink into oblivion; therefore his "obsession with the past is in fact a *repudiation* of the future" (Brooks, 1994, p. 291).⁷²

As the day proceeds, the readers follow his steps around Cambridge, Massachusetts, being the witnesses of the present and – more prominently – of the past. Both of them mingle until they culminate in the fight with Gerald Bland, to whom Quentin assigns the role of Dalton Ames. But before the climax, a very important event occurs in the bakery, where Quentin meets the little lost Italian girl. He tries to find who this girl is, and to return her to her family, for which he is almost attacked by her brother Julio because he "steala my seester" (p. 88) and brought to the court. This scene constitutes a parallel to the brother-sister relationship of Quentin and Caddy; the little girl becomes "sister" and Quentin is again the older brother, her protector. Nonetheless, when faced in a duel with Julio, the real brother, Quentin retreats and is reminded of his inability to solve things; he plays the role of a confused person drawn into a

⁷² Highlighted by myself

situation which is so absurd that it would be even more absurd to cope with it (i.e. the court hearing).

After he pays the fine and is released, he and his roommate Shreve join the company of Gerald Bland, his mother, and some young girls in a car ride, where the fight with Caddy's suitor Dalton Ames is powerfully relived. Gerald's boasting about his experience with women immediately releases the memories of his confrontation with Caddy after discovering that she had sex with Dalton Ames. It is apt that Gerald Bland, a Kentuckian, together with his mother representing the *nouveaux riches* of the New South, "the new-money vulgarity which has incomprehensibly risen to power" (Jehlen, 1976, p. 45), becomes Dalton Ames, Quentin's arch-enemy, the man responsible for the loss of Compson honor. Same as Dalton Ames, Gerald Bland simply "misse[s] gentility" (p. 59). In Quentin's eyes he is nothing more than "theatrical fixture. Just papier-mache, then touch" (*Ibid.*).

The fight reveals Quentin's despair when he cannot drive Ames out of town. For Caddy, her involvement with Dalton Ames is not a matter of any importance; it constitutes only a step toward maturity which one simply has to undergo as Ames tells Quentin, "it's not your fault kid it would have been some other fellow" (p. 101). Quentin, however, is unable to view this incident in the same light as Caddy and Ames do. Offended by the answer to his question about Ames having a sister,⁷³ he hits him, and is immediately pacified. When Ames hands him his gun, Quentin admits his failure and resigns with words "to hell with your gun" (p. 102).

The whole scene is deeply emotional and symbolic. Quentin's behavior is depicted as a series of gestures having primarily "ritualistic and symbolic aspects" (Millgate, 1994, p. 304) rather than any actual efficacy. He sees himself as a guardian of Compson honor, which Caddy and her sexual purity symbolize, exactly in accordance with his worldview based on the antebellum Southern moral code. Thus he believes his role is to deal with the blackguard who stained

⁷³ "did you ever have a sister did you
no but theyre all bitches" (p. 102)

the family honor and avenge his sister, despite the fact that, as he knows, everything will be totally useless and he himself will be the one who will end up being beaten. His role of avenger has no significance for anyone, except Quentin. For Caddy, his behavior constitutes another obstacle on her way to adulthood; he is simply a nuisance, who “is to be pitied but not feared or respected” (Brooks, 1994, p. 293).

After his failure as a protector, when the “odor of honeysuckle [got] all mixed up” (p. 81), the only possible solution is to take the blame for Caddy’s misdemeanor on himself, i.e. to insist that they had committed incest. In his derangement, Quentin believes that if Caddy had needed to transgress against the Compson honor, or in other words against the Southern moral code, at least it would have lesser importance and consequences, if she had crossed the boundaries with him. He imagines “*a hell beyond that [the incest]: the clean flame the two of us more than dead ...*,” (p. 74),⁷⁴ which would cast them as two eternal sinners but at the same time preserving the special bond between the two of them. The obstinate attempt to persuade his father about committing incest constitutes one of the most desperate acts of Quentin’s life,

Father I have committed Have you ever done that We didnt we didnt do that did we do that [...] we did how can you not know it if youll just wait Ill tell you how it was it was a crime we did a terrible crime it cannot be hid you think it can but wait Poor Quentin youve never done that have you ... (p. 94).⁷⁵

Mr. Compson knows that Quentin would not be able to do such a horrible thing, for he is not in love with Caddy, but with the “[symbolic] notion of virginity that he associates with her” (Brooks, 1994, p. 290). Quentin is, in fact, psychologically impotent (Minter, 1994, p. 353); he is “unable to play either of the heroic roles—as seducer or as avenger—that he deems appropriate to his fiction of himself as a gallant, chivalric lover” (*Ibid.*). His father attempts to reverse Quentin’s fate in convincing him that “purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature” (p. 74) Quentin immediately rejects on the basis of that all these concepts are just

⁷⁴ Italics by Faulkner

⁷⁵ Italics by Faulkner

words; “So is virginity and I said you dont know. You cant know and he said Yes. On the instant when we come to realise that tragedy is second-hand” (*Ibid.*). It is only “excruciating-ly apt” (p. 48) that Quentin is replaying this conversation on the bridge looking down at the water which will be some hours later his last companion.

Refusing to look into the future, Quentin almost masochistically takes delight in his musing on Caddy and the Compson honor, which was lost in the moment of her defloration, same as Quentin’s world based on Southern principles. He is not able, or rather he does not want to realize that, as his father says, he “cannot bear to think that someday it will no longer hurt [him] like this” (p. 112). After the unsuccessful attempt to convince his father that he is the father of Caddy’s unborn child, the only possible solution for Quentin is to kill himself, and thus to escape the world, where all ideas and concepts, to which he had so strongly clung, were blown into pieces. At least, he seems to have brought his painful memories and experience into some kind of spiritual reconciliation with himself (cf. the purely descriptive nature of the last paragraph of his section, which bears a certain amount of serenity) before the final act of suicide. He leaves a note, removes a blood stain from his vest, brushes his hat, and finally drowns himself into oblivion.⁷⁶

4.4. Jason’s World of New South’s Logic

The second son of Jason Compson and his wife, named after his father, has never really been a true Compson. As his mother says, “let me have Jason and you keep the others they’re not my flesh and blood like he is” (p. 66). He does not share Compson’s fondness of musing on the great past and comparing it with

⁷⁶ The act of suicide is ambiguous. It is a way of preserving the Southern moral code, for Quentin does not give up his antebellum values by his death, but at the same time it is a personal failure, a resignation. Quentin cannot fulfill the role of either a protector or a lover, and becomes a person whom nobody takes seriously; moreover he hates to stand in a line of ordinary men who are, according to his father’s words, “dolls stuffed with sawdust swept up from the trash heaps where all previous dolls had been thrown away” (p. 111). Therefore the only solution for him is to escape from this world.

inglorious present; instead, he looks into the future. Growing up in such a mausoleum-like environment as Compson household left traces on all Compson children, Jason included. However, in case of Jason, the exclusion from the private worlds of Mr. Compson, Quentin and Caddy turned him into self-reliant but bitterly cynic man, full of hatred and cruelty.⁷⁷ As opposed to the previous generations of Compsons, Jason is a man of action rather than a man of thinking. He does not believe in his father's stoic passivism, or his mother's whining, for if he acted the same way as they, all Compsons would "be down there at Jackson [state asylum] chasing butterflies" (p. 144). Exactly those kinds of black-humored comments make his section easier to follow, compared with the previous sections of Benjy and Quentin. As Olga W. Vickery points out, it is "his pride that he has no illusions about his family or himself" (Vickery, 1995, p. 42), which is the source of amusement in his section of the novel.

Although Jason does not fully admit it and prides himself on being sane and self-reliant, even his life has been deeply affected by Caddy's misdemeanor. After Caddy and Herbert became officially engaged, he was promised a well-paid job in Herbert's bank as a compensation for not being sent to Harvard like his elder brother. Nonetheless, when Caddy "prematurely" gave birth to little Quentin, the engagement was called off and so was Jason's promised job. This is the beginning of Jason's bitterness and grudge toward his own sister. Deprived of his prospects by Caddy's promiscuous behavior, Jason steals his niece's money, for he believes that he is taking a compensation for his lost job. Although it may seem defensible in terms of logic, morally it is nothing but contemptible.⁷⁸ Jason's problem is that he "furiously believes that for every loss there will be an equal and opposite compensation" (Matthews, 1994, p. 379).

Having not many options to choose from, Jason starts working as a store clerk in Earl's hardware store, fully embracing the idea of a New South "without

⁷⁷ Cf. his pseudo-racist complains about "work[ing] ten hours a day to support a kitchen full of niggers in the style they're accustomed to ..." (p. 150), or the scene when he burns the free tickets to the show before Luster's eyes, after demanding a nickel for each, even though he knows that Luster does not have any money, just for pure pleasure of tormenting Luster.

⁷⁸ Cf. the scene at Mr. Compson's funeral, when Caddy begs him to see little Quentin and pays Jason \$1,000, only to be offered a quick glance from the passing carriage.

recognizing in himself vulgar versions of the materialism and self-pity that we associate with his mother” (Minter, 1994, p. 350). He is not very successful, though, and as we are later told, he looks like a caricature of a bartender. He hates his job at the store, constantly complaining about customers whom he has to attend while persuading them to buy something. As he says, he will never “be a slave to any business [...] unless it’s Jason Compson’s business” (p. 132). He tries to speculate on the cotton market too, but with not much success because, as he says, the “eastern jews” (p. 120) are those who take the money of the “country suckers” (p. 142). Thus his only proper and stable sources of money are Caddy’s checks for Quentin’s expenses. Compared with his mother, he does not see the slightest reason to refuse the money of a “fallen woman” (p. 138); for him Caddy’s money is same as other money. However, he still gives Mrs. Compson the pleasure of burning the checks for the sake of “propriety” and fools her as to the co-ownership of the hardware store. In his philosophy of cold calculation, he is like a “modern Sancho Panza who could never mistake a windmill for an army, but who has no objections to others doing so, especially if he can turn it into his own advantage” (Vickery, 1995, p. 43).

Concerning Jason’s relationship with his niece Quentin, he acts similarly as his mother; i.e. he enjoys accumulating of Caddy’s money and at the same time takes revenge on Quentin for his lost prospect of a job. One reason for his bad treatment of Quentin is his misogyny. As C. Brooks says, “a common trait in Faulkner’s villains is the lack of any capacity for love” (Brooks, 1994, p. 294). For Jason, all women are just “bitches,” and his relationship with Lorraine is in fact nothing more than a business contract. He cannot understand why anyone would waste time courting women (as Southern gentlemen would); he wants to be clear of them, for women are primarily responsible for his “misfortune” – be it his mother, sister or niece.⁷⁹ Other reason for his rage is Quentin’s promiscuity, in which she shamelessly indulges before the eyes of all citizens of Jefferson.

⁷⁹ In this sense, Jason resembles his elder brother Quentin, for he too is “impotent.” While Quentin’s impotence is manifested in his inability to cope with Caddy’s misdemeanor, be it emotional or physical (i.e. failing the role of seducer, or avenger), in case of Jason his impotence has more literal meaning. By emphasizing his independence, he does not want others to be dependent on him. Therefore he will have neither wife, nor children, and with his and Benjy’s death there will be no Compsons left.

Although he is proud of his “un-Compson” sanity and mental balance, when confronted with his niece, he becomes more than emotionally unstable.

His frenzy, caused by his niece, is evident in his pursuit of Quentin and the man with the red tie in the fields. The red tie, the only characteristics of Quentin’s suitor, works on Jason as a red cloth on a bull. He is enraged by Quentin’s promiscuous behavior; for she thus destroys the respectability of the Compson’s in the eyes of the townspeople. In this aspect, it is important to realize that it is Jason who obstinately insists on the semblance of a real family (cf. his insisting on common breakfast and dinner) and, same as his mother, puts great emphasis on social reputation, for which Quentin could not care less.

Quentin’s final blow for everything she had to face, while living with her hypochondriac grandmother and her mean uncle, comes on April 8th, 1928, when she

swung herself by a rainpipe from the window of the room in which her uncle had locked her at noon, to the locked window and with the uncle’s firepoker burst open the locked bureau drawer and took the money [...] and climbed down the same rainpipe in the dusk and ran away with the pitchman who was already under sentence for bigamy (Faulkner, *Appendix: Compson 1699-1945*, 1994, p. 241).

Again, her uncle Jason is depicted as a man caught up in his own emotions. He is enraged when Quentin did not come to the breakfast and hurries to get her. After finding out that the door of her room is locked; he demands the key from Mrs. Compson. Unable to find it quickly enough, Jason shows his true nature concerning his mother, shouting “Give me the key, you old fool” (p. 175). As soon as he enters Quentin’s room and finds the untouched bed, he knows that something sinister must have happened. His premonition is further intensified by the pear tree and its branches, “scraped and rasped against the house and the myriad air, driving in the window, [which] brought the forlorn scent of the

blossoms” (p. 176), i.e. the obvious symbol of his sister Candace. He locks himself in his room and discovers that the money is gone.⁸⁰

Throughout the whole event of realization that Quentin and his saved money are missing, Jason manages to stay calm, save for the shouting at his mother. The first thing he does after being robbed is that he, as a good citizen of his country, loyal to authorities and obeying the laws, calls the police. As the only “sane Compson since before Culloden [...] and hence the last” (Faulkner, *Appendix: Compson 1699-1945*, 1994, p. 212), he believes that they will help him, but how great is his surprise when the sheriff refuses to do so. It is exactly at this time that Jason becomes to act almost as a maniac, hastily telling the sheriff his version of the story, “seeming to get an actual pleasure out of his outrage and impotence” (p. 189). When the sheriff asks him about the nature of that money and clearly hints that he has his suspicions about “who that money belongs to” (*Ibid.*), it is clear that the law and order, in which Jason believes, will not help him a tiniest bit. Jason is baffled, for all of a sudden the principles, which he used as the bases of his logic, turned against him; his world is lost, as the world of Quentin was some eighteen years ago.

The person chasing his niece and the man with the red tie in Mottson is a different Jason Compson. His system of calculation and logic in ruins, his pursuit is like that of an animal – with no plan and no clear thinking, acting impulsively, and being just subconsciously driven to recover at least something of his life savings. In Mottson, where he almost gets killed after a fight with one of the members of the show, he learns that the couple has vanished and that he will very probably never see his money again. Vanquished by his loss, his headache, and a shortage of camphor, he resigns, and eventually hires a black man to drive him back to Jefferson; \$7,000 for Quentin’s support, sent by Caddy, being finally in the hands of its true owner.

⁸⁰ Quentin’s robbery of her uncle is of dual nature. It is both the ordinary thing connected with running off the house, and also a logical outcome of Jason’s behavior toward her – a sort of Dickensian poetic justice. Jason, misogynous and proud of his cunning “system of retribution” for his lost job, is defeated by a girl, who is at the same time the reason as to why he lost the job.

4.5. The End of the Compsons

The novel ends with the words “each in its ordered place” (p. 199). Although they refer to Benjy and his perception of reality as a set of ordered patterns, they might be taken more symbolically. After the years of struggles and miserable existence in the shadow of the great ancestors, the Compsons were eventually put in its ordered place as a family of the long-vanished past, having no place in the commercialism of the New South. They were put so by their own member, Jason Compson who, after the death of his mother, put his brother into the insane asylum in Jackson and sold the remains of the Compson Mile. Having no children of his own, the Compsons have become a part of the historical records of the Yoknapatawpha County, thus joining the rows of the Sutpens and creating space for the emerging Snopeses from the later Faulkner’s trilogy.

As in case of the Sutpens, it was the enormous dependence on the past and on the Southern moral code, which helped to destroy them. Mr. Compson and Quentin, with their interests in abstract notions, brooding over the past, were clearly unfit for living in the New South of the 20th century. Yet even the materialism, epitomized in Jason, does not seem to constitute a better alternative. Hence, the message of the novel is rather ambiguous. If the Compsons were true family, and not just a group of contradicting people unable to love one another, they may have balanced the opposing tendencies, and thus prevent the disintegration. Yet since each one of them preferred to live in his/her private worlds, built upon different principles, lacking both love and humanity, no other option remained but destruction.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to prove that the decline of the aristocratic families of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* is deeply connected with the inability to overcome the enormous dependence on the past, and also on the Janus-faced Southern moral code which, however gallant and noble it may look at the first sight, proves to be the instrument of ultimate destruction. In this sense, the most important characters are Henry Sutpen, Quentin Compson, and their fathers. Each of them a descendant of a noble family, they both have to make the final decisions on their own, for there is no one to help them to cope with the situation they are facing. As to Henry and the marriage of Judith with Charles Bon, Sutpen plays the role of an observer; not until the miscegenation is imminent tells he Henry about Bon's "defect." In case of Quentin and Caddy, Mr. Compson, same as Thomas Sutpen, maintains his unconcerned attitude, only partly consoling Quentin with his cynical arguments about women's purity.⁸¹ The passivity of the parents and other family members thus only increases the urgency for some action which would reverse the tormenting situation. As discussed in the respective chapters, their solutions of the respective situation, originating in their worldviews based on Southern principles, are so ultimate and irreversible that there is simply nothing which would prevent the subsequent extinction of their families.

As to the suggestion for further analysis and potential expansion of the thesis, the theme of Southern aristocratic decline of is to be found also in Faulkner's third novel *Flags in the Dust (Sartoris)* and in a short story called "A Rose for Emily," which is often anthologized. In *Flags*, the main protagonists are members of the Sartoris family who after the Civil War managed to stand up and to keep their social and economical status. Nonetheless, the Sartorises are affected by personal tragedies, such as the death of young John Sartoris and his twin-brother Bayard's wife and child. Bayard, restless and depressive because of the death of his relatives, having self-destructive tendencies, is eventually killed

⁸¹ The same what was said about the young men's fathers can be said about their mothers, for both Ellen Sutpen and Caroline Compson fail in their mother roles; the first living in her personal world of illusions, the second in her self-pity and hatred to everything Compson.

during a plane crash, leaving behind a new wife and a son he always wanted. “Rose for Emily” tells a story about an aging spinster Emily Grierson who is highly respected by the townspeople of Jefferson but almost does not participate in the town life. Only after her death the representatives of Jefferson community manage to get into her house, where nobody has been for many years, and find there the body of Homer Barron, a Yankee artisan with whom Miss Grierson had an affair but whom they thought to have returned to the North. I believe that the analysis of those works would not only enrich the discourse but also bring a different perspective as to how the aristocratic decline is manifested in Faulkner’s works.⁸²

This thesis does not constitute the complete exhaustion of the proposed argument; its aim was only to focus on the most representative Faulkner’s works concerning the decline of Southern aristocratic families to prove the argument of the irrepressible past and the fatality of the Southern moral code. By the analysis of the aristocratic characters of those two novels with regard to the interdisciplinary introduction, I believe this task is now finished and the argument sufficiently proven. Nonetheless, it does not mean that we should leave Faulkner’s aristocrats behind; there are different perspectives in which they can be viewed and analyzed and we should be reminded of that fact by Mr. Compson’s words to Quentin, “no battle is ever won ... They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and [total] victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools” (p. 48).

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⁸² In case of *Flags*, one should pay attention to the sensitivity and psychological instability of Young Bayard, for he possesses the same character traits like Henry or Quentin (it seems that all Faulkner’s young aristocrats are extremely sensitive and unable to leave the past behind). Concerning “A Rose for Emily,” the importance lies in Miss Grierson’s reluctance to change and also in her fancy for possessing; when Barron tries to quit their relationship, she simply poisons him so that he cannot escape her, thus she manages to show her aristocratic power, for one does not disobey “the powerful.”

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