

Buddenbrooks  
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Sept 2021

### Abwärts

The original proposed title for Mann's novel - at that time a novella - was Abwärts meaning "downwards". The use of title, "Buddenbrooks" and subtitle "The decline of a family", signifies that the book can be read both as an aesthetic description of a bourgeoisie German family and as a moral tale of decline. In this sense, it has been said that the novel appealed both to those who sympathized with or aspired to the wealthy class and those who were critical of it and applauded their demise - like the spinster cousins.

The Buddenbrooks family appears to follow a common pattern of rise, peak, decadence, and decline but there is complexity and subtlety in that trajectory. It is implied from the initial passages of the book and at the centennial celebration of the firm that the family has, in recorded history, followed an upward trajectory from more modest means until we find them a prominent and rising family in 1835 Lübeck. At the opening dinner, Pastor Wunderlich notes:

"A happy present is not something we can always take for granted. These young people who have joined to celebrate with us older folks probably cannot imagine that things were ever any different"

The novel opens just prior to the peak of the family's prosperity. Even as the family celebrates their new home, Mann is careful to insert small hints, such as the discussion of the decline of the previous owners that foreshadows a similar fate. The firm and family will reach the height of wealth and respect in the third generation as Thomas injects new vitality into the business and resolve in the handling of family affairs. Despite his efforts, the novel ends in decline as Hanno annotates in the family history that nothing will follow, and then dies to prove the point. The family splits apart. But the family has not hit rock bottom. There is a hint of hope, but only a hint, that things will yet turn around.

I see Tony as the character who develops the most over the course of the novel and who represents that small sliver of hope. While Thomas seems more concerned with how the family is viewed externally rather than what is truly honorable, Tony evolves from her oft-repeated "silly goose" stage to a mature woman, holding up against repeated injustices. One of the most important scenes in the novel is the confrontation between Tony and Thomas following the Permanader debacle. After Thomas advises Tony to return to Munich to erase any evidence of a scandal, Tony lectures him:

"Hold your tongue, Thomas. It's my turn now. Listen to me. So you think the only shame and scandal in life is what people gossip about, do you? Oh no. The secret scandals that gnaw at us and eat away at our self-respect are far worse. Are we Buddenbrooks the kind of people who want to be 'tip-top' on the outside, as they say here, while choking down our humiliation within our four walls? You do amaze me, Tom. Just picture your father and how he would react, and then judge

as he would have. No, no, everything must be clean and out in the open. You can show the world your books at the end of every day and say, “There you are!”

In the final family meeting as Gerda is departing for Amsterdam there are several quick observations worth noting. The annoying daughters of Gotthold are described as having grown “bonier and gaunter” or “fat”. Klothilde has not changed at all - heaping her plate at the final dinner and being called a ‘muttonhead’ by Tony. Gerda “was taking nothing with her. She was leaving just as she had come.”

But Tony, Erika and Elizabeth have not only survived—they have become wiser and resilient. Tony, in particular is described as retaining her beauty and inner peace:

“Despite the troubled life she had led, despite her bad digestion, she did not look fifty. Her complexion had lost some of its glow... But there was not a single gray thread in the smoothly combed hair under her mourning cap.”

Tony accepts the family history from Gerda signifying that she is now in charge of the family’s destiny, and she resolves to persevere: “Yes, that’s how it goes. One struggles and takes another running start and goes into battle again.”

Yes, Tony has lost almost everything to the point that she suggests that Klothilde should host them for dinner because “you’re no worse off that we are now”. But she has her dignity. It recalls to me the final scene of *The Grapes of Wrath* where Rose of Sharon, having nothing else, offers her breast to the dying stranger, and “smiles mysteriously”.

Decline in literature and in *Buddenbrooks*

Decline is at least half of the human story - the fate of Aztecs and Sumarians - balanced by advancement - space travel and modern medicine. Consider some of the works we’ve read and various causes or factors leading to decline: Power corrupts (*All the Kings Men*), obsessive maniacal behavior (*Moby Dick*), war (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) hedonism (*Cousin Bette*) insecurity (*Othello*) ego (*King Lear*).

Mann seems to be attributing the demise of the *Buddenbrooks* to not one thing, but many. The decline is more subtle, complex and realistic. The family fades. It doesn’t seem inevitable, and at times it seems like the family will bounce back such as when Tony remarries. The *Buddenbrooks*’s gradual loss of prestige, wealth and vigor has multiple causes as depicted by Mann: the moral failure or even criminal behavior of people who marry into the family, questionable decisions and spending, implied weakening of the bloodline, loss of focus, vanity that weakens public perception, the prodigal brother, competent competitors, and pure bad luck. Tooth decay and stomach aches hint at weakness brought on by decadence. Also, the family seems to accept only the members of the family that fit their mold. Note how Gotthold is rejected for marrying a “shop girl” for love, Christian is tolerated or less but not loved. Thomas fails to embrace and love his very talented son, instead trying to mold him into someone he will never be. Tony is essentially forced to marry out of duty and to add prosperity to the family.

For those reading the book looking for moral lessons, there are plenty here to discuss.

To end, let me provide a few notes on the real Buddenbrooks - the Mann family. The Mann family history goes back as far as 1611 to a town in the north of Germany. By 1775, they were residents of Lübeck where they grew in stature as grain merchants. Thomas Mann's father was a senator of Lübeck. Paul Thomas Mann, our author, was born in 1875 (the year Thomas Buddenbrook dies in the novel). In 1891, when Thomas Mann was 16, the elder Mann died, and the family business was liquidated. This money eventually provided funds for the two boys, Thomas and Heinrich, to pursue their writing careers. Here the stories of the imaginary and real families diverge. While the Buddenbrooks decline after their business liquidation, the Mann family finds new vigor through the introduction of art into the previously business-centric family.

In 1900, at age 25, Thomas completed Buddenbrooks, his first full-length novel. In 1905 he married Katia with whom he fathered six children. In January 1912, Katia was admitted to a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland providing material for *The Magic Mountain*. At the outbreak of WWI, Thomas Mann was emphatically nationalistic, pro war, and espoused authoritarian government over democracy.

His brother, Heinrich Mann was a successful writer championing liberal causes and speaking out against WWI and the German Imperial Society. In 1915, after the outbreak of WWI, Heinrich wrote an essay that contained a "hostile reference" to his brother Thomas who viewed this as a betrayal. In response, Thomas started a lengthy work titled "Reflections of an Unpolitical Man". An odd title as Thomas was frequently involved in public debate of political issues. Over time, Thomas Mann repudiated his earlier ideas and embraced democracy. In 1929 Mann was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature with special emphasis placed on Buddenbrooks. As the Nazi's rose to power, Thomas Mann spoke publicly against them on multiple occasions. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Mann's children warned him not to return home from a vacation and Mann never resided in Germany again, though he visited after the war. He eventually settled in the US for the war years where he made radio broadcasts against Nazi Germany. While in the US, he was investigated by the FBI for suspected and likely real communist sympathies. The children of Katia and Thomas have mostly continued in their father's footsteps, many of them becoming writers. One of them I found especially interesting. Elisabeth received accolades as the "mother of the oceans" for her work protecting the environment. She was a recognized expert on maritime law and received awards from several governments and the United Nations. Her career is as impressive as her father's. Mann died in 1955 in Zurich, leaving the family, we might note, not abwärts but rather aufwärts - on an upward trajectory.