

Mann, Thomas

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* (1933-43), 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, Leverkuehn 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

- 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.