

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN

Thomas Mann

Readings

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Overview

Thomas Mann (1875-1955) was a German novelist, short story writer, and literary critic, who came from a large and distinguished literary family. He flourished during the Nazi period, and became an emblematic exponent of *Exilliteratur*, the literature written in exile—much of it in the United States—during the Nazi period. (He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929, chiefly for his novel *Buddenbrooks*.) He was a staunch and outspoken critic of Hitler, and spent many years in Switzerland, during and after the War. He spent the war period in the United States.

Story

The Magic Mountain (1924) deals with European culture in the ten years preceding the first World War. The vehicle of the tale is a young man in his early twenties, who is due to take up a position with a Hamburg shipbuilding firm, but who decides to visit his tubercular cousin in the Swiss Alps prior to taking up his career. This decision leads Castorp to take an extended vacation in the mountains, leaving behind him the flatlands. During his extended stay in the mountains, enforced by the doctor in charge, Castorp meets a wide variety of sanatorium patients, who represent forms of pre-war European consciousness, and give us a panoramic sense of impending cultural doom. These extraordinary characters represent in different ways attitudes toward the Enlightened Humanism which, since the eighteenth century, has been trying to redefine the nature of man in society.

Castorp himself, surrounded by serious illness, and himself significantly downed by TB—the intellectual disease—becomes the sounding board for prolonged discussions of man's existential condition—the nature of life itself, the meanings of dysfunction. The working through of this theme enables Mann to air red hot topics of the time, like Freudian psychoanalysis, its interpretation of the drivers of human nature, or the culturally cynical nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), which was a dark intellectual backdrop to pre-war Continental thinking. The characters espousing these ideas, over dinners, through romantic intrigues and subplots, and in mountain adventures, are a kaleidoscope of startlingly drawn intellectual personalities: a Jesuit who was formerly a Jew, and who is on the side of totalitarianism; a Dutch intellectual and sensualist, who is all about the Dionysian energies of human being; an Italian secular humanist, whose dream is to become encyclopedically one with all that humanity has been; and Claudia Chauchat, the recuperating romantic interest of Castorp himself. These personal encounters all play into the development of Castorp, through whom, as Mann explains, we should rediscover an old truth long ago highlighted by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus: that sickness and suffering are the path to wisdom.

The conclusion to this novel, however, is far from upbeat. Whereas we may want Castorp to come out of his experience, seven years of convalescence on the magic mountain, with a new maturity, and the capacity to play a constructive social role, the fact is that he emerges as an anonymous, ordinary German citizen, ready to march off facelessly to war.

Mann—like his near contemporaries Joyce, Proust, and Kafka—was deeply in tune with the issues of his time, but unlike those three formal experimentalists, he created *The Magic Mountain* along traditional fictional lines, tracking a ‘realistic’ protagonist through a recognizable landscape of generic personality

types. Mann's pervasive interest in 'psychology and neurosis,' which dominates such novellas as *Tonio Kroeger*(1903) and *Death in Venice*(1912) , reaches its broadest social expression in the gallery of diverse intellectuals who line the walls of the magic mountain. In all of these individuals—in both the novellas and the great novel—a world view seen askew, from a non-mainstream perspective, is the portal into insight. The magic mountain itself may therefore be understood as a place of highly personal angles, from which an unpredictable new world is forming.

Themes

Illness. The Sanatorium on the magic mountain is a place where individuals ill with their time—an illness here called tuberculosis—go to reflect, take peace, and temporarily heal. Castorp goes there as a way of finding out that he is in fact ill, and needs medical care.

Enlightenment. The dominant theme, among the intellectual perspectives that intersect on the mountain, is the value of the Enlightenment ideology which since the eighteenth century has provided the leading edge of European, and arguably global, thought. Empirical science is the chief vehicle of this ideology.

Characters

Hans Castorp. Castorp is at the start of a business career, when he decides to visit his cousin at a tuberculosis sanatorium in the Swiss Alps. While on what turns out to be a seven year convalescence there, from his own nascent tuberculosis, Castorp encounters persons of great and instructive originality, who widen his sense of the meaning of life.

Claudia Chauchat. Castorp's romantic interests gravitate to this lady with the 'lone wolf eyes,' whose seductive moves, in his direction, are as rudimentary as the symbolic offering of a pencil across the dinner table.

Leo Naphta. Naphta is a Jew turned Jesuit priest, and a supporter of political totalitarianism. He is thought to be modeled on the prominent Marxist literary theorist, Georg Lukacs.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Hans Castorp (Open)

Character Hans Castorp, the protagonist of *The Magic Mountain* (1924) is a bland and 'ordinary' German who takes off from his job for three weeks, to visit a cousin who is in a sanatorium high in the Swiss Alps. As his train climbs into the mountains, and leaves daily business life behind, Hans finds himself being drawn up into a 'magic atmosphere' which he will find it hard to leave. He gains independence and with fascination explores his new world. He enters a society of recoverers from such ailments as tuberculosis, yet finds them reluctant to return to the world they had left behind; they are embossed, as he becomes, in a high-altitude, spiritually intense atmosphere from which they are barely capable of returning.

Parallels *The Magic Mountain* is a type of *Bildungsroman*, tracking Hans' gamut of experiences and existential threats 'on the mountain.' The personal modesty and quiet openness remind us of Telemachus, in the *Odyssey*, the ingénue setting out for Menelaus and Helen, unsuspecting the web of cultural complexities he is entering. Werther, in Goethe's tale (1774), shares with Castorp the fresh openness to mountain culture and its discoveries—and its threats to the self. Higgs, the narrator of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), treats us to a utopia which he satirizes, in some ways matching the critique Castorp develops toward the magic mountain. Emil, in Hesse's *Demian* (1919), follows his essentially benign *daimon* into realms of self-discovery, finding truth in the midst of the illusion of life—as, in his growingly mature way—Castorp also does.

Illustrative moments

Ordinary Hans Castorp first appears to us quietly: 'an unassuming young man was traveling, in midsummer, from his native city of Hamburg to Davos-Platz in the Canton of the Grisons, on a three-week visit.' The picture of Hans enlarges but remains quiet: 'he sat alone in his little grey-upholstered compartment, with his alligator-skin hand bag, his traveling rug, and his winter overcoat swinging on its hook. The window was down, the afternoon grew cool...' On all sides the narrow gauge railroad moved through a sparser, and more treeless rising altitude, the air thinning. We have a sense of mystery about this trip with the young man.

Discovering Hans is leaving his own world behind him. 'Two days' travel separated the youth—he is 'a tender product of the sheltered life'—from his own world. Spatial separation was working in him, even more powerfully than time can do, to remove him from the person he was a short time ago. His life back home, where he was just on the verge of entering his professional career as a partner in a firm of shipbuilders, began to slip away from him. Towering peaks began to appear in the distance, and he is relieved to see his cousin.

Disoriented Directly upon arrival in the sanatorium, and after having met a number of the seemingly permanent guests, Hans begins to feel seriously disoriented, doubtless by the sudden change in altitude and breathing. When asked his age he is not sure. 'It seems to me I cannot anymore trust my five senses.' Hans has to lie down, to keep warm and horizontal, in order to remain in touch with his body. Yet when the impressive guest, Settembrini, suggests that maybe Hans would like to descend the mountain and leave, Hans is plainly disturbed, and rejects the idea.

Vulnerable With the passage of a couple of weeks, Hans begins to adventure out onto mountain paths where none of his fellow sanatorium guests are to be found. One afternoon as he is climbing a slope, and thanks to an altitude change, he finds himself beset by a nosebleed, and must lie down, staunch the blood, and for a prolonged time work to regain his oxygen level and balance. 'He felt no unpleasant sensation, the blood-letting had had a soothing effect,' but he was simply aware of himself breathing, being there. And only recently he had been immersed in daily commercial life, 'down there!'

Out of body While extended in the snow, during his nosebleed, Hans 'suddenly found himself in the far distant past'; so 'strongly, so resistlessly, to the annihilation of time and space; one might have said it was a lifeless body lying there...while the actual Hans Castorp moved in that far-away time and place...' The memory to which his body yields is of a brief teen-age love affair with a young man he never saw again. Slowly Hans returns into himself, finds his way down the slope, and exhaustedly returns to the sanatorium.

Discussion questions

What importance do you see in the fact that *The Magic Mountain* was written in 1924, between the two World Wars, and in a time of what most critics consider cultural anxiety?

What kind of visionary experience does Castorp undergo when he gets his nosebleed in the snowstorm? Is there a 'spiritual' transformation in him?

What are the trendy issues that constitute discussions on the mountain? What view emerges, of the science and philosophy of the day? What does Castorp think of these sophisticated fellow residents?