

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THOMAS MANN

(1875-1955)

Works (major prose works)

Buddenbrooks. 1901
Tonio Kroeger. 1903
Felix Krull. 1911 (published 1922)
Death in Venice. 1912
Reflections of an unpolitical man. 1918
A Man and his dog. 1918
The Magic Mountain. 1924
Mario and the Magician. 1930
A Sketch of my Life. 1930
Joseph and his Brothers. 1933-43
The Problem of Freedom. 1937
The Beloved returns. 1939
Doktor Faustus. 1947
Essays of Three Decades, 1947
The Holy Sinner. 1951
The Black Swan. 1954

Biography

Thomas Mann was born (1875) in Luebeck, Germany to a middle class family. His father was a grain merchant, and a senator in the State Government, while his mother was a Brazilian of both Portuguese and German ancestry, who emigrated to Germany with her parents when she was seven years old. (One might think ahead, to Mann's novella *Tonio Kroeger*(1903), in which Tonio's parents, cultural replicas of Mann's own parents, raise a complex artistic child who is in part constructed out of Mann himself.)

Mann's father died in 1891, whereupon his business was liquidated, and the family moved to Munich. Prior to the move, Mann studied at the gymnasium in Luebeck, then, in Munich, at the Ludwig Maximilian's University, working toward a degree in journalism: his studies were directed toward literature, economics, and history.

Thomas Mann lived in Munich from 1891 to 1933, except for a year spent in Italy with his brother. His literary career began with the publication of his first story, in 1898. In 1905 Mann married the daughter of a successful secular Jewish businessman, a marriage from which six children were born. (Though Mann's wife converted to Lutheranism, that took nothing away from the dangerous fact that she was born Jewish into a world where racial hatred lurked.) In 1924 Mann and his wife moved to a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland, an exposure which would play powerfully into Mann's greatest novel, *The Magic Mountain*. By this time, not that long after the end of the First World War, Mann was foreseeing and dreading a major conflict between France and Germany.

In 1929 Mann had a summer cottage built for himself and his wife in what is now Lithuania, the site of an art colony where he had been working, in 1930-32, on the writing of *Joseph and his Brothers*(1933-43).

In 1933, with the war 'approaching,' the Mann family emigrated to Switzerland, then in 1936 received Czechoslovak citizenship. Then, in 1939, with Hitler moving into Eastern Europe, the Mann family

emigrated to the United States, where Mann taught at Princeton University. In 1944 Mann became a naturalized American citizen; the Mann family moved to Los Angeles, where they became prominent members of the LA German community.

During the War Mann was widely heard over BBC, broadcasting 8-minute radio speeches to Germany attacking the Nazis. He felt contempt and scorn for Hitler, and astonishment as the brutal *End-loesung*, or final solution, became a reality.

During the Cold War in the U.S., Mann was accused of Communist leanings, put on the blacklist by the House Unamerican Activities Committee, and driven increasingly mad by the recrudescence in America of the kind of fascism he had known in Europe.

Stubbornly activist, and joining highlighted protest movements against McCarthyism, Mann was forced to resign from his position as Consultant in Germanic Literature at the Library of Congress.

In 1952 Mann returned to Europe, where he lived in Switzerland. He never again lived in Germany, though he travelled there often. His most momentous return to his birthland came in 1949, when he attended celebrations for the two hundredth birthday of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: a tribute to the war-transcending greatness latent in the history of German culture.

Achievements

Activism. History placed Mann on the threshold, then in the actual arena, of World War II. He was preoccupied with the brewing conflict between France and German, already in the twenties. By the late thirties, with Nazism fully declared, Mann was asked by the BBC to present 8-minute anti-Nazi broadcasts to Germany. He did this, throughout the war, forcefully condemning dictatorship. He did the same in the fifties, in the U.S., when he was accused of Communism by the McCarthy investigation. He forcefully defended his position as a non-communist, not as an anti-communist.

Psychology. From the time of *Tonio Kroeger* and *Death in Venice*, Mann is before us as a keen observer of the psychology of the intellectual and the artist. He pursues this vein of analysis throughout *The Magic Mountain*, which is set in the atmosphere of a highly cultivated sanatorium, in which a gathering of sensitive eccentrics are on display. In *Doktor Faustus*, the mad and eccentric musician, Adrian Leverkuehn, exploits all of Mann's capacities, for getting inside the relation between madness and art.

Europeanism. In his many essays, Mann expresses with increasing fervor his devotion to the basic 'idea' of European culture; the humane, Greco-Roman based, democratic and freedom loving tradition he valued. He is making the sharpest possible contrast between his own brutal time, and the great traditions of Europe. He strongly formulated this sense of the European in his address given in Germany on the two hundredth anniversary of the birthday of Goethe.

Democracy. Mann was faced, during the McCarthy hearings in the United States, with the charge of communism. The evidence was not there, the atmosphere of hysteria was strong; Mann bluntly refused the charges, made clear that he was a noncommunist, though not an anti-communist, and defended the ideals of libertarian democracy before a listening nation.

THEMES

Homosexuality. The issue of homosexuality, especially of pederasty, is pervasive in Mann's work. Tonio Kroeger is the cardinal, but not the only, example. The handsome teen age Tonio sweeps the tiring artist off his aging feet. The cholera filled atmosphere of Venice drifts into the relation between the older man and the youngster, and is in the end too much for the lover, and nothing at all to the beloved handsome youngster. Mann himself, we know, struggled with this very issue, never found it an unrelieved source of pleasure, and was at his best in diverting the addiction into literature.

Sickness. Sickness, especially in the artist or intellectual, is a continual concern of Mann. *The Magic Mountain* is a castle of the sick, and neurosis is in the air of all discussions. The fault line of homosexuality lies across many male relationships in Mann's work, and though that addiction is treated as seductive, it is also a form of sickness. One thinks of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, who like the artist is sick—gangrene of the foot—but who has the cure—the famous bow the Greeks need—for his society.

Beauty. The beauty of nature, seen through the psyche of the human, is hauntingly present in Mann's work. So is the beauty of the human, Tonio or Tadzio (in *Death in Venice*), by contrast with which the old man drying-up of Aschenbach, the would be lover of Tonio is as chilling as the discovery of mirrored-back ageing in Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. In both Mann and Wilde, human beauty is very much in the mind. Once it begins to unravel, to peel away, you get the ghastly image of pretend youth; the figure of the whorish and cosmeticized gent who scares Aschenbach to death as he spies him on the dock.

Geography. For Mann, as for Goethe and other Enlightenment Germans in the 18th century, the polarity between North and South is rich in connotation. In both *Death in Venice* and *Tonio Kroeger*, the south is the region of sun and sensuality, where the human body can be seen and enjoyed, while the north is the zone of repression, discipline, and cold concepts.

Characters

Thomas Mann, a superb observer of human nature in its historical-cultural setting, is at his best in describing characters like himself, observers, and sensualists doting on the beauty of the fallen world.

Tonio Kroeger, in the story bearing his name, fascinates the narrator, who is himself an observer-sensualist. Tonio is of mixed heritage, Germanic and Italian, and the personal richness born of this mixture is deeply intriguing to the narrator, who recounts the movements of Tonio through the cultural milieux that have made him. Mann is not only the observer observing himself, here—that is the story's narrator—but also the erotic teller narrating the beauties of the young man who fascinates him.

Another of Mann's subtlest stories, 'Death in Venice,' also involves a narrator who falls in visual and verbal love with a handsome youngster, who is at his most ravishingly handsome. Mann lavishes his finest prose on the language. **Aschenbach** (the writer) uses to describe the prurient but controlled feelings his young friend awakens in him. Mann's own pain, at the barriers between him and Tadzio, throbs across the tragic conclusion of the story, in which the author himself dies of the cholera which is sweeping down over Venice.

Hans Castorp, in Mann's powerful novel *The Magic Mountain*, goes by train into the Swiss mountains, where there is a sanatorium in which a wide repertoire of neurotics, intellectuals, visionaries are recuperating from tuberculosis and talking constantly about impending World War, man's destiny, and the place of science in society. The observer in Mann is given full rein, as he self-edits through Castorp, for whom the 'magic' mountain is a setting in which to see the other and discover himself.