



## SOUTHERN HONOR ETHICS AND BEHAVIOR IN THE OLD SOUTH

---



The world of the Old South was deeply rooted in Greek civilization, and saw the glory of warriors as did Xenophon: **“And when their fated end comes, they do not lie forgotten and without honor, but they are remembered and flourish eternally in men’s praises.”** It was said then of family attachment that **“one’s kin were indistinguishable from oneself”** – the defense of the kin-related community was the brave man’s obligation.

### *“There are Worse Things than Death”*

“Among the attitudes brought from the Old World was the ancient system for determining who belonged among the worthy and who did not. The first signs of an archaic honor appeared in the forests – not where Hawthorne’s story opens, but in regions beyond the Alps, before Christ, before Rome. The ethic of honor had Indo-European origins. From the wilderness of central Europe and Asia a succession of conquering tribes had come into prehistoric Greece, then, a millennia later, into Roman Gaul, Spain, Italy, and Great Britain, and finally, in the last upheaval, by sea from Scandinavia into parts of the once Roman world.

These peoples shared a number of ideas about how men and women should behave. They had thoughts in common about the nature of the human body, the mind, the soul, the meaning of life, time, natural order, and death. Myths, rituals, oaths, grave sites, artifacts, and most especially word roots all indicate a common fund of human perceptions that lasted in popular thought from antique to recent ages.

The overriding principle for these generations of human beings was an ethic almost entirely external in nature. It was easily comprehended and was considered physically demonstrable without resort to abstraction, without ambivalence or ambiguity. Differentiation of what belonged in the public or private realm were very imprecise [and evaluations]



## SOUTHERN HONOR ETHICS AND BEHAVIOR IN THE OLD SOUTH

---



depended upon appearances, not upon cold logic. Southern whites retained something of that emphasis.

As Walker Percy, the contemporary novelist, once remarked about the South of not long ago, there was an “absence of a truly public zone” completely separate from the interior life of the family, so that the latter “came to coincide with the actual public space which it inhabited.”

**Family values differed not at all from public ones.**

Intimately related to brave conduct . . . was family protectiveness. [When] the Civil War began, Samuel David Sanders of Georgia mused about Confederate enlistment, **“I would be disgraced if I staid at home, and unworthy of my revolutionary ancestors.”** Moreover, these strictures kept the armies in the field.

Said a kinswoman of Mary Chestnut in 1865: “Are you like Aunt Mary? Would you be happier if all the men in the family were killed? To our amazement, quiet Miss C took up the cudgels – nobly. **“Yes, if their life disgraced them. There are worse things than death.”**

(Southern Honor, Ethics & Behavior in the Old South, Bertram Wyatt Brown, Oxford University Press, 1982, excerpts pp. 33)

