Chapter III

DECLINE OF THE SOUTH
"The Southern myth is a story or cluster of stories that expresses the deepest attitudes and reflects the most fundamental experiences of a people. Its subject is the fate of a ruined homeland. The homeland—so the story goes—had proudly insisted that it alone should determine its destiny. Provoked into a war impossible to win, it had nevertheless fought to its last strength and it had fought this war with a reckless gallantry and a superb heroism that, as Faulkner might say made of its defeat not a shame, but almost a vindication. Yet the homeland fell, and from this fall came misery and squalor; ravaging by the conquerors, loss of faith among the descendants of the defeated, and the rise of a new breed of faceless men who would batten on their neighbour's humiliation." 1

Howe, here, very precisely sums up the basic themes of Faulkner's major fiction. In his first Yoknapatawpha novel—Sartoris, he uses subjective and local materials to depict the decline of a family which once played a decisive role in shaping the regional

conscience of a very proud people. Later, he exploits the possibilities of this theme to its fullest extent in different forms in different novels. The Sound and the Fury in which Faulkner wrote 'his guts' and which is considered to be his major achievement, is again about a Southern family and its disintegration. This family once produced 'men of achievements', now its inward-turning and backward-looking generation cannot meet the challenges of the present day world. The title itself suggests that the entire drama of the Compsons is a futile exercise and produces nothing but meaningless sound and fury. About the most sensitive young man of The Sound and the Fury, Faulkner writes:

... his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous deflected names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn - back looking ghosts.2

In Absalom, Absalom! he dramatizes the rise and fall of a dynasty. Sutpen, the legendary hero of the Saga carves

2 Absalom, Absalom! (The Modern Library, New York) 1964, p. 12. (All references hereafter, to the text, will be to this edition).
out a big plantation to give shape to his 'factual scheme', but finally submits to brute necessity and leaves behind a ruined plantation and its tortured inmates. The other allied themes, like South's humiliation and degradation he handles in his later works. But the present chapter is concerned with the decline of the three big houses of the South, which figure in his three novels - *Sartoris*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* *Sartoris* (1929), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) are Faulkner's earlier works which directly deal with the decline of the present day plantation aristocracy of the South. *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) is his later work, but deals with the earlier phases of the Southern legend, and is about the founding, establishment, decline and the fall of the dynastic design of Thomas Sutpen. This is the only novel of Faulkner which explains in detail the basic behaviour patterns which the Southern aristocrats followed to give shape to their grand design and which they could not finally sustain because of some basic moral flaw in the conception and the execution of the design. Both the rise of the Southern plantation aristocracy and its subsequent fall are fully adumbrated in the story of Thomas Sutpen. Those who are familiar with the deep South
and its infra social structure feel that the Sutpen saga is a microcosmic representation of the real causes of the rise and the fall of the plantation economy and with this the aristocracy of the South. The grand design with which Thomas Sutpen was obsessed at a very early stage of his life was essentially the design of the whole region. A strong-willed white man of the frontier stage always aimed to possess a plantation on which negroes would work. Thomas Sutpen's design in this respect was neither 'Faustian', nor was it in any way an inhuman enterprise. To a very great extent it was just and laudable. About this design Patricia Tobin observes:

"Manifestly, Sutpen's dynastic design is the synchronic microcosm of Southern ideals, and the subsequent family history a diachronic parallel and a synchronic model of the fall of the South." 3

But the main theme of Absalom, Absalom! is not to show merely the rise and fall of an order, but to show how unscrupulous disregard of human values corrupts a system and finally becomes the sole cause of its fall. In this

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novel Faulkner creates a rich tragic texture which includes those turbulent forces which crush the aspirations of a very chivalrous people of his home-land.

At the age of fourteen Thomas Sutpen conceives his design in emulation of the aristocratic culture which humiliated him as a boy. Instead of struggling against the injustice and human indignity which the system nourishes he directs his life's energy towards out doing it and finally becomes its victim. He begins a relentless, unscrupulous pursuit of power on the island of Haiti in the French West Indies where he becomes the overseer for the plantation of a French sugar planter. Here, he acquires wealth and negroes to bring his design closer to reality. But he also marries the daughter of the plantation owner and fathers the son who will eventually be responsible for the failure of his grand design. Four years after the marriage he repudiates his wife because her veins contained 'a spot' of negro blood, which she and her father had kept secret at the time of the marriage. Sutpen regards that spot of negro blood as a curse upon his design. After this act of repudiation he appears in Jefferson one Sunday morning in June 1833 to establish an enduring aristocracy in the South.
Absalom, Absalom! is a very complex work of art and offers obstacle upon obstacle to the seeker of a continuity. For a reader who is only familiar with the conventional narrative pattern, related from a single point of view which illuminates a more or less recognizable reality, it presents much difficulty. The material of this novel is fragmented in time and distributed among multiple narrators, each with a passionate involvement that produces differing versions of the same subject and creates many textual problems for a reader. Even the narrators themselves are frustrated by the paucity of historical details and fail to connect cause and effect in a convincing manner. This is the reason why we gather even these basic facts of the Sutpen saga slowly from the text. Certainly, the unorthodox management of time frightens a reader, but if he persists, he finds that its four narrators not only unfold the mystery of the Sutpen legend but also prepare him to view human existence in all its glory and absurdity. The legend begins with Sutpen's humiliation at the hands of a negro porter of a big plantation in Virginia and ends in Jefferson with his death at the hands of Wash Jones, an ardent admirer of the brave 'Kernel' and the burning of Sutpen's 'Hundred' much later.
Miss Rosa Coldfield, who is the only living principal narrator in the novel, knows Sutpen personally. Her 'ornate often sexualized' rhetoric with its intensity turns the story of Sutpen into a horrid gothic tale. Her narration touches the most sensitive points of the story. After the Civil War, Sutpen returns to his 'Hundred' to discover to his great consternation that his grand design has collapsed once again. He tries to rebuild it with the same ruthlessness and singlemindedness, and in the process proposes to Miss Rosa, with a condition:

... that they try it first and if it was a boy and lived, they would be married. 4

This queer proposal for a 'trial marriage', that too in the presence of a negro inmate not only outrages her, but shocks her to such an extent that for the next forty-three years, to preserve the violence of the moment, she dresses herself only in black. She informs Quentin about Sutpen's ungracious treatment of not only a Southern lady but a close relation. And when she describes Sutpen's appearance in Jefferson - 'out of quiet thunderclap he would erupt' (man-horse demon), her methodist upbringing becomes evident in her use of the biblical vocabulary. Although

4 Ibid., p. 234.
she tries to be just and objective in her presentation
of Sutpen's life, she cannot command the necessary
detachment because of her 'old insult'. Even her most
balanced observations reveal her bias:

Oh, he was brave. I have never gainsaid
that. But that our cause, our very life
and future hopes and past pride, should
have been thrown into the balance with
men like that to buttress it - men with
valour, and strength but without pity and
honour - Is it any wonder that Heaven saw
fit to let us lose?

Miss Rosa denies 'honour and pity' to Sutpen. But there
is enough evidence in the book to show that her assessment
of a person much larger for her limited view is not sound.
She often goes wrong even in her understanding of the basic
facts of Sutpen's history. She states:

I saw Judith's marriage forbidden without
rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse; I saw
Ellen die with only me, a child, to turn
to and ask to protect her remaining child;
I saw Henry repudiate his home and birth
right and then return and practically fling
the bloody corpse of his sister's sweetheart
at the hen of her wedding gown; I saw that
man return-the evils' source and head
which had outlasted all its victims - who
had created two children not only to destroy
one another and his own line, but my line
as well, yet I agreed to marry him.

5 Ibid., p. 23.
6 Ibid., p. 18.
If we examine the content of her frantic assertions, we find that the other narrators give different and more convincing versions of the story. But Faulkner's scheme is to give each narrator her or his due, because the narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* are not only detached reporters, but also participants in this violent human drama of Sutpen and his family. Even then, Faulkner always gives enough help to the reader to view the narrator in the right perspective. Faulkner's portrait of Miss Rose is not drawn with full sympathy:

...and the rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity while the wan haggard face watched him above the faint triangle of lace at wrists and throat from the too tall chair in which she resembled a crucified child.  

Much later in the novel he gives a glimpse of her wasted life, its frustration and despair:

... I who had learned nothing of love, not even parents' love - that fond dear constant violation of privacy, that stultification of the burgeoning and incorrigible I which is the need and due of all mammalian met, became not mistress, not beloved but more than even love; I became all polymath love's androgynous advocate.


This agonized confession of Miss Rosa Coldfield undoubtedly prejudices the reader, but Faulkner provides adequate information to correct his perspective. From the other narrators he learns that she is not only unfamiliar with love, but she is a stranger to all other social interests. After that holocaust in 1865, she never regains her balance. Consequently, her version contains the germ of the legend but does not trace its right growth. She is the only character in the novel the nature of whose suffering eludes all moral formulations. She lives alone in her father's house in Jefferson and receives due respect from the local people. But very few know the true nature of her loneliness. Forty-three years later when she invites Quentin to narrate the story of Thomas Sutpen and his cursed children her fury remains unabated. Quentin hears its reverberation in her very brief but forceful presentation of Sutpen's life:

It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—(Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen, who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—(without gentleness begot)—
Miss Rosa Coldfield says - without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only - (Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something and died)...
(Save by her) Yes, save by her (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson,

The only thing which impresses Miss Rosa is his superhuman energy and exuberance and she feels that this energy comes either from the nether world or is purely diabolic. She in her own way tries to understand the man who said - 'Do Sutpen's' Hundred, and there was his 'Hundred'. This man who can exercise such a dark authority can be only a demon for her. And from her 'not-language' it appears that inwardly she desires to share his demonic energy. But when his ungentlemanly proposal frustrates her, she not only refuses to forgive him, but very carefully nurses the wound. She returns to this sore point that Sutpen ignored her human personality and reduced her to a simple normal. Critics view Miss Coldfield as a sentimental and a pathetic character. They point out that essentially she is a morbid character, a prisoner of her methodist back-ground who cannot put

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9 Ibid., p. 9.
things together in a proper context to realize their fuller significance. Richard P. Adams views her in a peculiar light and observes:

In herself Miss Rosa is an absurd comic character. But her effect on the story is neither slight nor unimportant. In her ridiculous way, she is a spokesman and bard of the Southern myth.

Certainly, in the total context of the novel Miss Rosa does not appear to be a comic character. But if the comic means exaggeration of certain human traits or a one-sided view of the incongruities of reality, then, to some extent she is comic. Here, it is not out of place to state that this is not the right way to view Faulkner's characters in their Southern setting. In a sense all his characters are tortured and limited. The basic thing about Miss Rosa is that she is also a victim of the Sutpen design. And more than that a victim of her time and her history.

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Mr. Compson's version of the story covers almost the same points, but he converts Sutpen's legend into a classical tragedy. Himself a fatalist and a victim of the civil war, he views Sutpen's daring and achievement in a different light. He has learnt about Sutpen from his father, General Compson who was a friend and a well-wisher of Sutpen. Now, Quentin learns from his father that Miss Rosa's demon was not an altogether despicable person, but was a man whose mind worked in a single direction. The only real weakness of Sutpen was his 'innocence'. This innocence he shows in his rejection of his Haitian wife. Sutpen shows no sign of remorse or regret in acting against her. His complete devotion to his design does not give him time to think about the finer things of life, specially about the binding human relationships. Anything which is not 'incremental' to his grand design, he simply repudiates. Again, in his rejection of Charles whose dire need was a simple nod of recognition, he shows extreme rigidity and throws the family into the darkest pit. Later, his proposal to Miss Rosa for a trial marriage reveals his indifference to human feelings. His treatment of Willy in child-bed is perhaps the height of cold unconcern to basic human values. Consequently, her grandfather cuts his throat with
a rusty scythe. General Compean talks to his son about Sutpen's innocence at some length. He thinks his attitude to morality was simplistic. He reduces the whole complex of human values to a simple formula. General Compean describes his idea of morality in the following words:

... that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake would come out.\footnote{Absalom, Absalom \(1\), p. 263.}

Throughout his eventful career Sutpen follows the simple pattern of natural justice or fairness and always feels that fairness is enough. He repudiates his first wife but leaves for her his entire material inheritance and in this way fully justifies his action. He feels that any woman will accept money as a final recompense for desertion. Never in his long career does Sutpen become aware of the higher concerns of life. He commits a typical Janesian sin and uses men, women, friends, neighbours and all those who sooner or later enter his arena. He is always ready to 'coerce, exploit if necessary brutalize' any one for his design.
This ruthlessness of Sutpen is viewed differently by different characters. Wash Jones calls it 'bravery'; Rose Coldfield recognizes it as 'demonic', Shreve discovers the 'Faustian element' in his character and Mr. Compson gives it the name of 'innocence'.

Sutpen's innocence troubles the reader and the commentator alike. They feel frustrated when they are called upon to explain this simple word. Mr. Compson who reduces Sutpen's tragedy to a Greek tragedy sees it as a moral flaw in his character. And when Sutpen asked General Compson 'Where did I make the mistake?', General Compson had no answer. Cleanth Brooks writes about Sutpen's innocence:

This is an "innocence" with which most of us today ought to be acquainted. It is par excellence the innocence of modern man, though it has not, to be sure, been confined to modern times. One can find more than a trace of it in Sophocles' Oedipus, and it has its analogies with the rather brittle rationalism of Macbeth... But innocence of this sort can properly be claimed as a special characteristic of modern man, and one can claim further that it flourishes particularly in a secularized society.12

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Commenting on Brooks' interpretation Albert J. Guerard writes:

... Sutpen, who decidedly possesses a "certain magnitude", is both a figure of mythical grandeur and Old Testament simplicity... and a symbolic presence of some historic validity: a representative "new man" hacking an estate out of the South Western wilderness, a Yankee secularized Puritan, a nineteenth century rugged individualist, an American. 13.

And a little later in the same paragraph he remarks:

Faulkner's Sutpen is a selective distortion of any conceivable "full reality"; and it is better so. 14

With Miss Rose, Sutpen's story remains in the family circle, with Mr. Compson it moves into the larger social context and Quentin and Shreve together give it the final shape. These two young men at Harvard piece together the bits and pieces of Sutpen's saga and solve the mystery of Bon's death at the hands of his admirer and half-brother Henry. They are not very much concerned with Sutpen's


14 Ibid., p. 307.
innocence and his design; they are interested in the South's reaction to the racial code. In the previous chapter it has been made clear that it is not incest but miscegenation which Henry cannot bless. But it is desirable to restate that Sutpen and Henry accepted the Southern code of honour and racial purity in preference to an intimate human relationship. After having collected the crucial facts and motives Quentin and Shreve for the first time build up the total Sutpen legend and derive a fearful knowledge about the heroic suffering and endurance of a defeated people.

Now, the real problem is how to view Sutpen's design and its tragic end. If one remains faithful to the text one discovers that it is Sutpen's blindness to human values which proved detrimental to his dynastic design. The order which he founds or the house he builds in the deep South is basically one which needs constant exploitation of human resources. This aristocratic order which in its attempt to keep its image untarnished accepts segregation as an integral part of its bi-racial living and fails to preserve its social and economic institutions intact because of its inner contradictions. No order, however, mighty it is can last long if it is erected on the dark foundation.

Goodhue Coldfield, the Methodist, Steward of Jefferson,
expresses the same sentiments:

The South... erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality, but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage. 15

Robert Penn Warren also writes:

... The old order... did not satisfy human needs, did not afford justice, and therefore was "accursed" and held the seeds of its own ruin. 16

Obviously, Sutpen with his moral lapses represents the basic urges of the ante-bellum South and his tragedy is the tragedy of the region. David Levin very precisely presents the significance of the Sutpen legend:

Thomas Sutpen represents the extreme image of commonsense practicality: not the greedy man, but the man seeking status in an acquisitive society that has refused to see that he has any intrinsic worth. Despite the singularly destructive effects of slavery in Sutpen's peculiar region, Faulkner makes it hard for any of us to regard this

15 Absalom, Absalom, p. 250.
image complacently. Slavery is, as Southerners used to say, a peculiar institution, but Faulkner uses it as an extreme example of acquisitive materialism and the denial of human brotherhood.¹⁷

A little earlier on the same page Levin states:

The test of Sutpen’s representativeness is that he found it necessary to imitate the gentry of Virginia.¹⁸

If we try to understand the meaning of the Sutpen legend with the help of the text and the critical opinions, we realize that Faulkner with his commentators went to impress upon us that the old Southern order was founded on exploitation, inequality and indifference to human brotherhood. Sutpen’s weakness is his innocence which ultimately means disregard for complex human values and social relationships. The theme of Absalom, Absalom is tragic and the tragedy emanates from Sutpen’s and Henry’s rejection of a son and a brother respectively. If Faulkner admires the old order of the deep South, he


¹⁸ Ibid., p. 130.
also shows its weaknesses in *Absalom, Absalom!* To Quentin
the Sutpen story represents the essence of the deep South.
But Poirier sees more than this:

But *Absalom, Absalom!* is not primarily
about the South or about a doomed family
as a symbol of the South. It is a novel
about the meaning of history.*

In *The Sound and the Fury*, on a smaller canvas, Faulkner
paints tragic scenes from the Compson chronicle. Essentially,
the novel is about:

the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers:
a "doomed little girl" climbing a pear tree
to see a funeral; to see, more exactly,
through the parlour window, "what in the
world the grown people were doing that
children couldn't see".*

This initial situation steadily grew in Faulkner's
fertile imagination and took the shape of a powerful
symbol which kept him restless nearly for twenty years.

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*19 William R. Poirier, *William Faulkner : Two Decades of
Criticism*, (eds.) F.J. Hoffman & Olga Vickery,

*20 Faulkner in the University*, cited, Hugh Kenner, *A
Home made World*, (ed.) Gwynn and Mother, *(Allied
The story of this 'doomed little girl' which he tells in four sections of the novel is perhaps the most intensely realized piece of American fiction of this century. In this novel alone he exploits his personal, family and regional experiences and creates a myth which very aptly unfolds the causes of the breaking up of the old aristocratic order of his region.

The novel is about the Compsons. The family consists of Mr. Jason, Sr., Mrs. Carolina Compson and their four children. Attached to the family is Mrs. Compson's brother, Maury Bascomb, who leads a shady inactive life on the Compson establishment. Mr. Compson, a lawyer by profession spends his 'drink-sodden' days in contemplation of literature and philosophy. He views the world as a place where nothing counts - not even victory. He says:

Because no battle is ever won... They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools. 21

He is a cynic and a nihilist. His attitude to life largely colours the vision of his family. His wife suffers from hypochondria and always grumbles. She feels that she comes from a nobler family and her present suffering is the result of her misalliance with a Compson. Her favourite son Jason, Jr., who is a pure rationalist, keeps a mistress to avoid unnecessary botheration. He is the only 'sane Compson' in the family. Mrs. Compson admires him for his prudence and practical wisdom and all such virtues which a Boscomb displays. Denby is an idiot. The negro servants look after him. He often bellow and once he starts bellowing, it becomes difficult to pacify him. He lives by one or two simple instincts. He likes his pasture and Caddy's protection. Quentin, the eldest son is sensitive and is attached to his sister. He is over protective and fears that one day someone will violate her virginity. The very idea of violation troubles him. About his problem Faulkner writes:

Who loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honour precariously and (he knew well) and only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead as a miniature replica of all the whole vast globy earth may be poised on the nose of a trained seal; who
loved not the idea of the incest which he
would not commit, but some presbyterian
concept of eternal punishment. 22

Quentin is a tortured soul and ends his life by
drowning in the Charles river. Caddy, the daughter
is noble and affectionate and looks after her helpless
brothers and offers them all legitimate comforts. But her
attachment to Quentin is of a complex nature. Faulkner
expresses the nature and the magnitude of her tragedy
in the Appendix:

Doomed and knew it; accepted the doom without
either seeking or fleeing it. Loved her
brother despite him, loved not only him but
loved in him that bitter prophet and
inflexible corruptless judge of what he
considered the family's honour and its doom,
as he thought he loved, but really hated,
in her what he considered the frail doomed
vessel of its pride and the foul instrument
of its disgrace... 23

The family affair is managed by Dilsey and her children.
She is extremely motherly and offers to the Compsons those
normal comforts which Mrs. Compson denies to her family.

22 Malcolm Cowley (ed.) The Portable Faulkner. (New

23 Ibid., p. 745.
Faulkner chooses this family of the old planters and uses its regressive, defeatist psychology to show the true nature of the region's failure to accept the basic facts of life. The trouble begins with Mr. Compson, the head of the family. Quentin learns about Caddy's transgression and her violation by Daltoon Ames. Emotionally unsettled by this grievous 'psychic wound' he approaches his father for real consolation. But contrary to his expectations Mr. Compson deflates the magnitude of the problem to such an extent that it loses all its existential anguish. He tells Quentin:

Father said a man is the sum of his misfortunes. One day you would think misfortune would get tired, but then time is your misfortune. Father said. A gull on an invisible wire attached through space dragged. You carry the symbol of your frustration into eternity. Then the wings are bigger... Only who can play a harp...

A typical Southern young man conscious of its Cavalier tradition, its glory and pride, Quentin, who is in a sense motherless, often tries to involve his father in his deep personal problem. But Mr. Compson who lacks the fire  

24 The Sound and the Fury, p. 123.
and violence of his ancestors offers him only elaborate theories, pure conceptual paradoxes for the basic human dilemmas. Undoubtedly Caddy's sexual freedom has shaken him, but he consoles himself with the help of his cynical speculations. He says: 'it was men invented virginity not women'. And much later in the same section we learn from him:

Women are never virgin. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said so is virginity and I said You don't know. You can not know he said yes. On the instant when we come to realize that tragedy is second hand. 25

Caddy's moral laxity creates a very abnormal situation, but the real trouble with the Compsons is that there is no one in the family to meet the challenge. In life, women generally play a constructive role in such situations and give the family the necessary strength and courage to face the trial. But Mrs. Compson plays a negative role. She plans to hide the family disgrace by a grand marriage ceremony. Jason, her practical son, is not at all touched by the family crisis; he only curses Caddy for the loss of his bank job.

25 Ibid., p. 135.
Benjy is utterly helpless and simply shouts '—Caddy does not smell like a tree'. Quentin who is deeply involved in his family's tragic destiny tries to save the family pride by declaring before his father—'I have committed incest father'. Mr. Compson who has developed a peculiar distrust for all sorts of serious verbal articulations does not accept his son's statement at all. He simply tells Quentin:

... just stay awake and see evil done for a little while its not always.

He also tries to minimize the significance of Caddy's laxity by remarking—'nothing is so dreadful that can be remembered tomorrow'. The real problem with Quentin is that he remembers too many things. He simply cannot forget his sister's sexual transgressions. Before his death he is haunted by the same ideas:

... you have committed incest otherwise and it wasn't lying I wasn't lying and he you wanted to sublimate a piece of natural human folly into a horror and then exorcise it with truth and it was to isolate her out of the loud world so that it would have to flee us of necessity... You are not thinking of finitude you are contemplating an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the

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26 Ibid., p. 195.
When he has realized that even the despair or remorse or bereavement is not particularly important to the dark dicoeman... and it is hard believing to think that a love or a sorrow is a bond purchased without design which matures willy nilly and is recalled without warning to be replaced by whatever issue the Gods happen to be floating at the time not you will not do that until you come to believe that even she was not quite worth despair.27

In his own typical way he tries to help his son. Apparently, he is not alarmed by Caddy's sexual aberration and tries to convince his son that there is nothing unusual about the whole sordid affair. But Quentin who is in search of the real answer to his problems finds his father ineffective. Ultimately, he comes to the conclusion that his promethean problem does not have a human solution; he commits suicide and renders the family utterly helpless.

If Mr. Compson's cynical contemplations do not provide emotional anchorage to the family and allows it to disintegrate, Mrs. Compson's role is equally dismal. Always conscious of her family name, she very much likes to play the part of a fine Southern lady. It never occurs to her that she has to raise her children. On the contrary she

27 Ibid., pp. 195-196.
always discovers ways to shirk responsibility. When she is convinced that her youngest child is mentally deficient, she changes his name from Henry to Benjy. This unloving act even Dilsey denounces, but she does not care for their feelings. It gives her satisfaction that the child is now a Compton not a Bascob. She discovers that Caddy kisses a boy, and this simple fact alarms her so much that all next day she moves around the house in a black dress. She never cares to educate her properly in the ways of the world. She receives the news of Quentin's suicide and reacts in a very unmotherly manner by saying - 'it's only to flout me'. She often complains - 'what I have done to have been given children like these'. Herbert Head discovers that Caddy is big with another man's baby; he divorces her. Caddy wants to live with her people, but Mrs. Compton does not want her in the family, for the simple reason that she cares more for the family honour than for her fallen daughter. Her partiality to her people makes her partly an outsider in the family. Consequently, she fails to visualize the 'dark shape of doom', hovering over the Compton household.

The Sound and the Fury unfolds the tragic fate of a 'doomed' Southern girl. But rightly, Faulkner does not
give her a separate section in the novel. All the narrators
tell her story in the way that suits them best. But she
never directly speaks to the reader. What emerges from
their narration is Caddy’s promiscuity and its consequences.
She emotionally disturbs Benjy who immediately senses his
loss and the loss of her virginity. Her departure from
the family inspires feelings of homelessness and victimi-
zation. First Jason manages to get him gelded for a minor
offence and later sends him to the asylum in Jackson.
Quentin’s real problem begins with her physical maturity.
She alone understands his compulsive psychology and the
root cause of his melancholy. She also understands that
after her marriage Mr. Compson will be really lonely. This
is clear when she asks Quentin to look after the father
and Benjy. Fully conscious of the family problems she
marries Herbert Head to save the family from disgrace. But
her marriage proves to be a real calamity to the Compsons.
Soon she returns to her house to live with her people,
but Mrs. Compson does not accept her in the family. She
simply disappears from the world of Jefferson leaving
her child at her family home.

It seems that in spite of her excessive libidinal
lapses, indifference to family honour, and rebellion
against the Southern ideal of womanhood, Caddy continues to enjoy Faulkner's sympathy. He always speaks about her feelingly:

To me she was the beautiful one. She was my heart's darling. That's what I wrote the book about and I used the tools which seemed to me the proper tools to try to tell, try to draw the picture of Caddy.²³

The cause of this special partiality to Caddy is not far to seek. Obviously, Faulkner does not consider her fully responsible for her fall and degradation. He simply realizes that the dormant 'dark Compson strain' has become active in her. Like a Greek character in a profound tragic drama she simply submits to her fate. Beautiful, strong-willed, sexually aggressive, she finds the family atmosphere uncongenial for her proper growth. Her mother's inadequacies do not prepare her to face life as normal girls do. Her father naturally cannot give her that emotional support which a girl in the process of growing

²³ Faulkner in the University, (eds.) Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville : The University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 16.
up needs. Even Quentin who wants to play the role of a Galehead is not strong enough to protect her from the 'louid world'. She knows that her brother suffers from a 'death wish' and wants to use her to hide his own sexual deficiencies. In such a home, Caddy finds no real sympathiser and consequently decides to follow her own inclinations. But Faulkner unfolds Caddy's story in such a manner that she never loses the sympathy of the reader. The degradation of Caddy becomes the degradation of the Compsons because the entire Compson tradition is responsible for her tragic fall. One thing which becomes clear is that the Compson order is basically not different from the Sutpen order, or the Southern order. Hence, a family cannot escape its tragic heritage, suffering and humiliation.

Quentin commits suicide; Caddy physically disappears from the Compson world; Mr. Compson dies, Benjy's pasture goes to a golf club, the family fortune rapidly declines, and Jason becomes the head of the family. He works in a hard-ware store and takes keen interest in the stock-exchange. His attitude to life and his family is very much different from that of the other members of the family. He has
no use for the great family figures. He says:

Blood, I says, governors and generals.
It's a damn good thing we never had any
good kings and presidents; we'd all be
down there at Jackson chasing butterflies. 29

He also does not want to 'nurse his conscience' like a
'sick puppy'. He is so much obsessed with routine matters
that he has hardly any time left for the higher concerns
of life. Now, he becomes the mainstay of the family.
Naturally, he likes to be obeyed by all in the family.
Quentin (Miss Quentin) grows in the family and behaves
almost in the same fashion as her mother behaved. She
becomes a real headache to her grandmother. Jason, a
sadist unnecessarily harasses her. Caddy supports her
daughter, and Jason pilfers from her remittances. Quentin,
somehow, discovers that her uncle misappropriates the
money her mother sends for her maintenance. She grows
defiant, flouts his authority and finally disappears
with $7000 with a pitchman. 

29 The Sound and the Fury, p. 247.
With Jason the family line ends. He is a bachelor and is against perpetuating a family. His attachment to her mother does not stop him from cheating her and her people. His abnormal sanity, inhuman greed, indifference to family ethos, contempt for women - ('once a bitch always a bitch') - deprives him of all the finer human sentiments. No wonder, he is destined to become the last 'soul instrument of destruction' of the Compass order. Daniel Hoffman fully understands the essence of his character when he writes:

"The self-determinative hero" whose "powere" prove the self spiritually indomitable and adaptable to the wildest vicissitudes of fortune and nature... His character is aggressive, competitive, shrewd. He seeks mastery over nature, with respect to society, he seeks to demonstrate superiority over other individuals but not ordinarily does he recognize society as an organic structure in which power can be exercised for extra personal ends. 30

Michael Millgate finds in him those qualities which normally a Compass does not possess. He observes:

Since Jason's instincts are commercial and materialistic they are also anti-rural.

and anti-traditional. His is a willed deracination from the community in which he continues to live... however, it is this very materialism and deracination which makes Jason the one male Compson with any practical competence.

If we put these two opinions together and examine Jason's character, we find that he possesses those traits which Faulkner always condemns. He never admires a Southerner for his shrewdness, aggressiveness, or his materialistic tendencies. He admires a man for his courage, charity, dignity, honour, compassion and such other virtues which make men 'endure'. Jason totally lacks these qualities. Naturally Dilsey visualizes the situation and utters:

I've seed de first en de last... I seed de beginnin, on now sees de endinc.

Hence the problem is: what is the trouble with the Compson's? Is the novel about the disintegration of a


32 The Sound and the Fury, p. 297.
family because of the Civil War and the consequent economic disasters, or is its decline due to other factors? If we read Faulkner aright we realize that he never minimizes the importance of the social and economic forces, but at the same time, he never gives them precedence over human factors. The Compsons disintegrated not because they lost the 'Compson Hill' and later Benjy's pasture, but they disintegrated precisely because they failed on the human front: A family obsessed with its vanished glory; indifferent to present day realities, devoid of love and filial bond, and 'drained of all its energy and perspective', cannot face the harsher facts of life. It is not the failure of the economic order which proves fatal to the Compsons but it is the failure of human relationships which brings the family to disgrace and finally to disintegration. Carvel Collins admirably sums up the real causes of the Compson's disintegration:

But it remains a tragedy, nevertheless, for Dilsey is by no means able to offset the destructive effect of the Compsons' overwhelming emotional failure. 35

After a very brief discussion of the causes and the forces which led to the fall of the Southern aristocratic order in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*, it is perhaps out of place to discuss *Sartoris* in this chapter which is supposed to be a minor achievement of William Faulkner. But it is not difficult to justify the scheme of the chapter and show that *Sartoris* forms an integral part of this study. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner explores the causes of the South's decline. In *The Sound and the Fury* he discusses the fall of the Compsons of the present century. But *Sartoris* is mainly concerned with the post-First World War generation. It is about Bayard Sartoris' violent death and his rejection of the present-day Southern commercial world mainly dominated by the Snopeses and their ilk. In this novel Faulkner for the first time portrays a young hero who becomes his model for years to come. Perhaps more importantly in *Sartoris* he exploits the family legend to depict the tragic fate of his homeland. *Sartoris* is his source book and from this source emanates the saga of the South.

The Sartorises of *Sartoris* are real patricians. They command great respect in the community. It is not their wealth and position which overawe the people, but
their way of life which inspires admiration for them. Even the negro coachman is conscious of the family honour which becomes evident when he scolds a black chauffeur:

Don't block off no Sartoris carriage, black boy. -- Block de commonlity if you want, but don't inverryoke no equipage Waitin on crowned gal Miss Jenny. Boy won't stand for it. 34

Miss Jenny who is the basic source of the Sartoris legend is equally imperious. She takes the colonel to the doctor's nursing home and there the nurse inquires 'whether she had an appointment', she simply loses her temper and orders:

You go and tell Dr. Alford we are here. Tell him I have some shopping to do this morning and I have no time to wait. 35

Not only the nurse but even the doctor readily followed her command.

Bayard Sartoris the young protagonist of the novel returns home from the First World War with a psychic wound. He loses his pilot brother during the war; he is


"All references hereafter to the text, will be to this edition."

35 Ibid., p. 98.
full of haunting memories and this becomes the source of his estrangement. His life in Jefferson becomes a burden. He appears so much lost that Miss Jenny predicts that like a true Sartoris he will meet a violent death one day. His marriage with Narcissa does not alter the situation. In her own way she tries to drag him to the family comfort, but it does not simply suit him. He recklessly drives his car and one day because of his recklessness he kills his grandfather Colonel Bayard Sartoris. Full of remorse he spends sometime with a hillman farmer named MacCallum. When he returns to the Sartoris Mansion attempts are made to involve him in the family affairs, but nothing succeeds with him.

Bayard is Faulkner's first Southern hero who displays all those traits which we find in his later heroes. He is violent, proud, morbidly attached to something dead and suffers from a death wish. He is a world-weary young man who shows complete unconcern, and finally dies piloting an experimental plane. Hoffmann's observation partially explains the nature of his plight:

Bayard Sartoris goes to his death in a gesture of aberrant heroism, as Quentin Compson was to commit suicide to protect
a "legend" entirely abstracted from fact of any kind. Between the two — a legend and the reductive fact — there are intervening and alleviating agencies.

Hoffman's imputation of 'aberrant heroism' to Bayard Sartoris does not fully satisfy a critical reader of Sartoris. Perhaps he means that in this novel Faulkner fails to connect the act and the motive neatly. This is understandable. But certainly, it does not mean that Bayard's death is without a far-reaching significance. On the contrary, Faulkner tries to place the legend in a meaningful context. If he allows aunt Jenny to inflate the family chronicle, he also places it in certain human contexts which show Bayard's search for positive values and which his compulsive tendencies do not allow him to identify.

Basically, Bayard Sartoris is incapable of loving anyone. His lack of capacity for love results in a death urge. Therefore, the objects of his adoration are all dead. He obsessively loves his brother who died during the war, and his great-grandfather, both of who fought

and died during the Civil War. He is always in search of something positive. He knows the present-day Southern order, and its fundamental limitations. He is a real 'loner' who does not know how to connect himself with anything meaningful and permanent. Consequently, he looks back for support. More than the limitations of the Southern society, the Sartoris tradition makes him a prisoner. The Sartoris tradition which stands for valour and adventure inspires him to live like a Sartoris. The present South which worships money and success cannot offer him anything positive. As Irving Howe says:

"Home from the war and in search of a way to live, Bayard Sartoris finds neither guidance nor release from his need. Somewhere, something has been lost, and, as he plunges wilfully to his death, that is all he knows."

In this chapter an attempt has been made to recognize those factors and forces which destroyed the patrician order of the deep South. Thomas Sutpen appears in Jefferson in 1833, and Mrs. Compson dies in 1933. These dates are significant because between them we have the spiritual history of four generations. But Faulkner's

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plan was not to present this history in a simplified fashion. His novels are a proof of that fact and we find in them the agonies, strifes and miseries of life. Through them we know that whenever an order collapses, it does so because of its gross disregard of responsibility towards a fellow being. The Southern order represented by the Sutpens, the Sartorises and the Compsons failed because their founders ignored the human personality. C. Hugh Holman rightly states the situation:

The South once knew an order and tradition based on honour and personal integrity, but it was guilty of the exploitation of fellow human beings, the Indians and the Negroes. Because of this great guilt, came the Civil War like a flaming sword and ended the paradise of the noble, but guilty past. After the War, noble men for ignoble reasons submitted themselves to the moral duplicity and the mechanical efficiency of the mindless new world, and the region fell into the darkness of moral decay.

The South declined not because it lost a war, but because it could not withstand the inner dissension and the onslaught of an amoral industrial ethos. For the growth

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and stability of a culture, what is necessary is not merely a congenial physical condition, but also a positive attitude to life. In the absence of such an attitude a culture declines and decays. People lose the necessary will and discipline to revive and rejuvenate it. The Civil War placed the South in the same predicament. It damaged the physical props of the aristocratic culture and also curbed the creative will of the people to revive its old culture in its pure Cavalier form. The people of the region grew nihilistic or inflexible in their attitude to their old cultural imperatives and followed divergent moral standards and traditions without scrutinizing their validity in the altered historical context. In other words they failed to mobilize those human resources which sustain a culture and its ideals. Faulkner describes the phenomenon with the help of the tortured men of the region - Henry, Joe, Quentin, and Bayard. Thus it was not the old guilt or the new wound which destroyed the old South, but the lack of courage, incentive and spiritual adventure which proved fatal.