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Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family

Thomas Mann · *1901 · H. T. Lowe-Porter translation (1924)*

Thomas Mann's first novel follows four generations of a merchant family in the old Hanseatic city of Lübeck, from about 1835 to 1877. It opens with a housewarming in a new house and ends with the death of the last child. As the family's wealth and standing rise and fall, its members grow more refined and less able to carry on the business.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Why does a family decline as it grows more cultured, and what is lost when the practical energies that built it are spent?

Mann answers with a story, not a theory. Thomas Buddenbrook keeps the firm going by sheer effort, and the effort wears him out. His brother Christian drifts, his sister Tony makes unhappy marriages, and his son Hanno is a musical, fragile boy who has no taste for business. The book is both precise about the money and moving about the people, and it makes a decline feel like a human experience.

KEY CHARACTERS

Thomas Buddenbrook
The senator and head of the firm.

Tony (Antonie)
His proud sister, who marries twice.

Christian Buddenbrook
His brother, an idler and actor.

Consul Johann Buddenbrook
Their father.

Hanno
Thomas's son, a musical, fragile boy.

Gerda
Thomas's wife, a violinist.

Sesemi Weichbrodt
An old schoolmistress.

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The House on Meng Street

PARTS ONE TO THREE

The elder Johann and the Consul celebrate the new house. Tony is sent to marry Grünlich, and the firm prospers.

- The housewarming gives a picture of a confident family.
- Tony's marriage is arranged for the firm's sake.
- The first generation's habits are clear.

02

Tony's Trials and Thomas's Rise

PARTS FOUR TO SIX

Grünlich is ruined, Tony returns home, and Thomas becomes head of the firm and a senator.

- Grünlich's failure is a family disgrace.
- Tony's pride is hurt but not broken.
- Thomas takes the firm's weight on himself.

03

Decline

PARTS SEVEN TO NINE

Christian is lost to the stage, Clara dies, and the firm shrinks. The Hagenströms advance.

- Christian's drifting is comic and sad.
- The firm's losses mount.
- The Hagenströms are the rising family.

04

Thomas and Hanno

PARTS TEN AND ELEVEN

Thomas reads a book of philosophy that moves him deeply, and dies suddenly. His son Hanno dies of typhoid.

- Thomas's discovery of philosophy comes too late.
- His sudden death follows a trivial accident.
- Hanno's death ends the line.

05

The Last Scene

PART ELEVEN, ENDING

The surviving women gather and speak of a reunion. Sesemi Weichbrodt insists that it is so.

- The women are the survivors of the family.
- The talk is of faith and hope.
- The ending is quiet and firm.

Family and Decline · Money and Business · Art and Fragility · Time

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Follow the house through the book. When does it change hands?
2. Mann lets each generation speak differently. Notice the shifts.
3. Thomas is the book's central figure. Ask what drives him.
4. The ending is a faith statement from an old woman. Think about what it means.

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