

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# TONIO KROEGER

## Thomas Mann

### 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

Mann's *Tonio Kroeger*, published in 1903 when Mann was twenty-five, is a precocious novella, in which the author analyzes and anticipates his own personal development. His means of doing this is through the characterization of the life course of a man who is both different from Mann and similar to him.

Tonio's destiny is wrapped up in his dual inheritance from his parents. His father is a 'north German' type, a German consul who is disciplined, order-driven, and given to hard work. His mother, Consuelo, is of a far more southern temper, is artistic, and, when it comes to her son favors his happiness and natural inclination, rather than the demands of duty. Tonio participates especially well in the world view of his mother, and will throughout his lifetime prioritize his own artistic feelings.

Mann himself is partially embedded in the person of Hans, one of Tonio's schoolmates, and a handsome, popular boy who hardly pays attention to Tonio, though nothing would please Tonio more. It is Mann's own move, through this novella, to inquire into his personal relation to the artistic in himself. Tonio is in part Mann playing himself out in the relation of Tonio to Hans. It is noteworthy, about this relationship, that although Tonio admires Hans, he cannot sidestep his own strongly personal artistic traits. He cannot be like Hans. Hans, for example, likes to ride horses, while Tonio would rather read books about horses. There is a superior tone to Tonio, which is his way of dominating the Hans who in many ways is the 'popular one' of the two.

The complex relation of Tonio to Hans is intensified when Tonio falls for a lovely girl, Ingeborg, whom he meets in a dance class. The complexity rests in the resemblance of the girl to Hans himself, so that even heterosexual love does not free Tonio from his fascination with Hans.

The playing out of the narrative takes us into the travels of Tonio, who goes to the south, who becomes a well known writer, yet who is forever reminded of his difference from the blonde blue haired culture type he admires. While we follow this artistic type as he creates his own respectability about him, as he loves, grows, and shapes his life, we are constantly drawn to the author's own implicit effort here, to work out his own dual inheritance, to the artist and to the responsible citizen in him. The demands of art, Mann is saying for us, come at a price, for, as Mann asserts throughout his life, the artist has 'to die to everyday life.' The ethic and program of Modernism are encapsulated in this terse formula, and in the present novella events themselves conspire to force on Tonio a lasting reminder of his alienation.

Tonio travels north to revisit his home town in northern Germany, and to continue his inward dealings with his personal duality. While traveling there he is mistaken for an escaped criminal—

darkish skin, flashing eyes—and reminded that for the culture in which he grew up he will always be an outsider, as Mann himself will always be both the artist-outsider, and the native Germanic son of the north.

## Themes

**Art.** Mann was both an intensely artistic nature and a public figure with a deep consciousness of social/historical responsibility. Tonio represents one side of man, which cannot be repressed, although it cannot be fused with the socially responsible element in personal make-up.

**Exile.** The artist, in this case Tonio, is that part of the personality which cannot be absorbed by the norms of society. (Mann portrays this exile condition, of course, from the standpoint of the 'northern' mindset.) Tonio can never return from exile, and when he does, as on his trip north, he is taken for an escaped criminal.

## Characters

**Tonio** is the protagonist of the novella, though the narration is carried on from the standpoint of an objective narrator. His personality is compelling and creative, and contains the germs for growth—Tonio is from the beginning exceptionally observant, and perceptive of his differences from those around him.

**Hans** is the stable socially conscious blonde type, who is from the beginning of the novella on the inside. It is he whom Tonio wants to resemble, and emulates—until Tonio discovers his own uniqueness, and leaves Hans behind.

**Ingeborg** is the Hans look-alike, the attractive blonde girl whom Tonio falls for, in his first sally into the world of the conventional belongers. In the course of time he discovers that Ingeborg does not belong to his world any more than does Hans.

## Tonio Kruger (open)

**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?