

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Themes in Mann

## 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 recuperators 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.

**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.

**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 ingénu 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.

### **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?