



Poor Thomas Buddenbrook! Family Business in Literature

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According to the so-called Buddenbrooks syndrome, substantial differences can arise in managing and running a family business across generations. The first generation of proprietors supposedly possesses the pioneering character, striving for money and creating a successful business. The second generation, it is alleged, exerts itself in strengthening the firm and increasing its recognition and social prestige. The third generation sometimes lacks dedication to the management of the family business, preferring leisure and non-productive activities. In fact, German Nobel Prize–winner Thomas Mann’s novel *Buddenbrooks* itself shows that this usual understanding of the Buddenbrooks syndrome is incorrect. Fiction provides an excellent way to analyze family business. It is possible to establish a classification of different models based on significant features of family firms in literature, as I attempt to do in this essay.

There is a fashion in international academic circles, related to the subject of family firms and their economic history, referred to as the “Buddenbrooks syndrome.” This syndrome derives its name from German Nobel Prize–winner Thomas Mann’s novel *Buddenbrooks*, published in 1901. The novel follows the circumstances of a German family firm through several generations, as well as the human, economic, social, and political context in which the family evolves.

According to the Buddenbrooks syndrome, substantial differences may occur in the way different generations manage a family business. The first generation of proprietors, the firm’s founders, has a pioneering character, striving for money and success. The second generation, in turn, aims to strengthen and increase the firm’s recognition and social prestige. The third generation sometimes shows insufficient dedication to the

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management of the firm, preferring leisure and non-productive activities. In short, according to the Buddenbrooks syndrome, in the third generation, representatives of a family firm are not dedicated to business, but rather to music or to a social or fashionable life.¹

However, the primary source, Thomas Mann's brilliant novel, contains nothing that supports the popular definition of the Buddenbrooks syndrome. In the novel, four generations of the Buddenbrook family run the firm. Johann, the third-generation Buddenbrook, was not given over to leisure and non-productive activities that would have been detrimental to the management of the firm. Neither was Thomas, the fourth-generation Buddenbrook, who was to be the last owner of the family firm. He neither neglected the management of the business nor indulged himself in hedonistic and playful activities. It is true that Hanno Buddenbrook, who might have been the fifth generation of the Buddenbrook owners, enjoyed performing music more than caring for the business of the family, but Hanno was a child under 15 when the stipulation came to liquidate the firm. Thus, one of my goals in this essay is to emphasize the inadequacy of using the concept of the Buddenbrooks syndrome for a family firm that begins its decline during the third generation of owners.

Now we are going to meet the Buddenbrooks (see Figure 1). We will observe them from two perspectives: in conjunction with the features of contemporary family firms and in relation to other family firms in literature.

The First Generation: Johann Buddenbrook

In Thomas Mann's novel, Johann Buddenbrook founded the family firm in 1768.² Although Mann never named the firm's location in the novel,

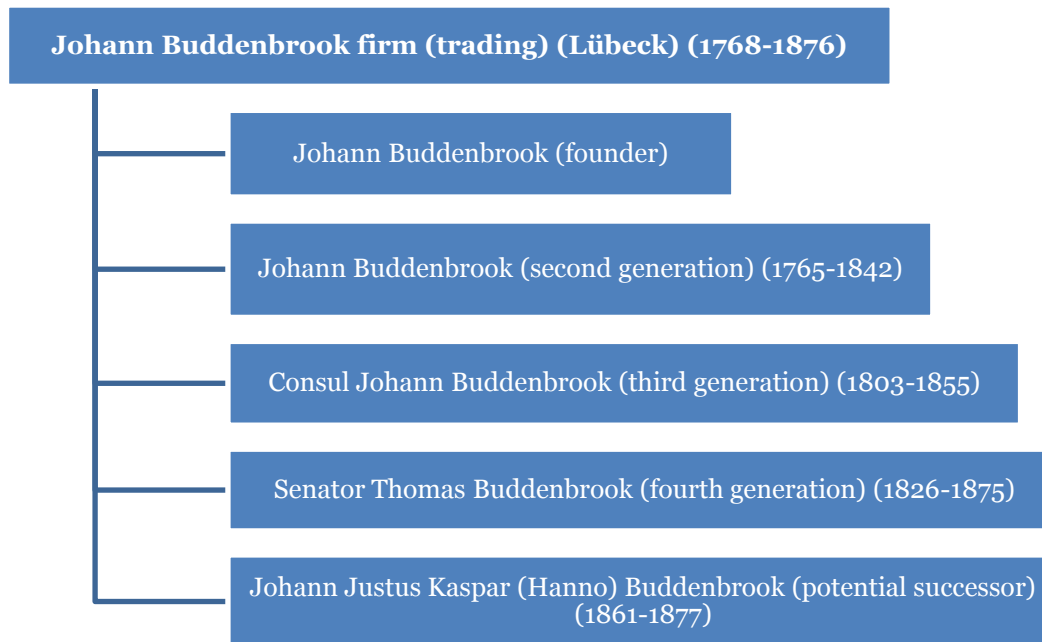
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¹ As early as 1960, Walt Whitman Rostow, in *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, England, 1960), stated: "In Thomas Mann's novel of three generations, the first sought money; the second, born to money, sought social and civic position; the third, born to comfort and family prestige, looked to the life of music. The phrase is designed to suggest, then, the changing aspirations of generations, as they place a low value on what they take for granted and seek new forms of satisfaction" (11n). Rostow did not mention "Buddenbrooks syndrome" but "Buddenbrooks' dynamics." In addition to this footnote, he also used "Buddenbrooks dynamics" on pages 80, 91, 134, 135, and 162. Rostow, however, is not referring to family businesses, but to the economic and political situation of countries such as the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

² This information is directly described in Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (Berlin, 1901), 45, 58, and 396.

literary critics hold that it was set in the city of Lübeck, where Mann himself was born. The business of the firm was foreign trade in grains.

FIGURE 1
The Buddenbrook Generations



Source: Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (1901)

Information related to the firm's founder is scattered throughout passages in the novel. The so-called family notebook, which the first Johann Buddenbrook initiated, contains some information about the founder.³ We find out that he was a religious man, who took the time to write down some practical advice for his descendants in this notebook. He included a motto of sorts: "My son, attend with zeal to thy business by day; but do none that hinders thee from thy sleep by night."⁴

Unfortunately, the novel refers only briefly to the first Buddenbrook. However, despite the few direct references to the founder of the firm, we know he was, like any founder of a family firm, an enterprising person.

³ Such a notebook is important to the culture of any family firm. In it are collected not only the most outstanding events of the common history of the family, but also its memories, ways of acting when dealing with any situation, its lifestyle, its heart, and so forth.

⁴ Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (1901; rpt., London, 1999), part 2, chap. 1, p. 45.

Second Generation: Johann Buddenbrook

We know that the second Johann Buddenbrook was proud to be a businessman.⁵ The slightest hint of doubt deeply affected him. He also held very strict and radical ideas regarding family prestige and the absolute necessity of fighting for its economic and social improvement. Accordingly, he broke off all contact with his first son when the son chose to marry the owner of a small drapery shop, instead of a wife who would have given more prestige to the family. It seems clear that the marriages in the Buddenbrook family were not for love, but for social and economic convenience, aimed at enlarging the family estate and prestige. This was true of Johann Buddenbrook's second marriage, as well as of the only marriage of his second son, Consul Buddenbrook.⁶

The professional success of the second Johann Buddenbrook was evident, as shown, for instance, in the acquisition of a new house, "the house of the Mengstrasse," designed as both the family's home and the firm's offices. Overall, economically his management was clearly satisfactory. His era as the firm's owner would be remembered with nostalgia, as something of the family business's golden age.

The second Johann Buddenbrook was not fond of odd or extravagant ideas. He disliked it, for example, when Consul Buddenbrook (his son and business partner) spoke about the life cycle of firms and the inevitability of their decline; the Consul maintained that every firm eventually lacks drive and that no one can do anything to prevent its fall. Nonetheless, on both personal and professional levels, the second Johann was on good terms with his son, who he had designated to be his successor as head of the family firm.⁷ In due time, and because of his advanced years, he trans-

⁵ With respect to this second Buddenbrook, see Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (1901), parts 1-2.

⁶ Sometimes in family firms there is not always a clear difference between the specific patrimony of the firm and that of the family. Mann describes this in many passages of *Buddenbrooks*.

⁷ The challenge of two generations (usually fathers and sons) simultaneously working together is another aspect of family firms that frequently appears in *Buddenbrooks*. Other literary examples of this are found in Ignacio Agustí, *Mariona Rebull* (Barcelona, 1944), chap. 4; Agustí, *Desiderio* (Barcelona, 1957); and Agustí, *19 de Julio* (Barcelona, 1965). In Agustí, *Guerra Civil* (Barcelona, 1972), chaps. 22 and 23, we see something uncommon in family firms: a grandfather, Joaquín Rius, and a grandson, Carlos Rius, working closely together. Unfortunately, neither Mann nor the authors of other literary works emphasize the importance of continuity and succession in family firms. Authors of literature do not deal in depth with the protocols related to modern family business transitions. At most, as in the *Buddenbrooks* case, there is some mention of the will or testament.

ferred the management and ownership of the firm to his son and partner Johann Buddenbrook.⁸

Third Generation: Consul Johann (Jean) Buddenbrook

Known as Jean to the family and as Consul Buddenbrook in the social and economic spheres of the town, the third Buddenbrook acted as a representative of Holland's interests.⁹ As a potential successor in the ownership of the family firm, Johann as a youngster received occupational training developed by the family firm in Bergen and abroad, in Antwerp. He not only served as a clerk doing office work, but also performed manual labor.

Like other Buddenbrooks, the Consul was highly devoted to the family and its traditional values. He applied himself to being a Buddenbrook, giving primary importance to the prestige of the firm and to family unity.¹⁰ Consistent with his own ideas about marriage, and according to an unwritten rule of the Buddenbrooks, the Consul married for social and economic convenience, aiming at increasing the family estate. Jean Buddenbrook adopted this stance in a natural and unquestioning way. Thus, it is no wonder that he believed that the marriage of every female in the family must contribute to enlarging the economic welfare and social prestige of the family firm. In short, matters such as love and personal feelings were not among his priorities. Consul Buddenbrook was a deeply pious man. Religion and the family business, his Christian beliefs and his business sense, were the two constants to his life.

Concerning the relationship with his father, despite generally being cordial and courteous, the two men had differences in thinking about certain topics. Thus, he held some rather pessimistic ideas about the family business life cycle, ideas at odds with his father's way of thinking.

⁸ In addition to shared management with the future successor, the owner of the firm's retirement (dissociation from the firm for reason of advanced years or infirmity) is another key issue for family firms, and one that is difficult for the owner to face. There are other examples in literature, not only in *Buddenbrooks*. We find one example in D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (New York, 1920), chap. 17, where the old, tired miner/owner Thomas Crich transferred the management of the firm to his son Gerald Crich, with whom he initially was not on good terms, but whose ability as a manager was evident. Another example occurs in Émile Zola, *Travail* (Paris, 1901), book I, chap. 3. Here we meet Jérôme Qurignon, representative of the second generation of a family-owned iron works. A tireless worker, at 55 he developed a degenerative illness and transferred the running and ownership of the firm to his son, Miguel Qurignon.

⁹ Information about the third Buddenbrook is available in Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (1901), parts 1-4.

¹⁰ In family firms, family unity, as well as commitment to the family's values, are highly positive. In *Buddenbrooks*, we find many examples, some extreme, of these strengths in family firms.

These concepts gave rise to his father's scorn and drew skepticism from other business people. He held the fatalistic idea that when a specific moment in the life cycle of a firm has arrived, the decline begins and nothing can be done to change the course of things. He considered this unavoidable, predestined, before which a man was "paralysed." Moreover, he thought, "that was the way his destiny was to be fulfilled . . . under the pressure of inexorable necessity."¹¹

As for his professional image, although Consul Buddenbrook was devoted to the family business, he was not a workaholic. In addition to the management of the firm, he held several appointed public offices, posts that, despite making clear the Buddenbrooks' importance and prestige in the town, required a lot of his time and even overwhelmed him. However, Consul Buddenbrook's full integration into his town's public life was apparent. He was also engaged in events of his time. For instance, he was enthusiastic about the Customs Union, an institution that he supported in heated discussions.

Despite his eager devotion, he was not an innovative businessman. He did not seem to evolve much in his professional work, and to some extent, he confined himself to remaining comfortable without assuming much risk. During his ownership as head of the firm, the business's development was not completely satisfactory. Cycles occurred, and Consul Buddenbrook himself admitted a substantial cut in turnover and profits for some years.

¹¹ Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, part 1, chap. 4, p. 15. This is an essential idea in *Buddenbrooks*: the concept of a sort of determinism and life cycle for every family business that irrevocably will lead to the decay and extinction of the business after the highest success has been attained. Émile Zola, in *Travail*, set out a variation on this subject. He does not hint of fatalism, as Thomas Mann did, concerning a family firm unavoidably bound for decline after having fulfilled its mission. Rather, he emphasizes the ephemeral and short-lived character of the peak of a family business, as compared to the countless generations that make up the long history of a family; see Émile Zola, *Travail* (Paris, 1901), book I, chapter 3 and book III, chap. 1. Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* provides another variation on this theme. In this play we meet Mildred Douglas, heiress of a large steel company, who refers to herself in the following terms:

But I'm afraid I have neither vitality nor integrity. All that was burnt out in our stock before I was born. Grandfather's blast furnaces, flaming to the sky, melting steel, making millions—then father keeping those home fires burning, making more millions—and little me at the tail-end of it all. I'm a waste product in the Bessemer process—like the millions. Or rather, I inherit the acquired trait of the by-product, wealth, but none of the energy, none of the strength of the steel that made it.

O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape* (New York, 1922), scene II, 15.

He asserted that following his father's death the business had not thrived again.

In business matters, Consul Buddenbrook trusted in his head clerk, Mr. Marcus.¹² In his final arrangements, the Consul expressed the wish that Marcus become a partner in the firm.¹³

¹² The non-familial employee is a multifarious literary character, usually stereotyped as black or white. Some are highly faithful to the company: loyal, good professionals, and close to management, although not fond of making decisions and sometimes a bit boring and tedious. Others are treacherous, sinister, and by no means loyal to the firm. Among the faithful employees, in addition to Mr. Marcus, are: Mr. Owen, head clerk of the merchant house Osbaldistone and Tresham, in Walter Scott, *Rob Roy* (Edinburgh, 1817); Mr. Morfin and Mr. John Carker, of the Dombey firm, in Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (London, 1846-48); Mr. Watson, the "faithfull old clerk" of Bradshaw and Co., in Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (London, 1853); Mr. Baines, the chief assistant of Baines drapery shop, in Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale* (London, 1908); the old Mr. Cocles and the young Manuel Raymond of the shipping company Morrel and Sons, in Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Paris, 1844-45); and the head clerk Mr. Llobet, his son Arturo Llobet, and his grandson Miguel Llobet of the firm Textiles Joaquín Rius, in Agustí, *Mariona Rebull, El Viudo Rius* (Barcelona, 1945), *Desiderio, 19 de Julio*, and *Guerra Civil*. Among the untrustworthy are, for instance: Mr. James Carker, manager of the Dombey firm in Dickens, *Dombey and Son*; and Mr. Danglars, of the shipping company Morrel and Sons, in Dumas, *The Count of Montecristo*.

Literature also provides representations of less simplistic and stereotyped business managers without ties to the family; see, for example, Lawrence, *Women in Love*, chap. 17, p. 267, where in relation to the restructuring of the Crich family's mining company by Gerald Crich, we read: "His managers, who were rare men, were no more expensive than the old bungling fools of his father's days, who where merely colliers promoted. His chief manager, who had twelve hundred a year, saved the firm at least five thousand." Also Edwin Lefèvre, who is considered the father of financial fiction, contributes, through a highly topical modern style, a variety of efficient managers and business agents, such as Mr. Leigh and Mr. Rogers, who work for Roanoke Railroad, owned by Sampson Rock. See *Sampson Rock of Wall Street* (New York, 1907). Moreover, this novel shows us the complicated work of expert brokers, such as Mr. Dunlop, attending to Sampson Rock businesses on Wall Street. In Zola, *Travail*, book I, chaps. 3 and 4, we find engineer Delaveau, a very efficient manager, ambitious and careerist, who reorganizes and restores to profitability l'Abîme iron works. At the same time, we meet the skillful old hand, engineer Laroche, who remained at the head of the mining and iron works la Crécherie for more than thirty years.

¹³ Of course, in spite of the entry of partners from outside the family, as in the case of Mr. Marcus, the firm does not necessarily lose its familial character. Literature provides more examples of this kind. The trading company Osbaldistone and Tresham had two partners, but the latter "was only a sleeping partner . . . little in the habit of acting personally in the business of the house";

Consul Buddenbrook died prematurely at the age of 52. In the end he did not leave the family in bad economic condition. Although “Johann Buddenbrook had continually complained, as a merchant will,” “the truth was that the Consul’s estate was more considerable than any one had supposed.”¹⁴

Fourth Generation: Senator Thomas Buddenbrook

Thomas Buddenbrook was the last of the Buddenbrooks to be a proprietor of the family firm.¹⁵ The town addressed this fourth-generation Buddenbrook as “Senator Buddenbrook.” He was 16 years old when he left school and joined the firm. Thomas Buddenbrook started in the family business as a dedicated and talented youngster. His father played an essential role in initiating him, spurring him to take an active part in the business; Thomas’s response was to be more than suitable.¹⁶

see Scott, *Rob Roy*, chaps. 1, p. 13, and chap. 17, p. 206. The shipping company Morrel and Sons also had a partner unconnected to the family; see Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, part 1, chap. 1. The counting-house Bradshaw and Co. had the rigid and intransigent Mr. Bradshaw as main partner and the tolerant Mr. Farquhar as second partner; both were efficient businessmen; see Gaskell, *Ruth*, chaps. 17, 21, 30, and 31. Also related to this question is the financing of family firms. It is interesting to note that in family firms, in general, there is a greater tendency toward indebtedness intended to prevent losing control of the property than to increase capital. Zola, *The Ladies’ Paradise*, chaps. 1, 3, and 11, describes the way in which Mouret, the owner, funds his project of enlarging the Ladies’ Paradise department store through his employees’ participation and the support of banks. An excessive increase of capital potentially implies loss of control of the company’s ownership; see Juan Antonio Zunzunegui, *Novelas de la Quiebra, I: Ramón o la Vida Baldía* (Madrid, 1947), first part, 50.

¹⁴ Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, part 5, chap. 1, p. 211.

¹⁵ Information about the fourth Buddenbrook is available in Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (1901), parts 2-11.

¹⁶ This is another issue related to the management of family firms: the gradual training of the heir—for instance, by providing close acquaintance with the firm, its activities, and staff, as well as allowing a gradual assumption of responsibilities and an inculcation in the values of the firm. In that respect, Johann Buddenbrook successfully trained Thomas, his heir and eldest son. Thomas did not to achieve a similar result when he tried to instill the family firm’s values into his potential heir, Hanno. Other literary examples of the process of instilling similar principles into potential successors are found in:

Benito Pérez Galdós, *Fortunata y Jacinta* (Madrid, 1887); see part 1, chap. 2, including brief descriptions of some features of the preparation for textile commerce in the Santa Cruz family.

Urged by his father, and according to the family custom, he interrupted his activity in the firm and carried out a long training period in Amsterdam, with Mr. Van der Kellen, at Kellen and Company.¹⁷ Following his training abroad, he again joined the family business with his characteristic “ability and earnestness.”¹⁸

This was the professional image of young Thomas Buddenbrook, designated to be the representative of the fourth generation of his family firm, and who would be the last of its owners. When his father died prematurely, Thomas found himself overnight turned into the owner of the associated trading house, Johann Buddenbrook.

As a result of this generational change in ownership, a new managerial style came into being in the company, a more modern and determined style.¹⁹ After he took charge of the family firm, Thomas acted as a capable

Agustí, *Mariona Rebull*; see chap. 4, where Joaquín Rius (senior) frequently instills the values of the textile business into his son Joaquín Rius (junior).

Zunzunegui, *Las Novelas de la Quiebra, I: Ramón o la Vida Baldía*; see first section, which concisely depicts the training of Ramón Aguirre (junior), potential successor of the family firm Aguirre Bank, developed by Ramón Aguirre (senior).

Lefèvre, *Sampson Rock of Wall Street*; see chaps. 6-10, where we attend a sort of intensive course, imparted by Sampson Rock (senior) to Sampson Rock (junior), on “how to become heir of a big family firm through a few lessons.”

¹⁷ The training of the potential successor of the Buddenbrooks fits quite well with the planning of modern family firms; it stresses a sound grounding by training in other firms, and even in different countries, under the tutelage of a mentor. This was typical of many family firms. Literature contributes other examples of this sort of training. For instance, that of the English Francis Osbaldistone in Bourdeaux, under the tutelage of Monsieur Duborg, who was a correspondent there of the mercantile house Osbaldistone and Tresham. However, it does not seem that this kind of training was very profitable to young Osbaldistone; see Scott, *Rob Roy*, chap. 1.

Another potential heir of a family firm who was trained outside the family business—although not abroad—in order to take charge of the family firm in due time was Richard Bradshaw. In this way, young Bradshaw fulfilled his father’s demands, becoming a credit to the strict businessman Mr. Bradshaw; see Gaskell, *Ruth*, chap. 19.

¹⁸ Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, part 4, chap. 10, p. 195.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, part 5, chap. 3, p. 220. This feature, strategic and managerial renewal, usually takes place every time a change in the ownership of a family firm occurs. It is possible to find other examples in literature, as for instance in Lawrence, *Women in Love*, chap. 17, where Gerald Crich implements a profound shift in the management and administration of the company, chiefly searching for profit-

and tenacious young businessman. Frequent references show us the young Buddenbrook seriously devoted to his work and displaying highly positive qualities.

As with his predecessors, the idea of increasing the prestige and patrimony of the family was central to Thomas. He was attached to the idea of his family being well regarded and respected within the community. Undoubtedly, these circumstances represented strength for the family firm.²⁰

Thomas displayed leadership as the guardian of his family's values on many occasions. For example, in contemplating his future marriage, his behavior was consistent with his own ideals; he admitted that his future wife's large dowry had contributed, to some extent, to his decision to marry her. It is clear that the Buddenbrooks confused love and business; they mixed the concept of patrimony with the assets of the firm.²¹

ability and giving up paternalistic systems developed by his father, old Thomas Crich. Arthur Miller similarly portrays the new generation owner of a family company implementing a different management approach in *Death of a Salesman*. In this play, Howard Wagner makes decisions that affect the staff, particularly the salesman Willy Loman. Loman himself says that old Wagner would not have done what his son has done; see Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York, 1949). In turn, in Agustí's *Mariona Rebull*, chap. 4, we meet Joaquín Rius (junior), who also implements more innovative practices that differ from his father's conservative management.

²⁰ With regard to the concept of pride in the family firm, see Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, chap. 1, p. 3; chap. 47, p. 695; and chap. 51, p. 757. Here we encounter severe criticism and satire about Mr. Dombey's obsessive search for respectability for his trading firm. In addition, in Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, part 2, chaps. 6 and 7, the Morrel family defends the concepts of respect and uprightness concerning their firm. In this case, Dumas treats the topic in a positive, rather than a pejorative, way.

²¹ With respect to a spouse linked to the family business, several fictional examples include:

Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*: in this novel we meet Manuel Raymond, an honest young employee who honors his engagement to marry the boss's daughter even when the firm—Morrel and Sons shipping company—is about to go bankrupt. At the end, the young couple wind up the family firm—debt-free—and become *rentiers*.

Zola, *Travail*, book 1, chap. 3: Where we meet Mr. Boisgelin, who, having married the heiress of the Qurignon family, proprietors of a declining iron works, is neither qualified nor motivated to look after the business.

Zola, in *The Ladies' Paradise*, introduces perhaps the most successful spouse managing a fictional family firm. In this novel,

As a holder of public office, Thomas Buddenbrook also contributed to the modernization of his town. Thus, for instance, he was aware of the necessity of having a modern railway network, which he strove to attain. Likewise, he was a fervent supporter of the supposed advantages that the Customs Union would provide. In short, he evidenced vitality in this first stage of his management and ownership as the head of his family.

He also took charge of the Holland consulship, and later the citizens would elect him senator. However, these public posts, with their prestige and so much else that seemed attractive to the Buddenbrooks, also had their disadvantages: they consumed too much time and energy. This problem had befallen the Consul, and his son the senator found himself in a similar situation. Nevertheless, in the really important matter, the course of the business, Thomas's management during this first phase was

we meet a businessman who implements some of the most innovative management and business administration techniques in the history of literature. He is Octave Mouret, a young widower. His wife had inherited a draper's shop that he gradually enlarged and turned into the large Parisian department store, the Ladies' Paradise. Within this novel (which is like a marketing textbook), a dramatic fight occurs between many retail shops with their small shopkeepers and the large department store sector represented by Mouret's firm. We also observe the traditional practice of marriage between chief shop assistants and the heiresses of the small shops, as occurs, for instance, in the drapery and flannels shop, Au Vieil Elbeuf.

In Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*, Constance, the heiress of the Baines drapery shop, and the chief assistant Mr. Povey marry exclusively for love. Old Mrs. Baines thinks that the marriage will demote her daughter's social status. Mr. Povey becomes an innovative businessman.

In Benito Pérez Galdós, *Fortunata y Jacinta* (Madrid, 1887), a woman, Isabel Cordero de Arnaiz, has business qualities and shrewdness clearly superior to those of her husband Gumersindo Arnaiz, the heir to a drapery business in Madrid.

Agustí, *Guerra Civil*: because the only son of Carlos Rius (owner of a textile company in Barcelona) does not want to continue the business tradition of the family, the reins of the business will be taken by Rius' eldest son-in-law.

Zunzunegui, *Las Novelas de la Quiebra, I: Ramón o la Vida Baldía*: the self-seeking Count of Arrieta, married to Felisa Aguirre, one of the heiresses of the Aguirre Bank, greedily takes part in the management of this family bank.

impeccable; as Mann wrote, “. . . his business at this time was as brilliant as ever it had been in his grandfather’s day.”²²

The trading company Johann Buddenbrook flourished. The family even acquired a new residence in the Fischergrube. Meanwhile, their social prestige peaked with Thomas as senator of the town. This was the highest point the Buddenbrooks ever reached; though it was achieved, to some extent, by Thomas, he recalled every time he had occasion to that the success was also thanks to the three generations of Buddenbrooks who had preceded him.

Then things began to change for the worse, for no apparent reason. Several problems appeared at the same time: the family firm did not expand, certain business deals failed, some interventions in public offices were inadequate, and there were family difficulties. These troubles did not occur because the heir of the family firm was fond of leisure activities and neglected the business. Rather, they resulted from weariness and fatigue (in modern terms, stress or depression), and possibly, what Consul Buddenbrook, Thomas’s father, would have referred to as the beginning of the inexorable decline of the firm once it fulfilled its objective.

Thomas Buddenbrook showed a certain fatalism and resignation regarding these changed circumstances. His father’s old idea, which had annoyed Thomas’s grandfather so much, reappeared, now restated by Thomas:

I feel that could not have happened to me before. It is as though something had begun to slip—as though I haven’t the firm grip I had on events. . . . Often and often, in these days, I have thought of a Turkish proverb; it says, “When the house is finished, death comes.” It doesn’t need to be death. But the decline, the falling-off, the beginning of the end.²³

More prosaically, as Thomas also said: “And business is poor.”²⁴

Senator Thomas Buddenbrook turned into a mediocre executive during his second management phase. For instance, the trading firm Johann Buddenbrook did not achieve expected economic revenues during the war against Austria. Furthermore, unlike other traders and business people in the town, the Buddenbrooks’ firm scarcely took advantage of the Customs Union: “As for money matters, his estate was much reduced and the business, in general, on the decline.”²⁵

Like his father, Thomas Buddenbrook died prematurely. Unexpectedly, in his will Thomas instructed that the firm be liquidated and closed

²² Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, part 7, chap. 5, p. 344.

²³ *Ibid.*, part 7, chap. 6, p. 352.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, part 7, chap. 7, p. 357.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, part 10, chap. 1, p. 493.

down within a year; he gave no reason for this directive.²⁶ Unfortunately, because of a lack of time to implement this transaction, as well as of someone skillful to handle the process, the trading company Johann Buddenbrook closed under disadvantageous circumstances in 1876.

This, in short, is the story of Thomas Buddenbrook, the last owner of the firm Johann Buddenbrook. He did not neglect the business; he was not devoted to activities outside the family firm and his public office. Perhaps he just started to feel depressed. Similar to his father, he thought that family firms had an irreversible cycle, that once they reached their peak, a decline began that nothing could prevent.

Although it was not a top firm before the liquidation, Johann Buddenbrook was still profitable. Moreover, there was a direct heir to be Thomas' successor. Why did Thomas Buddenbrook decide to liquidate the family firm? Thomas Mann does not give us a clear answer, though he hints at two possible reasons. The first appears throughout the novel, and concerns the determinist life cycle of firms. To understand the second reason, we have now to consider the potential heir and successor: Hanno, who was born during the period in which his father began losing vigor as a businessman. Did Thomas Buddenbrook consider whether or not his son would be capable of curbing the decline of the family firm? Hanno's short biography answers this question.

Potential Fifth Generation: Hanno Buddenbrook

Hanno Buddenbrook, the last of the Buddenbrooks and who never assumed ownership of the family firm, was born in 1861.²⁷ He was a very timid, sickly child. He was fond of music and had a talent for playing the piano, an aptitude encouraged by his mother, who was enthusiastic about music. We know that Thomas, Hanno's father, disliked these things. He once said, regarding music: "Please don't put such ideas into the child's

²⁶ Other fictional family businesses ended as follows: The trading firm Dombey went bankrupt; see Dickens, *Dombey and Son*. Morrel and Sons shipping company was liquidated; see Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The iron works l'Abîme, owned by the Qurignon family, was absorbed by a workers' cooperative; see Zola, *Travail*. La Crécherie, the mining and iron works firm owned by the Jordan family, converted to a workers' cooperative. The ruthless competition exerted by the department store the Ladies' Paradise compelled many small shops to close; see Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise*. The wholesale drapery firm Santa Cruz was sold; see Pérez Galdós, *Fortunata y Jacinta*. Aguirre Bank went bankrupt; see Zunzunegui, *Las Novelas de la Quiebra, II: Beatriz o la Vida Apasionada* (Madrid, 1947). The old textile firm Tejidos Joaquín Rius, later named Sucesores de Joaquín Rius, was still in operation after adapting to modern times; see Agustí: *Guerra Civil*.

²⁷ For information about this potential Buddenbrook successor, see Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, parts 7-11.

head.”²⁸ Senator Buddenbrook’s self-respect suffered because his son did not have the makings of an executive; Hanno’s interests swayed toward playing music.

Thomas lost his fight to instill fondness for the family business in his son. The reasons for Thomas’s defeat included his own clumsiness as a mentor, as well as Hanno’s natural preferences.²⁹ In vain, Thomas

²⁸ Ibid., part 8, chap. 6, p. 414.

²⁹ The heir’s lack of interest in assuming the leadership of the family business, as well as fear of revealing the feeling to his or her father, is a frequent conflict in fictional family firms. Like Hanno, Paul Dombey was a sickly and feeble child, also theoretically predestined to be the heir of his family’s firm. Little Paul did not enjoy the ambitious projects that his father, Paul Dombey (senior), arranged for him, and died as a child; see Dickens, *Dombey and Son*.

One of the most thrilling literary passages relating to the conflict arising from a family firm heir’s lack of interest in following his father’s example is the conversation between young Francis Osbaldistone and his father William Osbaldistone; see Scott, *Rob Roy*, chaps. 1-2. Sam Rock (junior), because of his moral scruples, initially did not want to follow his father, a railroad magnate and successful Wall Street broker; see Lefèvre, *Sampson Rock of Wall Street*, chaps. 3-5. Also for moral reasons, young Christopher Keller had misgivings about taking over his father’s aeronautical components firm; see Arthur Miller (1947), *All My Sons* (New York, 1947). Gustave Qurignon theoretically was to be the fourth generation of his family in the iron industry. However, he “refused to walk in that old factory that declined and smelt foul.” The youngster came to an unhappy end and obviously did not take charge of the family firm; see Zola, *Travail*, book 1, chap. 3.

Marcial Jordan, a more reasonable heir than Gustave Qurignon, was expected to be the third generation of owners in his family’s iron works, but he preferred to devote himself to research on electric energy, giving up direct involvement in managing the business. Nevertheless, he did not lose interest in the firm, which voluntarily converted to a workers’ cooperative; see Zola, *Travail*, book 1, chap. 4. One peculiar example was that of the ship owner Morrel, who seemed to be unaffected when his son decided to pursue a military career instead of following his footsteps in the family firm; see Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, part 2, chap. 7.

Desiderio Rius, potentially the third-generation representative of a dynasty of Catalonian textile business people, did not fit into the family company despite his father’s expectations; see Agustí, *Desiderio*, and *19 de Julio*. In turn, Desiderio Rius’ grandson, another potential owner of the Rius textile firm, also disliked the family business, and withdrew; see Agustí, *Guerra Civil*. We find one picturesque circumstance in the family firm Santa Cruz. The parents, who had achieved an important patrimony in wholesale textile commerce in Madrid, accepted that their son, Juanito Santa Cruz, would not join the family business, but instead studied Law and Humanities; see Pérez Galdós, *Fortunata y Jacinta*. Similarly, in Bennett’s *The Old Wives’ Tale*, Constance Baines and Samuel Povey, proprietors of Baines drapery shop, did not want Cyril, their heir, to join the

attempted to accustom his son to the family business. He tried everything, even taking a despotic stance, forcing his son to prepare himself to take over the ownership of the firm. Such projects did not appeal to Hanno in the slightest. He was a mere child. “When his father asked him if he felt any inclination towards his future career, he answered yes—a simple, unadorned, embarrassed ‘yes,’ which the Senator tried to make a little more convincing by asking leading questions, but mostly without success.”³⁰ Hanno was less than 15 years old when his father died and the Johann Buddenbrook firm was closed down.

Conclusion

It is clear from this description that in Mann’s novel *Buddenbrooks* the last representative of this business dynasty, Thomas Buddenbrook, was neither an executive who disregarded his family firm’s duties nor a man who preferred indulging in leisure and non-productive activities.

Moreover, Thomas Buddenbrook was not a representative of the third but of the fourth generation of the family owners of the Johann Buddenbrook firm. The representative of the third generation, Consul Johann Buddenbrook, was by no means a proprietor who devoted his life to leisure, without regard for the family business. Thus, I assert that the usual understanding of the Buddenbrooks syndrome is incorrect.

It is possible, however, to establish a taxonomy or classification of different models or syndromes based on the most significant features of fictional family firms (for an outline of these families, see the Appendix).

Qurignon model: This describes the ephemeral character and brief duration of a family firm, compared to the many generations comprising the whole history of a family, as in Émile Zola’s *Travail*.

Osbaldistone model: Here conflict arises when the heir to a family firm does not want to succeed the parent in the business, as in Walter Scott’s *Rob Roy*.

Sophia model: In this case, there is a reluctant heiress rather than an heir, as portrayed in Arnold Bennett’s *The Old Wives’ Tale*.

Dombey model: This model involves a thoughtless business person who places excessive hope on a potential successor to head the firm, as Charles Dickens depicted in *Dombey and Son*.

Morrel model: Here it is the business person who is indifferent to whether or not the potential heirs will continue running

business. However, one generation earlier, Mr. and Mrs. Baines, parents of Sophia and Constance, were very upset that Sophia did not want to follow her parents into the business.

³⁰ Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, part 10, chap. 2, p. 500.

the family business. Alexandre Dumas provides the exemplar in *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Crich model: In this scenario, the new owner broadly restructures and modernizes a family firm previously run by his or her progenitor in a more conventional way. D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* is the fictional example.

Mouret model: Another possibility is a male spouse who successfully manages a firm initially owned by his wife, as Émile Zola portrays in *The Ladies' Paradise*.

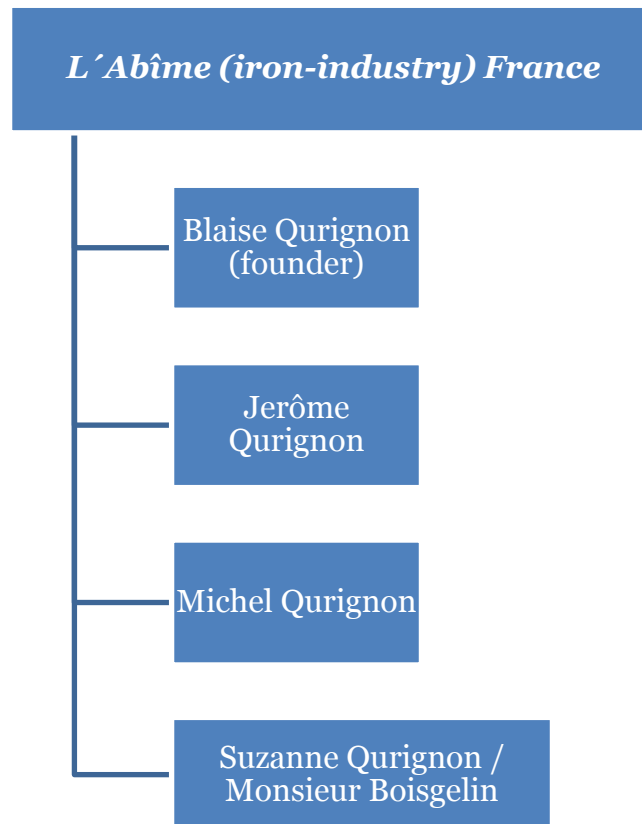
Arnaiz model: It can also be the female spouse who successfully runs a firm initially owned by her husband, as Benito Pérez Galdós shows in *Fortunata y Jacinta*.

Joaquín Rius model: Another model is a family business workaholic, who is always going on about work and is unable to gain satisfaction from activities outside the firm, as in Ignacio Agustí's, *Mariona Rebull*.

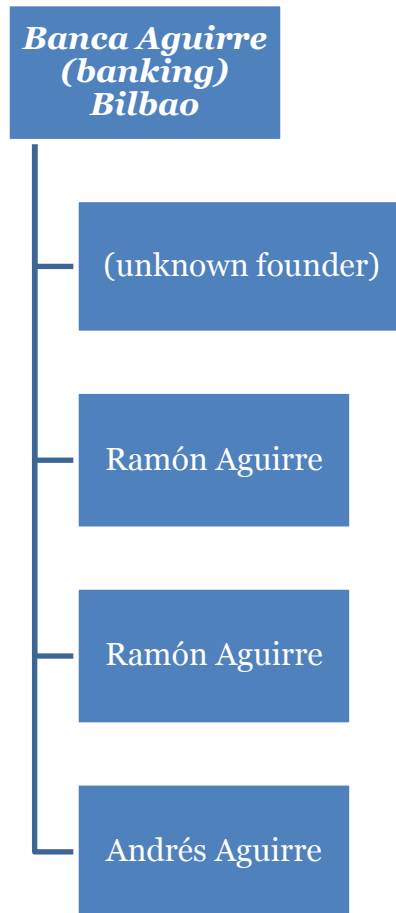
Aguirre model: This pattern describes a family who lose control of the firm's ownership because of an excessive increase in capital. Juan Antonio Zunzunegui illustrates this in *Las Novelas de la Quiebra*.

Finally, have we left the Buddenbrooks "syndrome-less"? Obviously not! Thomas Mann's novel deserves to give its name to a model of the family firm, though not the one to which it is currently applied. I think that the Buddenbrooks syndrome should refer to that fatalism in which both Johann Buddenbrook and his son Thomas seemed to believe unquestioningly. According to this view, once a family firm has reached its peak and accomplished its mission, it begins an irreversible decline that no one can prevent.

Appendix
Family Firms in Literature



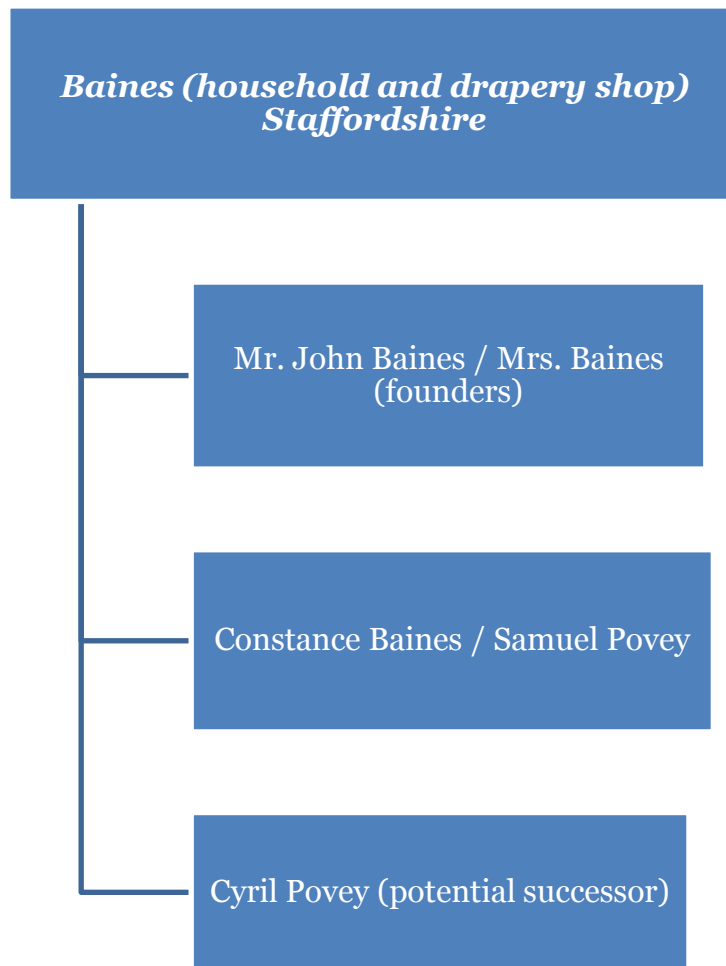
Source: Émile Zola, *Travail* (1901).



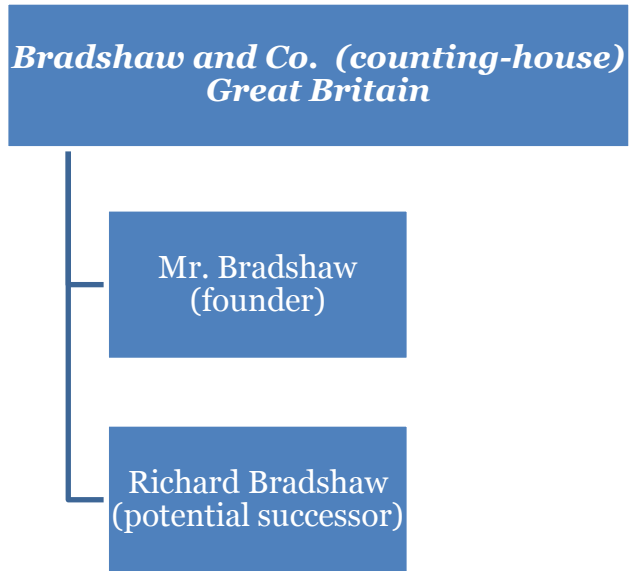
*Source: Juan Antonio Zunzunegui, *Novelas de la Quiebra* I-II (1947).*



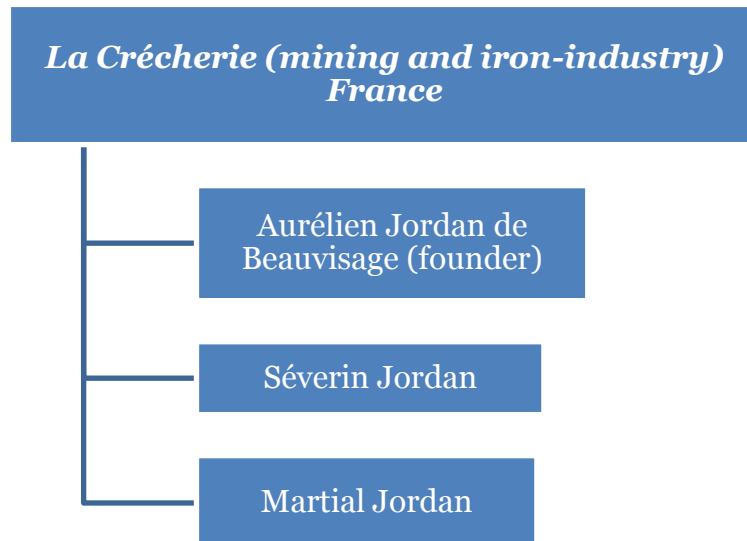
Source: Benito Pérez Galdós, *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1887).



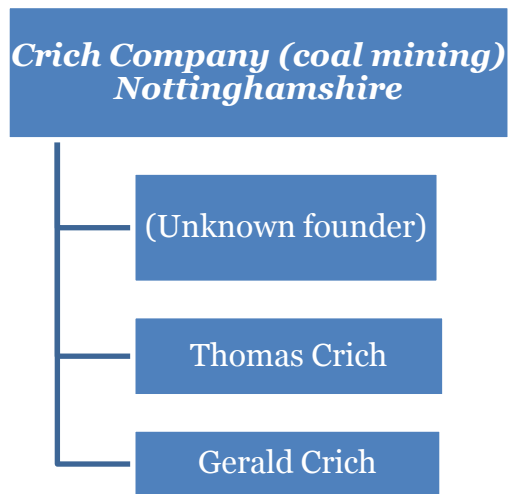
Source: Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908).



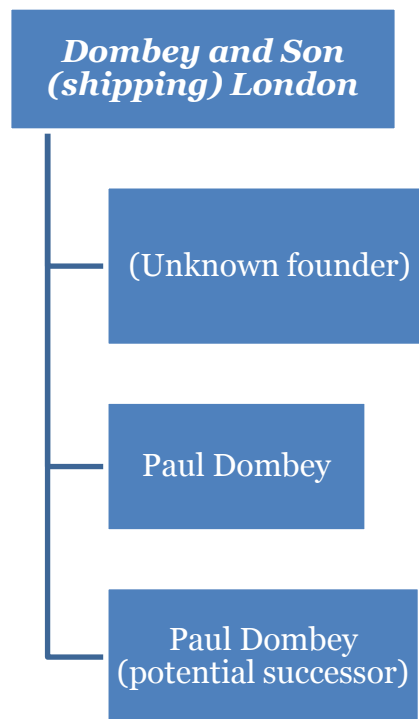
Source: Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (1853).



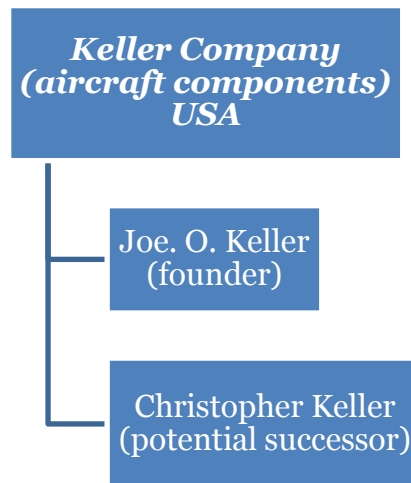
Source: Émile Zola, *Travail* (1901).



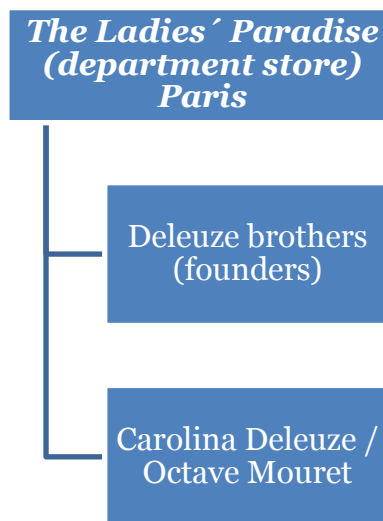
Source: D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (1920).



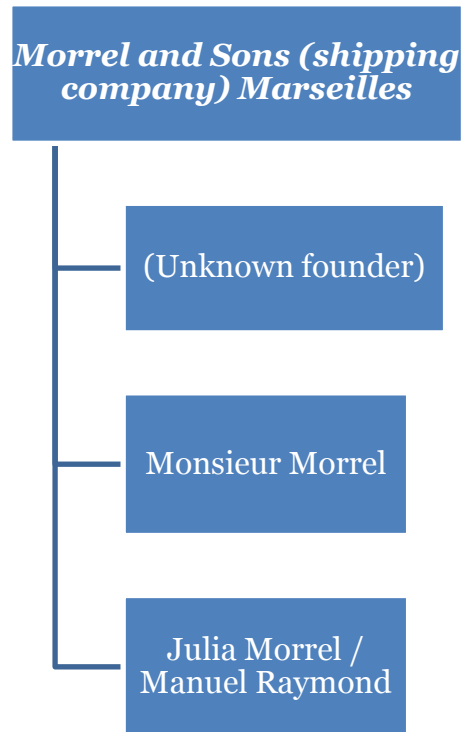
Source: Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1846-1848).



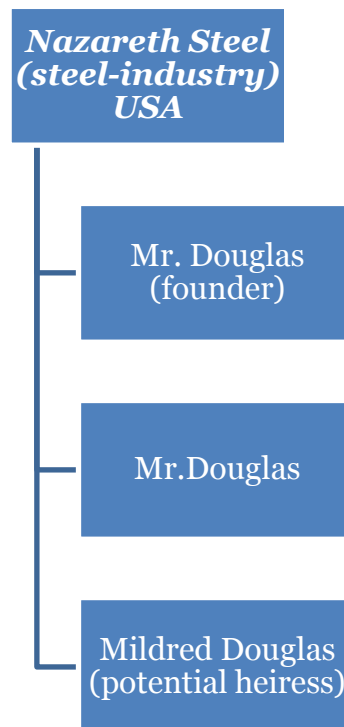
Source: Arthur Miller, *All My Sons* (1947).



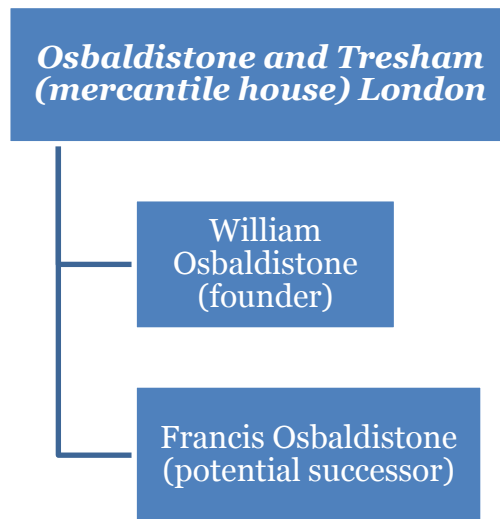
Source: Émile Zola: *The Ladies' Paradise* (1883).



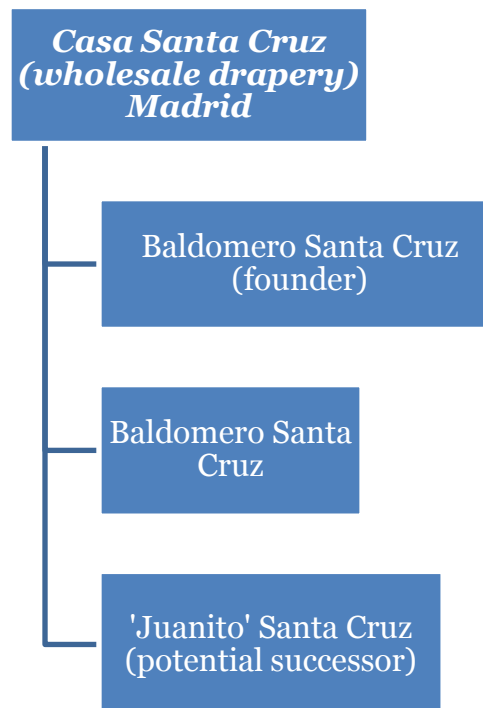
Source: Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Montecristo* (1844-1845).



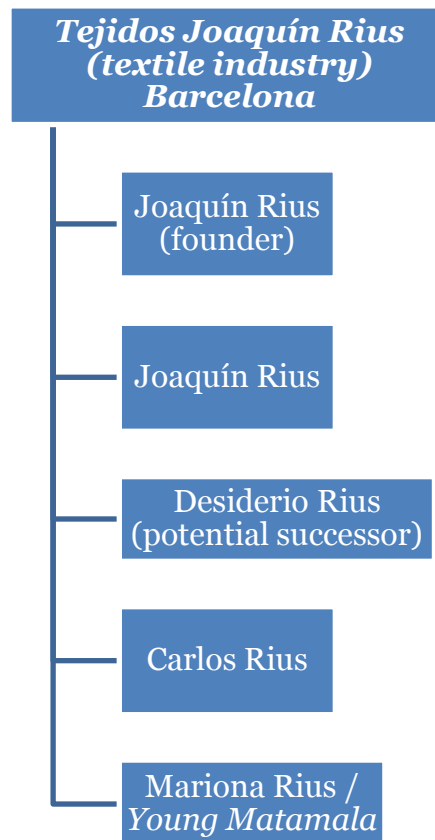
Source: Eugene O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape* (1922).



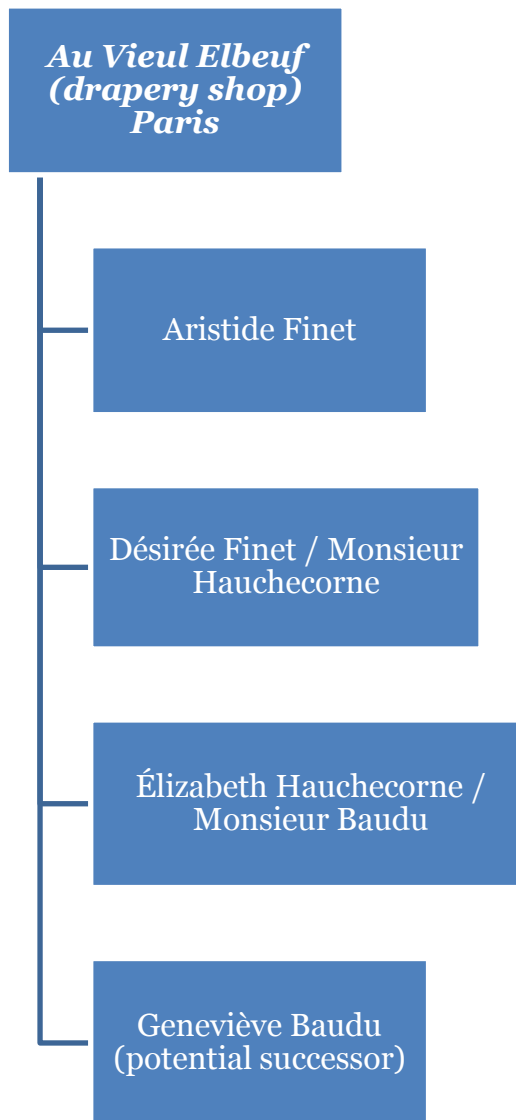
Source: Walter Scott, *Rob Roy* (1817).



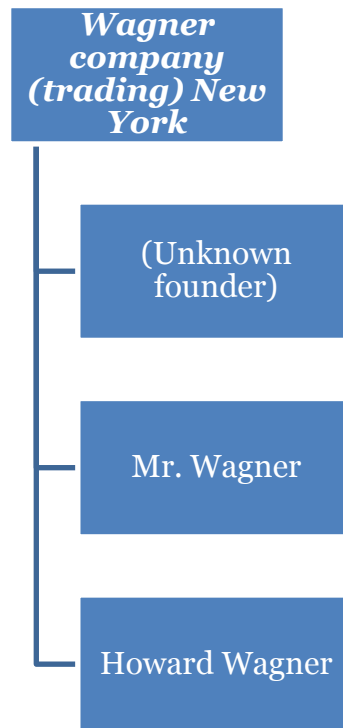
Source: Benito Pérez Galdós, *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1887).



Source: Ignacio Agustí, Mariona Rebull (1944), El Viudo Rius (1945), Desiderio (1957), 19 de Julio (1965), and Guerra Civil (1972).



Source: Émile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise* (1883).



Source: Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman (1949).