

# GERMAN LITERATURE – 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## **20th Century German Literature**

The political and military history of Germany during the first half of the 20th century, is so well known that only the briefest outline should suffice. Under Kaiser Wilhelm II Germany began WW I in 1914. Decisively defeated by the Allies in 1918, she lost all her colonies, Alsace-Lorraine, and some frontier territory. The Republic of Germany (Weimar Republic) was proclaimed in 1919. For fourteen years the nation remained in a deplorable condition: her economy was severely damaged; the government was highly unstable and the people were under a cloud of war guilt. Already as early as 1923 Adolf Hitler made a bid for power in the Beer Hall Putsch in Munich; although this attempt proved abortive, Hitler continued to gain power, and by 1933 he was able to seize complete control of the country. He abolished the Weimar Republic, set up the so called Third Reich, with himself as dictator, repudiated the Versailles Treaty which had ended WW I, carried out a campaign of racial purification, annexed Austria (1937), and part of Czechoslovakia (1938), and began WWII by attacking Poland in 1939. Germany was defeated again in 1945. The division of Germany into East and West, during the Cold War between the United States and Russia, consumed much of the German spirit for the remainder of the 20th century.

## George

**Life and work of Stefan George.** Stefan George (1868-1933) was a German poet, translator, and editor, who was born in Bingen, in Prussia. Already as a teenager he was actively creating poetry, some of it in a private language he invented; thus representative, already, of George's drive toward the pure and hermetic in language. In the late 1880's he found himself for a while in Paris, where he met the eminent poet Paul Verlaine, and became a member of Stephane Mallarme's famed Tuesday soirees, at which many leading French poets appeared. Upon returning to Germany he founded a literary review—*Blaetter fuer die Kunst; Art Journal*—which was to become a style setter for the new and arcane wave of German post Romantic lyric. (It might more precisely be said that the aesthetic forged in the Art Journal was one in which the Symbolist movement—which George was introduced to in Paris—was grafted onto the most recent versions of Romantic poetry. A cult of poetry was under construction here, in which George came increasingly to think of himself as high priest.)

**The aesthetic of George and his Circle.** Around him George promoted the creation of a Kreis, a Circle, of devotees of him and his work; devotees who were expected to call George Meister, and among whom were a few of the best of German poetry. George boldly formulated the qualifications for entry into the poetic priesthood of pure language: 'in poetry... anyone still desirous to 'say' or 'bring about' anything is not worthy even to enter the forecourt of art.' (The reigning mode of this circle was homosexuality, which was George's life-slant, and the purity of poetry seems here to do with the non-parturitive; virginity on all sides, enforced, furthermore, by George's strong recommendation that all the homosexuals in his *Kreis* should remain chaste, like him.) The exclusivity of this *Kreis* was not, however, a sign of indifference to the world situation evolving around every member. George, the aesthete, was also a prophet, by self-proclamation, and in the years during which he saw his country wiped out in WWI, swept into a dull and weak Weimar Democracy, between the two wars, and finally drawn toward an alarming take over of civic life by a prophesied violent solution, was deeply sensitive both to his country's need for a 'way out' of civil chaos and economic, and to the horror of the impending solution—he died in 1933.

**The work of George.** Consider two poem cycles, *Algalal (Helagabalus)* (1892), and *Das Neue Reich (The New Empire)* (1928), which enter George's reflection on the condition of life itself and of his own world. The first sequence concerns the effete and self-indulgent Roman Emperor, Helagabalus, The work shows a fascination with the ultimate in narcissism—a king who can only relate to a marble statue, being incapable of human relations. And ultimately isolated. The later poem sequence, The New Empire, anatomizes the new Germany of the late twenties, which has suffered nothing but defeats, and which is boiling to promote some overwhelming and catastrophic revenge triumph. 'The poet in times of tumult,' written in 1921, anticipates the coming of a powerful leader surrounded by committed followers. Many such prophetic poems crowd the pages of The New Empire, some predicting precise events, like the substitution of the swastika for the cross. All these later poems appear to speak for a nation humiliated, hopeless, potentially violent, and closing in on itself

## Reading

### *Primary source reading*

*The Works of Stefan George*, trans. Marx and Morwitz, 1974.

### *Secondary source reading*

Norton, Robert, *Secret Germany: Stefan George and his Circle*, 2002.

### *Further reading*

Rieckmann, Jens, *A Companion to the Works of Stefan George*, 2007.

### *Original language reading*

Karlauf, Thomas, *Die Entdeckung des Charisma*, 2007.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Stefan George and his aristocratic artistic Kreis embraced certain plotters—von Stauffenberg at their head—who attempted to assassinate Hitler. At the same time George has been accused of Nazi sympathies. Where do you think the truth lies, concerning George's attitudes toward the Nazis?

As a teen ager, George invented a private language of his own, using words and phrases of his own making. What traces of that youthful impulse do you see in George's mature work as a poet?

*Excerpt poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/.../stefan-george-you-like-flames*

Thanks

The summer field is parched with evil fire,  
And from a shoreland trail of trodden clover  
I saw my head in waters thick with mire  
That wrath of far-off thunder dimmed with red.  
The mornings after frantic nights are dread:  
The cherished gardens turned to stifling stall,  
Untimely snow of bane the trees filmed over,  
And upward rose the lark with hopeless call.

Then through the land on weightless soles you stray,  
And bright it grows with colors you have laid,  
You bid us pluck the fruits from joyous spray,  
And rout the shadows lurking in the night...  
Did I not weave-you and your tranquil light-  
This crown in thanks, who ever could have known  
That more than sun, long days for me you rayed,  
And evenings more than any starry zone.

## Rilke

**The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke.** Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) was a Bohemian-Austrian poet, novelist, and voluminous correspondent, who left a deep mark on the introspective (and borderline mystic) lyric of our own century. Rilke was born in Prague. His father, a not very successful military man, and his mother, who came from a well to do Prague family, divorced in 1884, when Rilke was nine. Partly due to this shake up in the family, Rilke found himself consigned to a military academy from 1886-1891. Rilke was not at home in this environment, and could not wait to get out—which he did in 1895-96, when he studied at the Universities of Prague and Munich. It can be said that with the departure from those institutions of higher learning, Rilke set out on a course of lifelong devotion to poetry, as well as love. In 1897 he met and fell in love with Lou Andreas Salomé, the gutsy, attractive, and very talented intimate of Freud and Nietzsche, as well as of Rilke. Rilke remained close to Lou for the next three years, and though they then split up she remained an invaluable guide and adviser to him throughout his life. (Close to Freud, and in her own right a serious student of psychoanalysis, she aided the often self-absorbed Rilke to think more critically about himself.) It was she, after all, who had forced him to change his name from René to Rainer, which seemed ‘more masculine.’ A meeting with Tolstoy, in 1898, greatly expanded Rilke’s sense of the power of art in the world.

**The Prose Work of Rainer Maria Rilke.** Rilke brought many of his lifetime themes into his only work of fiction. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). This work presents the jottings, notations and observations of a young painter living in Paris, in pretty complete human isolation. For some time Malte is struck by the ugliness of Paris, as a vast urban sprawl, but gradually he learns how to look at his surrounding world ‘aesthetically.’ The model for this change in sensibility—which is the turning point into a whole new world view—can be seen in the Baudelaire poem, ‘Une Charogne,’ ‘The Corpse.’ That poem is cited admiringly in the novel and suggests the transformation by which one can come to find the sight of a rotting corpse aesthetically satisfying. Malte’s self-discoveries also include, not surprisingly, a fascination with his own death, which becomes profound and interior to him, and opens him up, strangely, to a power of transcendent love.

**Rilke’s poetry.** In his *Stunden-buch, Book of Hours*, 1905, Rilke deepens the haunting bond between his prosodic flexibility and the mystical dignity of his thought. In this work he laments the loss of a past—especially the 18th century aristocratic past—which enshrined human values and a sense of beauty, and which set standards of behavior and thought, unlike the crass society of Rilke’s time, with its brainless commercialism, and indifference to valid traditions. Among the bleak casualties of this commercial culture must rank the almost universal forgetting of the interior meaning, and enrichment, of death. *The Duino Elegies* (1923) and *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923) show us Rilke at his most mature and powerful, making new myths for our time—myths of the Angelic, myths of the Orphic—deepening his account of the leading place art plays in the making of society, and widening his sense (which is always latent in his work) of the importance of the underclasses in his society, and of their candidacy for artistic greatness. Rilke carries his work far beyond the barren isolation of Malte, into a participatory transcendent world, which all can assay.

## Reading

### *Primary source reading*

*Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Robert Bly, 1981.

### *Secondary source reading*

Freedman, Ralph, *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke*, 1998.

### *Further reading*

Tavis, Anna, *Rilke’s Russia: A Cultural Encounter*, 1997.

### *Original language reading*

Engel, Manfred, *Rilkes ‘Duineser Elegien’ und die moderne deutsche Lyrik*, 1986.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Why was death so personally meaningful to Rilke? Was this intimacy to death a creative factor in Rilke's poems? Is the death he lives with a depressing death or an inspiring death?

What does Malte Laurids Brigge discover about the ugly aspects of death, as encountered in Paris? Does he find a way to see a rotting human corpse as beautiful?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/archaic-torso-of-apollo/>

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We cannot know his legendary head  
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso  
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,  
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,  
gleams in all its power. Otherwise  
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could  
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs  
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced  
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders  
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,  
burst like a star: for here there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.

## Hugo von Hofmansthal

**The Life of Hugo von Hofmanstahl.** Hugo Von Hofmanstahl (1874-1929) was an Austrian novelist, librettist, poet, and dramatist, who came to believe strongly in the writer's need to be significantly absorbed in his society, and who accordingly was widely known in his home world of Vienna. His father was an Austrian-Italian banker, and his mother came from an old and distinguished Viennese family. His great grandfather was a Jewish merchant, prominent in Vienna, who was ennobled by the Austrian Emperor.

**Student and early creative life in Vienna.** At an early age Hofmansthal was active writing poems, and at 17 he made the acquaintance of Stefan George, and published poems in George's *Blaetter fuer die Kunst, Art Journal*. (Characteristically enough he refused George's invitation to membership in George's Kreis, anxious not to adopt a servant/master relationship to the great man.) Hofmanstahl studied Law and Philosophy at the University of Vienna, but on graduation, in 1901, he chose to take the direction of poetry—which his financial situation permitted. He settled into Viennese avant garde creative circles, joining the Young Vienna group, in which he enjoyed the partnership of the Viennese dramatist, Arthur Schnitzler.

**Hugo von Hofmanstahl, a literary life.** Hugo von Hofmanstahl met the composer Richard Strauss for the first time in 1901, and formed a working relationship with him, as the Romantic fabulist E.T.A. Hoffman had formed such a relationship with the great composers of his day. (Libretti for a number of superb opera dramas were generated by Hofmanstahl and Strauss: we note *Elektra*, perhaps the best and best known, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Ariadne on Naxos*. In 1912 Hofmanstahl adapted into German the 15th century English mystery play, *Everyman*—which is still performed annually at the Salzburg Festival. We can easily imagine that, during the years following WW I, Hofmanstahl was writing continuously, in several genres: but he was also taking his part in society, in the way, he thought, the poet should. During the War he supported a pro-Government position, and grew increasingly conservative and supportive of the Austro Hungarian Empire. His disappointment, at the outcome of the war, was predictably great, and the Weimar Republic little solace. Nonetheless, von Hofmanstahl continued with an intense regime of writing and directing. In 1920, with the director Max Reinhardt, von Hofmanstahl founded the Salzburg Festival of the arts, which flourishes to our day.

**Hugo von Hofmanstahl in later life.** Hugo von Hofmanstahl married in 1901, his Jewish wife having converted to Christianity, and von Hofmanstahl having grown deeper in his appreciation of Roman Catholicism as he advanced in his own imaginative work. Three children were born to the marriage; von Hofmanstahl's son Franz, committed suicide, and two days later von Hofmanstahl himself died of a stroke. He was buried in the habit of a Franciscan tertiary.

**The character of the work.** A couple of examples will suffice. In 1902 von Hofmanstahl published his fictive letter, 'Ein Brief,' 'A Letter,' purportedly written by the English nobleman Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon, in the 16th century. This fascinating letter allows von Hofmanstahl to elaborate his own ideas about the crisis of language, as a means to encountering the world, and the inherent loneliness of the person who tries to reach the world through language. The Bildungsroman *Andreas or the United* (1912) consists of two parts: the first, set on an Alpine farm, features Andreas mystically identifying with the extremes of good and evil; the second part, set in Venice, displays Andreas in love with a split personality woman whom he tries, it seems in vain, to reunite into one person through love. Von Hofmanstahl probes deeply into imagination and its psychological depths.

### Reading

#### *Primary source reading*

McClatchy, J.P., ed. *The Whole Difference: Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmanstahl*, 2008.

#### *Secondary source reading*

Broch, Hermann; trans. Michael Pitnam, *Hugo von Hofmanstahl and his Time: The European Imagination, 1860-1920*, 1984.

#### *Further reading*

Schorske, Carol, *Fin-de-siecle Vienna. Politics and Culture*, 1980.

***Original language reading***

Mayer, Mathias, *Hugo von Hofmannstahl*, 1993.

**Suggested paper topics**

Look into the Chandos letter of Hoffmanstahl. Why is this discussion set centuries in the past, in England? What point is Hofmanstahl making here? Is the issue primarily the nature of human beings lost in the loneliness of their own private language?

*Read Andreas or The United*, and discuss Hofmanstahl's perceptions into serious mental illness. Does he show a technical understanding of the psychoanalysis which was a major trend in the Vienna of Hofmanstahl's time?

*Excerpt* [www.poemhunter.com/hugo-von-hofmannsthal/](http://www.poemhunter.com/hugo-von-hofmannsthal/)

The valley of dusk was filled  
With a silver-grey fragrance, like the moon  
Seeping through clouds. But it wasn't night.  
The silver-grey fragrance of the dark valley  
Caused my sleepy thoughts to blur,  
And silently I sank into the weaving,

Transparent sea and left my life.  
What wonderful flowers there were,  
With dark chalices glowing! A maze of plants  
Through which a yellow-red light,  
as if from topazes, glowed in warm streams. All  
Was filled with a deep swelling  
Of melancholy music. And this I knew,

Even though I could not fathom it, but I knew:  
This was death. Death turned music,  
With an immense longing, sweet and glowing darkly,  
Brother to deepest melancholy.  
And yet:  
A nameless homesickness for life kept crying  
Mutely in my soul, crying as someone

On board a big ocean vessel would cry, a ship, driven  
By gigantic yellow sails, passing by the city,  
His city, at night in dark-blue water. There he sees  
The lanes, hears the rushing of the fountains, smells  
The scent of the lilac bushes, sees himself,  
A child, standing on the shore, with a child's eyes,  
Fearful, with tears welling up, sees

Through the open window the light in his room  
But the big ship carries him along,  
Gliding away on dark-blue water soundlessly,  
Driven by gigantic yellow sails of strange shape

## Kafka

**The Achievement of Franz Kafka.** Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was a writer in German—of short stories, novels, and aphorisms; a body of largely incomplete work which has nonetheless made Kafka one of the determinant literary forces of the twentieth century.

**The Life of Franz Kafka: Jewishness and Education.** Franz Kafka was born into a middle class German speaking Ashkenazi Jewish family living near the Town Square in Prague, in the later years of the Austro Hungarian Empire. Prague was a city in which both Czech and German were spoken, and which, during the course of Kafka's lifetime, was to see a rivalry verging on hostility develop between the two racial groups. (Kafka was later to dismiss the claim that his work was marked by its Jewish tone, and yet the lifetime evidence is that the sensitive Kafka strongly felt the Jewish predicament he found himself in.) Kafka's father was a ritual slaughterer, who later became a fancy goods retailer and traveling salesman rep. His mother was better educated than his Father, and easier for Kafka to understand and love than his Father, with whom Franz had a lifetime struggle toward an understanding which never materialized. (In his later Letters to His Father he described this parental disharmony as a major life-blockage.) Kafka himself was sent to the local boys' elementary school (1889-1893), then, for the usual eight years, to the State Gymnasium in Prague, a home to strict Latin and Greek educational practices. Kafka entered Charles University in 1901, majoring in Chemistry, but soon changing to Law, with which he was to complete his degree. While at Charles University, Kafka met Max Brod, with whom he formed a firm and creative relationship which was to be seminal for both men. (Brod would later be the biographer of Kafka, and the editor of his literary estate.) Together they read Plato (in Greek) and Flaubert together, and shared ideas, on aesthetics, which would buoy up their fellow Prague aesthetes in the years following graduation (1906). The life and work of Franz Kafka after graduation become increasingly bifurcated: fairly successful employee of two different insurance companies, at one point President of a new asphalt company, Kafka frets and will continue to fret at the only limited time he has for his work.

**The work of Franz Kafka.** The hypersensitive Kafka lived to see a brutal war (World War I) and its aftermath, the increasing bourgeoisification of European society, and formative stages of a uniquely barbaric political movement, National Socialism in Germany. (And fortunately not the Third Reich, in which three of his sisters were gassed.) Like many in his time, Kafka grew increasingly aware of the inhumanity of the 'new society' forming around him; a wasteland of bureaucracy, of faceless decisions, of abject middle-class values, and, of course, of undercurrents of menacing revenge for the wartime humiliation of his homeland. Better than any critic, however, Kafka knew how to describe the crisis of his time, in novels or short stories catching the human in the midst of bureaucratic labyrinths, and meaningless adventures.

**Kafka's Work.** *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), two of these novels, skewer the individual against the mysterious and threatening power of society. It is easy to see the spiritual kinship among George, Rilke, and Kafka, as they confront a world which to them seemed dangerously confused, but which to us is beginning to seem unremarkably familiar. But the turn Kafka gives, to these shadowy tales of individuals lost in the non meaning of contemporary life—that is of life one hundred years less far, than we are today, into the ravages of alienation, family disintegration, impersonality, and occasional, mysterious transformation—is more directly spooky than the lamentational or aristocratic twists given by Rilke or George, as they call out against the monstrously new. Kafka places shadowy figurae in a shadowy world, and becomes their lostness with them.

## Reading

### *Primary source reading*

Kafka, Franz, *The Trial*, 2009.

### *Secondary source reading*

Murray, Nicholas, *Kafka*, 2004.

Corngold, Stanley; Wagner, Benno, *Franz Kafka; The Ghosts in the Machine*, 2011.



***Original language reading***

Alt, Peter-Andre, *Franz Kafka: der ewige Sohn. Eine biographie.* 2011.

*Excerpt en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Franz\_Kafka*

“Many a book is like a key to unknown chambers within the castle of one’s own self.”

“Don't bend; don't water it down; don't try to make it logical; don't edit your own soul according to the fashion. Rather, follow your most intense obsessions mercilessly.”

“A First Sign of the Beginning of Understanding is the Wish to Die.”

“I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is my belief.”

“All language is but a poor translation.”

“The meaning of life is that it stops.”

## Hesse

**Herman Hesse's Life.** Herman Hesse (1877-1962) was a German novelist, poet, and short story writer, who won the Nobel Prize in 1942, for the novel *The Glass Bead Game*. Hesse was born in Calw, in the Black Forest in the State of Wuerttemberg, of parents who were missionaries of the Basel Mission, at one time in India. Hesse's mother was born on mission. Her husband, a doctor, hailed from Estonia, but the parents settled in Calw, when the father, who was severe and religiously powerful, settled the family into a new job. (Hesse himself was never comfortable with the small town culture he then found himself raised on, and from the start, with the help of a highly cultivated polylingual grandfather, considered himself a citizen of the world.) As Dad took on a job with a theological publishing company the Pietist atmosphere in young Hesse's family grew even more marked. Accordingly young Hesse grew up yielding to his powerful stubbornness—his Mother wondered what force could subdue him—and at times seriously depressed. By the age of twelve, Hesse had firmly decided to be a writer.

**Hesse's Education.** Hesse's formal education began at the Latin School of Goeppingen, in Switzerland, was then continued to the gymnasium level at the Theological Seminary of Maulbronn Abbey. Not a model student, Hesse took to drinking and smoking with older boys, not to mention a serious episode—a suicide attempt—to prove how deeply disorganized he was in that educational environment. After matriculation he took on a number of bookstore jobs, finally discovering a position in Tuebingen at which, after a twelve hour day as salesman, he was left free to read at his leisure—and did so, voraciously, in the German classics and Nietzsche, whose notions of good and evil, and transcendence of them, were compelling to Hesse.

**Hesse's Work.** Hesse had decided, from age 12, to devote himself to writing, and of course did fill his teen age years with essays and stories. But his first major public success came with *Peter Camenzind* (1904), a book Freud considered one of his favorite texts. In 1911 Hesse traveled to Sri Lanka and Indonesia, a trip on which he would build impressions and insights later to gel into the novel *Siddartha* (1922), a tribute to aesthetic withdrawal, and transcendence, which many found facile and unrealistically 'poetic,' at the time. (Interestingly enough, the American sixties, with their hippie stress on Peace and Love, brought back Hesse's novel as a cult commodity.) Like most sensitive Germans, Hesse was appalled at the sufferings and cruelties of WW I, but unlike most he tried to remain 'European,' rather than nationalist, throughout the conflict; though later he confessed that he had failed in his effort to use love against war. After the war, with return to civilian life, and to a second shattered marriage, Hesse readdressed himself to the realities of his world, and created his most powerful novel, *Steppenwolf* (1927). *The Wolf from the Steppe* is in fact a study of the profound split in the mind of Harry Haller, a disoriented post WW I middle class German, who both adores German comfort, classical values, the world of finance, and, on the other hand, reveals himself as exposed—a steppe wolf—to the vicious and uncivilized in mankind, and to the New Americanized World of jazz, danger, wild dreams and self-discoveries, and, foreseen but foresworn by the protagonist, the onset of a world catastrophic clash of forces. *The Glass Bead Game* (1944) projects into an ideally pure elite company of aesthetes, who have found a (temporary) solution to chaos, in the perfection of a game which is pure pattern.

## Reading

### *Primary source reading*

Hesse, Herman, *Siddartha*, 1981. (There are many updates of this translation; take your pick.)

### *Secondary source reading*

Freedman, Ralph, *Herman Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis. A Biography*, 1978. (The classic study of Hesse.)

### *Further reading*

Mileck, Joseph, *Herman Hesse: Biography and Bibliography*, 1977.

### *Original language reading*

Zeller, Bernhard, *Herman Hesse*, 2005.

### **Suggested paper topics**

From *Siddhartha*, with its sympathy for peace and withdrawal to the darker jungles of urban imagination, in *Steppenwolf*, is a long journey. Was the Hesse of *Steppenwolf* still the same peace seeking sensibility we saw in *Siddhartha*?

What was Hesse's experience of trying to bring love to the understanding and resolution of the conflict in WW1? Was Hesse discouraged by this experience? Did the experience change the direction of his thinking?

**Excerpt** [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1113469.Hermann\\_Hesse](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1113469.Hermann_Hesse)

“For me, trees have always been the most penetrating preachers. I revere them when they live in tribes and families, in forests and groves. And even more I revere them when they stand alone. They are like lonely persons. Not like hermits who have stolen away out of some weakness, but like great, solitary men, like Beethoven and Nietzsche. In their highest boughs the world rustles, their roots rest in infinity; but they do not lose themselves there, they struggle with all the force of their lives for one thing only: to fulfil themselves according to their own laws, to build up their own form, to represent themselves. Nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary than a beautiful, strong tree. When a tree is cut down and reveals its naked death-wound to the sun, one can read its whole history in the luminous, inscribed disk of its trunk: in the rings of its years, its scars, all the struggle, all the suffering, all the sickness, all the happiness and prosperity stand truly written, the narrow years and the luxurious years, the attacks withstood, the storms endured. And every young farmboy knows that the hardest and noblest wood has the narrowest rings, that high on the mountains and in continuing danger the most indestructible, the strongest, the ideal trees grow.

Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.

A tree says: A kernel is hidden in me, a spark, a thought, I am life from eternal life. The attempt and the risk that the eternal mother took with me is unique, unique the form and veins of my skin, unique the smallest play of leaves in my branches and the smallest scar on my bark. I was made to form and reveal the eternal in my smallest special detail.

## Mann

**The Importance of Thomas Mann.** Thomas Mann (1875-1955) was a German novelist, critic, short story writer, philanthropist, and towering figure of mature perspective during the catastrophic and chaotic years of the Third Reich. Mann won the Nobel Prize in 1929, for his novel *Buddenbrooks*, which was published in 1901. His elder brother, Heinrich, was also a prominent and influential fiction writer.

**Life of Thomas Mann.** Mann was born in Luebeck, Germany, into an old Hanseatic business family. He was the second son of Thomas Mann, a senator and prosperous grain merchant, and of a Brazilian-German mother, who had been brought to Germany as a child. The young Thomas Mann was baptized as a Lutheran, and moved to Munich, where his first education was in the science departments of the Munich gymnasium. After matriculation he enrolled at the University of Munich, and then at the Technical University of Munich, where it was his intention to study Journalism. During these years, as we know from Mann's Diaries, which were opened after his death, he became aware of his homosexuality—which was to play a keen role in some of his short fiction—and fought hard to come to terms with his bisexual nature. None the less he fell in love with the woman of his life, with whom he was to have six children, three of them consequential writers. He grew in his writing—perhaps his most ambitious novel, *Buddenbrooks*, was published in 1901—and in his public presence, early on as a friend to the German nation, and to the Weimar Republic, then in the increasingly explosive twenties as an ardent foe of the National Socialist Movement, and finally, in 1933, as an exile to Switzerland. (Mann's children had warned him, just in time, that it was too dangerous to return to Germany after a European trip. In 1939, as the European landscape grew desperate, and many German intellectuals were going into exile, Thomas Mann and his family left Europe for the United States. He spent the war years in California, then returned to Switzerland in 1962.

**The Work of Thomas Mann.** Mann's work spans a vast period of tumultuous personal and political turmoil, and generates themes of widely varying character. One thinks first of *Buddenbrooks* (1901), then of the short story 'Death in Venice' (1912), *The Magic Mountain* (1924), *Joseph and his Brothers* (1933J-43), and *Dr. Faustus* (1947). In the aggregate these works constitute the most mature analysis available to us, of the double nature of German society, at best brilliant and creative, at worst demonic, hate filled, and disastrous. *Dr. Faustus* puts this complex package in a powerful way, through the character of one Adrian Leverkuehn, a composer. Typically German, as Mann puts it, Leverkuen is given to exhilarating and frightening regions of experience, like Nietzsche, and accordingly makes a pact with the Devil, promising not to love anyone in return for the understanding of how to use the absolutely pure and anti humanist twelve tone scale. Leverkuehn's biography is recounted by his friend, a decent man and schoolmaster, who is a realist, around whom—his narration starts in 1943—the world is starting to fall apart, German cities bombed out of existence. Mann's overall comment on the powers and perils of the German personality are intense and vivid.

**Mann's grand reach.** Mann, writing at the height of his powers from exile, struggles to defend the German enterprise, hearkening back to the Humanist tradition in his nation, a tradition which political madness and virulent hatred had rendered nearly a dead letter.

### Reading

#### *Primary source reading*

Mann, Thomas, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. Woods, 1996.

#### *Secondary source reading*

Kurzke, Hermann, *Thomas Mann: Life as a Work of Art: A Biography*, trans. Leslie Wilson, 2007.

#### *Further reading*

Reed, T.J., *Thomas Mann: the uses of tradition*, 1974.

#### *Original language reading*

Boehm, Karl Werner, *Zwischen Selbstzucht und Verlangen: Thomas Mann und das Stigma Homosexualitet*, 1991.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Thomas Mann was tortured, it seems by his homosexuality. (He was in fact a married father of six.) How does he handle this personal tension in his writing? Is his tension the source of 'good writing'?

What layers of German historical experience are embedded in Mann's *Doktor Faustus*? Why is so much emphasis placed on 12 tone music? Are you convinced by the artistic technique of combining story narration with panning shots of the actual destruction of German cities by bombing?

*Excerpt* [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Mann](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Thomas_Mann)

- I think of my suffering, of the problem of my suffering. What am I suffering from? From knowledge — is it going to destroy me? What am I suffering from? From sexuality — is it going to destroy me? How I hate it, this knowledge which forces even art to join it! How I hate it, this sensuality, which claims everything fine and good is its consequence and effect. Alas, it is the poison that lurks in everything fine and good! — How am I to free myself of knowledge? By religion? How am I to free myself of sexuality? By eating rice?
- Here and there, among a thousand other peddlers, are slyly hissing dealers who urge you to come along with them to allegedly "very beautiful" girls, and not only to girls. They keep at it, walk alongside, praising their wares until you answer roughly. They don't know that you have resolved to eat nothing but rice just to escape from sexuality!
- We are most likely to get angry and excited in our opposition to some idea when we ourselves are not quite certain of our own position, and are inwardly tempted to take the other side.
- It is as though something had begun to slip — as though I haven't the firm grip I had on events. — What is success? It is an inner, an indescribable force, resourcefulness, power of vision; a consciousness that I am, by my mere existence, exerting pressure on the movement of life about me. It is my belief in the adaptability of life to my own ends. Fortune and success lie within ourselves. We must hold them firmly — deep within us. For as soon as something begins to slip, to relax, to get tired, within us, then everything without us will rebel and struggle to withdraw from our influence. One thing follows another, blow after blow — and the man is finished.

## Brecht

**The Achievement of Berthold Brecht.** Berthold Brecht (1898-1956) was a German poet, dramatist, theater producer, and adherent of Marxism, who put his political insights to work in new visions of the nature of theater, and of its relation to the audience.

**The Life of Berthold Brecht.** Berthold Brecht was born in Augsburg, Bavaria. At the time of Brecht's birth, his father worked for a paper mill, of which he was to become managing director in 1914. (Thus despite Brecht's later claims to have been brought up in Marxist appropriate working class conditions, Brecht was a child of the middle class.) Brecht's mother was pious and supportive, and importantly responsible for Berthold's intimate knowledge of the Bible, which supported him in many ways throughout his life. While other great German writers of the modern period typically carved out their thought paths in the course of advanced University study, Brecht found events projecting him into the world, where he was to discover life, and the social setting for his literary work. Brecht's first sense of WWI was the desire to participate with his fellow countrymen, but he changed his mind as he saw the ravages of the war, and on the advice of his father, who urged him to enroll in a medical course which would qualify him for exempt status. At the same time, while the War raged, Brecht was finding his social theatrical milieu, starting with his lifetime friendship with Caspar Neher, who was to be the set-design collaborator for many of Brecht's finest stage works. Not only was Brecht positioning himself, in Berlin theater life, as a designer, producer and adapter—in addition to much collaborative work he was into the creation of such 'epic theater' as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Mother Courage and her Children*, *The Good Woman of Szechuan*—but he was creating startlingly original socially observant poems, as in the volume *Domestic Breviary* (1927). He was an avid consumer of popular Berlin theater, vaudeville, slapstick—a great admirer of Chaplin, and of the music hall creations of Franz Wedekind—and from life on the Berlin streets he was forging both a dramatic genius and a sense for the drama of the times. As so many of his most gifted German colleagues, the twenties were a period during which great creativity and great anxiety were blended. That crisis on the horizon, which George had anticipated, was the daily bread of Brecht, whose own Marxism—he had been educating himself in Marx and Lenin--was fed by the mounting struggle against Nazism.

**Exile and after.** In 1935, knowing he was tightly pursued by the Nazis, Brecht moved to Denmark, then, in 1939, went to Sweden, preparatory to following one branch of the exile tribe to America. In America, like many self-exiled Germans, Brecht came under suspicion for Communist sympathies, and was called before the House Un American Affairs Committee, by which he was set free of all charges. In 1947 he returned to East Germany, where he was to receive the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954, and to spend the remainder of his life.

**Brecht's Work.** As a lyric poet, but especially as a dramatist, Brecht was from start to finish socially involved. His work as a dramatist was also work as a member of society, setting up actions within the citizenry; thus Brecht regularly incorporates, in his plays, a *Verfremdungseffekt*, Alienation Effect, designed to make the drama itself seem like a social action, and not a piece of literature. The societal impulse, at work here, took large scale form in Brecht's commitment to Communism. This playwright long allied himself to the East German and East European political perspective instituted during the Cold War. The finest of his plays, like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* or *The Good Woman of Sechuan* throw light on social organizations still unrealized, but part (possibly) of social shapes that will extend out beyond the social period we inhabit in this Encyclopedia.

## Reading

### *Primary source reading*

Brecht, Berthold, Letters, 1913-1956, trans. John Willett.

### *Secondary source reading*

Benjamin, Walter, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Bostock, 1983.

### *Further reading*

Fuegi, John, *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama*, 2002.

### *Original language reading*

Mittenzwei, Werner, *Das Leben des Berthold Brecht*, 2 vol., 1986.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Review some Brecht plays—The Caucasian Chalk Circle, The Good Woman of Szechuan—to see what in effect he means by a theater of alienation, in which the audience is to be forbidden the Aristotelian pleasure of catharsis. Can you see a good case for this innovative view of theater?

Brecht emerges as a collaborative playwright, performing many roles himself, and working with many fellow producers. Was the same kind of collaborative production at play in the dramatic work of Goethe and Schiller? Lessing?

*Excerpt* [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Bertolt\\_Brecht](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht)

- People remain what they are even if their faces fall apart.
- But something's missing (Aber etwas fehlt).
- A man who strains himself on the stage is bound, if he is any good, to strain all the people sitting in the stalls.
- The theater-goer in conventional dramatic theater says: Yes, I've felt that way, too. That's the way I am. That's life. That's the way it will always be. The suffering of this or that person grips me because there is no escape for him. That's great art — Everything is self-evident. I am made to cry with those who cry, and laugh with those who laugh. But the theater-goer in the epic theater says: I would never have thought that. You can't do that. That's very strange, practically unbelievable. That has to stop. The suffering of this or that person grips me because there is an escape for him. That's great art — nothing is self-evident. I am made to laugh about those who cry, and cry about those who laugh.
  
- Let nothing be called natural  
In an age of bloody confusion,  
Ordered disorder, planned caprice,  
And dehumanized humanity, lest all things  
Be held unalterable!
- Literary works cannot be taken over like factories, or literary forms of expression like industrial methods. Realist writing, of which history offers many widely varying examples, is likewise conditioned by the question of how, when and for what class it is made use of.
- Do not rejoice in his defeat, you men. For though the world has stood up and stopped the bastard, the bitch that bore him is in heat again.