

# TONIO

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**Tonio Kruger** (in Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kruger*) [open](#)

**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.

**Character** *Tonio Kruger* was one of two early short stories—*Death in Venice* was the other—in which Mann dealt with the contrast between the cold bourgeois north, of his own Hamburg background, and the passionate, sensuous south—Italy especially. Tonio Kruger is himself a blend of these two cultural environments, a child of an upscale merchant family, whose Mother was from the south, and who brought into Tonio's life the passion and concern with art which his father didn't understand. Tonio defines himself by the search for the meaning of the art in life. He is an explorer into the deepest polarity in his personality, the north and south.

**Parallels** Tonio represents a centuries old clash, in the soul of the modern German, between the dour north of the country, with its cultural roots in Norse and Icelandic sagas, and the sensuous south of classical Italy and Greece. (Tonio belongs to both of those worlds, which is what fascinates the author. Winckelmann, in his *History of Ancient Art* (1764), Goethe in his *Italienische Reise* (*Trip to Italy*, pub. 1816-17), and Herder, in his *Journal of my Journey in the year 1769*: these three authors embedded their maturest thinking in the dichotomy between North and South Europe—and more widely between the austere and the sensuous. This eighteenth century German theme finds ample reworking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: In Heine, Rilke, and Thomas Mann.

## Illustrative moments

**Sensuous** Tonio is physically distinctive, standing out for his sensuous mien—and for brilliant eyes; traits which will play a part in his later personal development as an artist. '...beneath Tonio's round fur cap was a brunette face with the finely chiseled features of the south; the dark eyes, with delicate shadows and too heavy lids, looked dreamily and a little timorously on the world.' Conscious of himself as a physical presence, Tonio will be drawn to inwardly beautiful people, throughout his maturing, and they will form the basis of his aesthetic philosophy of life.

**Split** Tonio is very drawn to his 'southern mother,' though he finds her hard to understand, and out of tune with the Hanseatic business world in which married life has placed her. He accedes to the house rules imposed by his father, and considers them the norm of civilized life, yet at the same time suspects that his deeper self cannot be captured by such rules of middle class life. For his entire life he lives a provocative indecision over whether he must return to the organized social being in him, or whether he should give freedom to the artistic impulses that wish to shape his whole life.

**Explorer** In late adolescence Tonio breaks from his northern world and moves to the south, the land of his senses. (Goethe was constantly thinking over the meaning of this journey south, and Thomas Mann builds on the same vision.) 'He lived in large cities and in the south, promising himself a luxurious ripening of his art by southern suns; but his heart being dead and loveless, he fell into adventures of the flesh...' For years Tonio sought for some harmony of discipline and art,

but all the time grew more painfully troubled by the conflict between the two poles of his personality.

**Polarity** Tonio Kruger eventually returns on a trip to the north, and to his old homeland. He is shocked, on that return, to find that his old house has been converted into a Public Library, which pleases him, and to find himself suspected by the Police—his papers were non-existent—of being a fraudster. (The proper role of the artist is fraud, he reflects.) From these somewhat alienating experiences, Tonio makes his way farther north to Denmark, just across the North Sea from the land where he was brought up. There, as in Hamburg, he loves what he sees as the innocence of the bourgeois, friendly and innocent faces of people swimming and playing on the beaches.

### **Discussion questions**

Does Mann (or the narrator of Tonio Kruger) favor either the southern or northern component of Tonio's personality? What is Tonio's reaction to the northern world of Denmark?

What is Tonio's relation to Lisabeta Ivanovna, whom he meets in Italy? What does he say to her in his final letter?

What does the author of the tale, in the tale, feel toward Tonio? Admiration? Physical longing? Wonder?