

# Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*



Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*:  
A Reader's Guide

By

Rodney Symington

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P U B L I S H I N G

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by Rodney Symington

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*“The novel is the highest example of subtle interrelatedness that man has discovered.”*

—D.H. Lawrence

*“One cannot read a book; one can only re-read it.”*

—Vladimir Nabokov

*“Without recognition of death, how can there be any knowledge of it?”*

—Buddhist saying

*“All interest in disease and death is only another expression of interest in life.”*

—Thomas Mann



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## INTRODUCTION

*The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann (1875–1955) is one of the premier works of fiction of the twentieth century. Although the novel is set in a specific time-period (1907–1914), it is far more than merely a novel about the seven years preceding the First World War. The setting—a tuberculosis sanatorium in the Swiss Alps—allows the author to bring together in one place people who represent not only various European countries, but also different views of life. In essence, the novel is a portrayal of the state of European civilization in the early twentieth century and a discussion of the fundamental philosophical choices available to people in the modern age. The ultimate questions of life and death assume a central role in the novel.

Within this historical context—both factual and philosophical—the novel portrays a journey of self-discovery by an “ordinary” young man. In so doing, it implicitly invites the reader to participate vicariously in his intellectual and ethical adventures, and to formulate a personal odyssey of the reader’s own. The novel ends with a question that is an invitation to further thoughts and reflections about human nature.

*The Magic Mountain* underwent a long period of composition—one that was not foreseen by its author when he first conceived of the work. The occasion that gave rise to Thomas Mann’s writing the story was a period of convalescence undertaken by his wife Katia. In March 1912 she traveled from their home in Munich to Davos in Switzerland, to be treated for what was thought to be tuberculosis. She remained there in the Waldsanatorium from 12 March to 25 September, under the care of the sanatorium’s director, Dr. Friedrich Jessen. Thomas Mann went to visit her from 15 May to 13 June 1912.

The impressions he gained from this visit gave him the idea of writing a humorous story about life in the sanatorium, as a kind of “grotesque counterpart” (as he called it) to the seriousness of his novella *Death in Venice*, which he had published in 1911. During his visit to his wife he had been examined by Dr. Jessen, and in recalling this episode in 1940 Thomas Mann wrote sardonically:

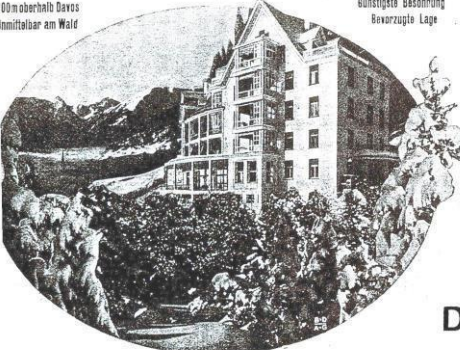
“The head doctor [...] thumped me about, and with the greatest rapidity discovered a so-called moist spot in my lung. [...] The physician assured

me I should be acting very wisely to submit to a six-month cure up there, and if I had followed his advice, who knows, perhaps I would still be lying up there.”

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**Dr. F. JESSEN**  
Hausarzt: Dr. K. REHS

Näheres Prospekt

Advertisement for the Waldsanatorium

Mann's thoughts coalesced over the ensuing year (during which time he was also working on other projects), and he began writing the new “short story” in July 1913. However, as he wrote, the “short story” became longer and longer, so that by May 1915 he was referring to the work as a “novel.”

The outbreak of the First World War in September 1914 presented Mann with the ending to the novel that he had been seeking, but it also interrupted his work on it. Although he continued writing the novel for various periods during 1915, the events of the day preoccupied his mind so much that in October 1915 he finally put the novel aside and began what was to become the *Reflections of a Non-Political Man* (published 1918)—and the writing of that long book about the First World War caused a four-year hiatus in the composition of the novel.

In March 1919 Mann began thinking about the novel again, and read various materials with a view to incorporating them. On 20 April 1919 Mann wrote in his diary: “After a four-year interruption I began to write *The Magic Mountain* again.” However, the War and its outcome had had a profound effect on him, and it was some time before he could find clarity about what he wanted to do with the already composed sections and where he wanted the novel to go. Thus it was not until more than five years later,

on 27 September 1924, that he was able to write the last word “Finis” under the manuscript. It had taken him twelve years to complete it.

## Tuberculosis

The tuberculosis bacterium has been present in the human population since antiquity, and the term “phthisis” (consumption) first appears in Greek literature. In the nineteenth century the disease we now know as tuberculosis was a plague that ravaged Europe and killed thousands of people.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century everybody in Europe was at some point in their lives infected with tuberculosis. (Thus it is not surprising that in the novel Hans Castorp's lungs show evidence of an earlier infection.) In most cases there were no serious complications—some scarring, and natural immunization by the body,—but two variants were far more dangerous. Either the afflicted person suffered from “galloping TB” and died quickly, or the disease stayed with them for years or even decades, progressing very slowly and leading to shortness of breath, the coughing of blood—or even the eventual failure of the body's entire systems. Causes were thought to be heredity, evil spirits, and odors from foul sewage or swamplands, vapors and corruption within the body—including possibly an infection. Since the disease was simply not understood, treatment included all kinds of desperate measures, including hypnosis, purging, and blood-letting.

Not unexpectedly, society itself was greatly affected by the disease: for example, those who suffered from the disease were excluded from many occupations, and governments undertook widespread public health measures.

The introduction of the sanatorium cure provided the first step towards stemming the progress of the disease. Hermann Brehmer (1826–89), a Silesian botany student suffering from tuberculosis, was advised by his doctor to seek out a healthier climate. He travelled to the Himalayan Mountains where he could pursue his botanical studies while trying to rid himself of the disease. He returned home cured and began to study medicine. In 1854, he presented his doctoral dissertation bearing the optimistic title, *Tuberculosis is a Curable Disease*. In the same year, he built an institution in Görbersdorf in Lower Silesia (today: Sokolowsko in Poland) where, in the midst of fir trees, and with good nutrition, patients were exposed on their balconies to continuous fresh air. (Görbersdorf eventually became known as the Silesian Davos.) This method of treatment became the blueprint for the establishment of sanatoria all over the

world, and was seen as a significant development in the battle against an insidious opponent.

In 1882, the German physician Robert Koch (1843–1910), who had previously isolated the anthrax bacillus in 1877, discovered a staining technique that enabled him to see the tuberculosis bacterium. This development raised the hope that the disease could be defeated.

However, despite the fact that the bacterium had been identified, the measures available to treat the disease were still quite limited. In general, social and sanitary conditions could be (and were) improved, and adequate nutrition was promoted to strengthen the body's defenses. Sanatoria provided a dual function: on the one hand they isolated the sick, the source of infection, from the general population, while on the other hand the enforced rest and a proper diet and the well-regulated hospital life assisted the healing process.

In truth, the actual results were modest: patients stayed in a sanatorium for three months on average (although doctors often tried to persuade them to stay for six to twelve months). At the beginning of the twentieth century up 70% of the patients who came to Davos with infectious tuberculosis died within ten years. (The sanatoria frequently attempted to hide the dying patients—for example, by moving them elsewhere—in order not to undermine the reputation of the resort as a place where people could be cured.) By 1930 and with improved treatment methods, the death rate was still 48%. Harsher critics of the system called the treatment ultimately useless.

## Davos

Davos developed into a popular location for sanatoria in the late nineteenth century. Starting in the 1860s it had become a center for invalids and affluent hypochondriacs. It had been noted that residents of the high-alpine town (5000ft above sea-level) did not suffer from tuberculosis. The first lung patient came to the town in 1865, and the man who put Davos on the map, medically speaking, was Dr. Alexander Spengler who built his sanatorium there in 1867. It was Spengler who devised the resort's celebrated regimen for a "cure": every morning patients were taken out on to a south-facing wooden balcony on fur-covered rattan loungers to enjoy the sunshine and ice-cold air. This came to be known as "corpse rest" ("Kadaverruhe")—a term that has a direct bearing on the themes in *The Magic Mountain*.



Davos 1863

The high point of Davos's popularity was between 1900 and 1914. By 1912 30,000 patients from various nations were staying in the town's facilities. Davos was a truly international location—with five foreign consulates, an English Quarter, and countless clubs for foreign nationals. In first two decades of the twentieth century the medical diagnosis relied on observation, touching, tapping, and listening—but above all on the “expertise” of the physician in percussion and auscultation. (The medical procedures described in the novel reflect the practices current in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.) Nowadays we know that these methods, that relied in any case on the mysterious “secret knowledge” of the physician, were highly dubious. Some visitors to Davos were very skeptical—including the mother of Katia Mann, Hedwig Pringsheim, who astutely perceived the questionable alliance of medicine and commerce and declared the entire enterprise to be “bogus.” In fact, many years later when Katia Mann's original chest x-rays were re-examined, it was discovered that none of them showed any signs of tuberculosis. Thus *The Magic Mountain* arose, at least in part, out of an incorrect diagnosis.

All over Europe Davos advertised itself as the continent's leading “refuge for the healthy, the sick, and the recovering.” In the 1920s and 1930s the popularity of the resort was at its peak, but in the 1940s the British developed penicillin, and almost overnight a successful treatment became available. On November 20, 1944, the antibiotic was administered for the first time to a critically ill TB-patient. The effect was almost immediate. The patient's advanced disease was visibly arrested, the bacteria disappeared from the sputum, and the result was a rapid recovery. Tuberculosis was no longer a mystery: it could be defeated. Thereafter the

clinics had to change their strategy, and started taking asthma patients instead, but the number of clinics still declined drastically: from around thirty to four.

## Tuberculosis and Art

It is not surprising that the widespread prevalence of the disease in the nineteenth century should have led to so many works of art that featured it. Artists variously viewed the disease as a romantic affliction that promised redemption, or alternatively, as a punishment for a less than virtuous life (for example, in the case of the consumptive prostitute). More progressive thinkers viewed the disease as a symbol of society's ills, and its sufferers as victims of social injustice.

In opera the consumptive heroine was an attractive figure because the audience could see the suffering of a beautiful woman wasting away, and her sexuality and her passion destroyed by a pernicious enemy. Thus in Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853) the heroine, Violetta, is a courtesan whose beauty is heightened by the progress of the disease.

But later operas took a less romanticized and more pragmatic view of the disease. In Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1881) the beautiful, but consumptive Antonia is treated by a quack doctor, Dr. Miracle. By portraying Antonia as a victim of a charlatan, Hoffmann was satirizing medical incompetence. Since the opera also linked Antonia's consumption to her mother's heredity as a possible cause of consumption (a popular belief before Koch's discovery of the bacillus), this seemed to absolve the patient from guilt or shame. A decade and a half later in Puccini's *La Bohème* (1896) tuberculosis was employed as social commentary: the opera features street artists living with poverty and disease. Mimi, a seamstress, loves a poor poet named Rodolfo. At first he loves her in return, but then he abandons her, because he fears he cannot provide for her and perhaps because he believes she will infect him with the disease.

In prose works also, such as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877), the progress and final stages of the disease were depicted graphically. This shift in the perception of the disease from the romantic to the realistic was accompanied by many "scientific" attempts to conquer the disease: vaccines and therapies, rest cures, tonics, various surgical invasions (some of which occur in *The Magic Mountain*), and a lot of quackery: for example, various surgeons experimented by packing the pleural cavity with fat, paraffin, and even ping-pong balls.

When the novel *The Magic Mountain* appeared, many in Davos were outraged by its depiction of their society, failing to understand that the town and its medical environment were intended as a metaphor for the state of European society before 1914. Among the novel's many detractors was one of the leading-lights of Davos, Dr. Karl Turban, the founder of the village's first tuberculosis sanatorium, who in his *Autobiography* (1935) predicted that: "This sensational novel, a dark distillation of a dark age, ... will soon be forgotten."

### **Disease and illness**

In 1913 Thomas Mann wrote to his brother Heinrich of "a sympathy with death that is deeply innate in me: I have always been intensely interested in decay." This fascination with decay and disease can be traced throughout Thomas Mann's works. Disease obviously plays a major role in the novel *The Magic Mountain*, too. For the patients at the sanatorium disease is a mark of honor, a confirmation of their élite status. Spurred on by the sanatorium's director, Dr. Behrens, they are proud of their sickness and talk of the ability to acquire it as a "talent." As Hans Castorp remarks, anyone who had the good fortune to be healthy didn't count. The mountain air is "good for illness"—and the ambiguity is intentional: the ambience promotes both the progress of a disease and its cure. However, in the novel disease is explored in many ramifications. Hans Castorp is fascinated by it, and his acquaintance with and contemplation of it leads him into areas of emotion and intellect with which he had previously been unfamiliar. In pursuing these interests he breaks the fetters of tradition and places himself outside of the conventional bourgeois limits. Furthermore, he is troubled by the harsh reality (as opposed to the convenient myth of disease as an ennobling agent) that disease and stupidity may go hand in hand—and based on the overt evidence at the Berghof, disease for most people leads to destruction.

In "normal" society on the "Flatland" illness—that is, the state of being ill as a fundamental feature of humanity—is repressed. During his stay at the Berghof Sanatorium, however, Hans Castorp discovers the truth: namely, that he is ill, both physically and metaphysically. At first he rejects the idea—propounded by Dr. Krokowski—that he might be ill and does not subscribe to Krokowski's thesis that he has "never met a perfectly healthy person before." But the discovery of a "moist spot" on his lung is liberating for him and he takes pride in it. In the course of the novel the contemplation of disease and death leads him into the realms of passion, adventure and abandonment, until gradually he comes to realize the wisdom

of Krokowski's view, so that by the time Naphta arrives on the scene he is ready to accept the latter's argument that "to be human was to be ill." The entire novel is concerned with form and dissolution, the disciplined effort needed to live a "conventional" life on the one hand, and the relaxing lure of death on the other. How can we find meaning in life when the very nature of it is decay and dissolution? Despite all the views and opinions expressed in the novel, there is no one clear and convincing answer to that ultimate question.

In an essay written at the time he was composing *The Magic Mountain* Thomas Mann wrote: "An interest in death and illness, in the pathological, in decay, is merely a kind of expression of an interest in life, in humanity, as the humanistic faculty of medicine shows; anyone who is interested in the organic, in life, that person is also interested in death; and it could well be the theme of a *Bildungsroman* to show that the experience of death is, in the final analysis, an experience of life and that it leads one to humanity." This is, in essence, a summary of the "education" of Hans Castorp in the novel.

## **The "polyphonic" novel and the leitmotif**

In the literary novel the form of the work, as well as its content, is intended to give us aesthetic pleasure. In the case of Thomas Mann, the pleasure that we take in reading well-written prose is compounded and extended by the way in which his prose endeavors also to imitate the structure of music. Thomas Mann constructs his novel out of words and phrases (leitmotifs) that recur time and again, but, just as happens in a musical composition, with variations, not always in precisely the same form. There is, of course, lots of text that does not consist of leitmotifs, but all of it is directly related to the themes of the novel. In Thomas Mann's works, nothing is there simply to fill out the page: every word has relevance to the central concerns of the work.

Thomas Mann's aim in *The Magic Mountain* was to write what he called a "polyphonic" novel. What does that mean? Music is polyphonic, in that multiple notes can be played at once. But writing consists of one word after another, in a linear progression. Thus it is difficult to conceive of how an author could possibly write a "polyphonic" novel: the ear can hear more than one sound at once, but it is difficult for the eye to read more than one word at once, especially for 700 pages.

However, by "polyphony" in the novel, Thomas Mann meant something slightly different from the polyphony of music. For him literary polyphony was created by the interweaving of words and phrases (just like



musical themes or leitmotifs), like a symphony in prose. However, the “polyphony” arises only insofar as the reader remembers the words and phrases and leitmotifs and recognizes them as such. In the worst-case scenario, of course, the non-discerning reader would remember nothing and polyphony would never arise; whereas in the best-case scenario, the reader would remember *every* word. Thus this novel should be read as you would listen to a symphony: just as the musical themes are repeated throughout the movements of a symphony, so, too, in *The Magic Mountain* there is a complex structure of themes and verbal leitmotifs that form a dense web.

At many times throughout the novel the narrator reminds us of something that was said or that happened. But as well as the instances in which the narrator takes the trouble to remind the reader when an important idea was expressed earlier and by whom, or when a character did something in a particular situation, a great many of the leitmotifs in *The Magic Mountain* are repeated or reprised without narratorial comment, and thus it is up to each reader to construct a symphony out of them. The more allusions a reader recalls, the richer the symphony will be.

Thus Thomas Mann encouraged his readers to regard his novels as musical scores. He wrote, for example: “Judge what I have done, my works of art, as you will and must, but they were always good scores, one like the other; musicians have also loved them; Gustav Mahler, for example, loved them, and I have often wanted musicians as public judges.”

Like a piece of music that contains so many strands that we cannot grasp them all at one listening, the polyphonic complexity of *The Magic Mountain* also cannot be apprehended in one reading. In order to encompass the full extent of the novel's rich interweaving of leitmotifs, we would ideally have to have the entire text in our brain and be able to recall every relevant line at will. The best reader would be the one who could recall all the references and leitmotifs and be able to see the relationship of everything to everything else. That is, of course, impossible for the average reader, just as the average listener cannot do it for a symphony either. But, as we listen to a favorite piece of music over and over again, and hear new aspects each time, so it is with *The Magic Mountain*: it is a novel that demands to be read and re-read many times, because the full complexity of its allusiveness can never be fully grasped. Every reading, and every discovery of new allusions and connections, increases our aesthetic pleasure.

This is what Thomas Mann himself said about this novel: “I believe that the peculiar construction of the book, its composition, results in a

heightened and deepened pleasure for the reader if he goes through it a second time—just as one must be acquainted with a piece of music to enjoy it properly. Musical composition—I have already mentioned in connection with earlier works that the novel has always been for me a symphony, a work of counterpoint—a thematic fabric in which ideas play the part of musical motifs. This technique is applied to *The Magic Mountain* in the most complex and all-pervasive way. On that account you have my presumptuous suggestion to read it twice. Only then can one penetrate the associational musical complex of ideas. When the reader knows his thematic material, then he is in a position to interpret the symbolic and allusive formulae both forwards and backwards.”

In *The Magic Mountain* the words connote associations (frequently erotic) with the ideas that underlie the surface structure of the novel: the pencil, thermometer, cigar, lying horizontally, x-ray pictures, Asiatic eyes, mushrooms, etc.—those are examples of “things” from every day in the sanatorium that at the same time relate to both the erotic sphere and the complex of ideas relating to the mysteries of life. Such objects are real and have a practical function, but each of them also has a more important significance on the symbolic level.

Because of the dense web of leitmotifs the novel exists simultaneously on two planes: the real and the symbolical. Thus the Berghof sanatorium and everything connected with it are described in realistic detail. But at the same time as the Berghof is a sanatorium, it is also a hotel, a prison, a monastery, a Siberian salt-mine, a barracks, a school (kindergarten), and a brothel. It is located on a magic mountain with echoes from Germanic myth, from Greek and Roman mythology, from opera, and from many other sources. In sum, it represents a multitude of possibilities that are intended to connote a wide range of associations in the reader’s mind.

## **The perils of art**

Now all of this polyphonic invention is not merely an attempt to be clever. Thomas Mann was acutely aware of—and deeply concerned about—the dangers of pure aestheticism: that is, creating things that have beautiful form, but nothing else. He had developed his interest in literature at the end of the nineteenth century, when “art for art’s sake” had been a very influential movement, and Thomas Mann’s early works contain elements that show the influence of that style of art. He realized, however, that this approach to art had serious problems, such as the danger of becoming superficial and barren. The danger of “aestheticism” (i.e. beauty merely for the sake of beauty) was to remain in his conscience his whole life long,

and he never completely overcame the fear that his art might be merely clever, and not at the same time significant. This was essentially the charge that Nietzsche had leveled at Wagner's music: that it was all sound and fury and had no real content—and while Thomas Mann adored Wagner's music, the doubts that Nietzsche had raised about it preyed on Thomas Mann's mind, and caused him to wonder if his own works might also be criticized in like manner.

This concern was but one element in the broader problem of the nature and status of the artist. Thomas Mann was never able to rid himself of the nagging fear that the artist was fundamentally a charlatan: a man who pulls the wool over the eyes of a gullible public, while knowing that what he is doing is essentially fraudulent. (And that gullible public applauds him loudly and heaps honors on him—which only makes him feel even guiltier.) Mann's early story *Tonio Kröger* (1903) portrayed a writer who was tormented by being “different” and outside of “normal” bourgeois society and who had a guilty conscience about being an artist and not fitting in: he finds it only right and proper, for example, that when he returns to his home town for a visit, he is suspected of being a criminal whom the police are seeking.

Mann's unfinished novel *The Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Trickster* (started in 1911, thus not long before Mann commenced writing *The Magic Mountain*) went one step further by implying that the other side of the coin was equally valid currency: it portrayed the criminal as a consummate artist. In one memorable scene, the young Felix is taken by his father to see a concert performer, Müller-Rosé. The latter appears on stage, in a glittering costume and with brilliant make-up, and he overwhelms his admiring, even swooning audience with his splendor. When, however, Felix and his father go down to the dressing-room after the performance, they see Müller-Rosé with one half of his face still encased in the make-up that made him look so impressive on stage, but the other half, without make-up, pallid and pock-marked, his eyes red and watery, and his back covered in seeping pustules. This was Thomas Mann's merciless metaphor for the real nature of the artist: the luminescent glitter on the outside hides the festering corruption beneath the mask.

Thus when Thomas Mann created the complex novels of his maturity, he was still troubled by nagging doubts about his art. In the case of *The Magic Mountain*, however, the aesthetic dimension—while providing the reader with pleasure in itself—is a vehicle for the expression of profound reflections about life. This is a novel of ideas, but they are couched in a host of metaphors that populate all aspects of life. The complex structure of the novel might thus be considered to reflect a metaphysical principle:

the victory of art over life—a fundamental idea that Mann found in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wagner are the three major influences on Thomas Mann's view of life and art. Mann himself spoke of these three as the "triple star of eternally united spirits that shines powerfully in the German sky." But we must always bear in mind that Mann did not simply accept and adopt the ideas he found in the works of these men wholesale and without discrimination. On the contrary, he took from them only those elements that fitted in with his own understanding both of life and of art, and at all times his use of sources was highly selective.

## Schopenhauer

Thomas Mann's reading of Schopenhauer introduced him to a world-view that confirmed his own. As he wrote to a correspondent (in respect of Schopenhauer): "We always find ourselves in books. Strange that our pleasure is always great and we declare the author to be a genius."

From Schopenhauer Mann absorbed the view that in life all things are in conflict, and that ultimately we have no power over our actions. Behind all this conflict Schopenhauer divined that there was a mysterious force that he called the "Will":

Thus everywhere in nature we see conflict, struggle and the variations of victory, and furthermore we will more clearly recognize how the Will is essentially in conflict with itself. [...] We can observe this conflict through the whole of nature. [...] This struggle achieves its clearest manifestation in the animal world that exploits the plant world for its nourishment, and in which every animal becomes the prey and nourishment of another animal, [...] and where every animal can maintain its existence only by destroying that of another; thus the Will to Life constantly devours itself and becomes its own nourishment in different forms, all the way up to humanity which conquers all other living things and regards nature as a phenomenon for its own use; yet this same species [...] manifests in itself that inner conflict of the Will with the most terrible clarity, and becomes *homo homini lupus* [man is a wolf to man].

—Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (Vol. 1, Book 2)

The Will asserts itself at all times, and we have no control over it. Our libido is a good example of the way in which the Will does with us what it wants. If we look, for example, at Hans Castorp's infatuation with Clavdia Chauchat, we see that he criticizes rationally any number of features that he observes (her slamming of doors, her slouched posture, the fact that she

bites her nails and is “sick, listless, feverish, and worm-eaten deep inside”)—and yet he cannot help falling in love with her. Like so many other people who love, he suffers—when Chauchat is at the Berghof, when she leaves, and when she returns. In this way, the novel demonstrates the principle that the Will causes a man to fall in love—and to suffer as a consequence.

All the characters in the novel demonstrate their ultimate inability to counteract the Will. Joachim is intent on becoming cured of his illness and is highly disciplined and single-minded in pursuit of his goal. But even he is distracted from time to time by the physical attractions of the Russian girl, Marusya. Even the ultra-rationalist Settembrini, who always insists on proper manners and the formality of social intercourse, breaks down as Hans Castorp is leaving the Berghof: he uses the informal form of address and gives him a “Russian” kiss.

Is there then no salvation, no escape from the pernicious influence of the Will? No—and yes. The only way in which human beings can release themselves from the toils of the Will is by creating something that the Will cannot touch, namely, a work of art. Artistic creation may *temporarily* escape the power of the Will; the artist, by creating a work of art, is able to rise above the Will and demonstrate independence from it. Thus while *The Magic Mountain* may be viewed as exemplifying in its *content* the effect of Will on the characters and their behavior, the *novel itself* is a product that rises above the Will's power to dominate existence. Nevertheless, whereas the novel as an artistic creation rises above the Will, the fact remains that since the novel ends with the cataclysm of the First World War, which may be viewed as the ultimate manifestation of the Will, there is little room for optimism.

One of the central questions of Thomas Mann research has remained unanswered: Is *The Magic Mountain* an affirmation of Schopenhauer's philosophy—that life is dominated by irrational forces—or a denial (i. e. an overcoming) of it? Is the complex structure of the novel—with its infinite connotations through the use of leitmotifs—a demonstration that art can, indeed, overcome irrational chaos, or is that artificial structure a confirmation of the emptiness of the world of forms that we construct? Ultimately, it is up to each reader to decide those questions.

## Nietzsche

The title of Thomas Mann's novel is taken from a passage in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Now it is as if the Olympian magic mountain had opened before us and revealed its roots to us.” But Nietzsche's influence

on Thomas Mann and on this novel goes far deeper than merely borrowing a phrase for the novel's title.

Nietzsche's philosophy played a major role in Thomas Mann's view of life and art, and the influence of Nietzsche is all-pervasive in the novel. The latter's criticism of ethics and ideologies that rest on a belief in the divine finds its counterpart in the novel's search for answers to the important questions of life. Nietzsche's famous dictum: "God is dead" has to be read in the context of Nietzsche's view of Western religion and ethics. He perceived that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the increasing secularization of society was resulting in a loss of faith. The bold statement: "God is dead" expressed the unpleasant truth that people had lost their faith and that, as a result, the foundation of Western ethics had been demolished (although people in Nietzsche's day did not realize that fact—which led Nietzsche to affirm that his ideas were dynamite that would explode posthumously). Whereas in the past God (religion) had been the benchmark for answers to ethical questions, the loss of faith in God signified a loss of an ultimate reference-point for such answers. To whom or what do we turn for such answers now? Since Nietzsche's death the question has become increasingly relevant and acute, as he predicted it would become, and ethical issues—such as abortion, euthanasia, etc.—have since his day so often become the subject of political struggles.

Thus for Nietzsche, once the belief in the divine being was lost, the entire fabric of Western ethics became a sham, an empty façade behind which there was nothing of substance. This is reflected in the novel when Hans Castorp seeks for answers and hears nothing but a "hollow silence."

Furthermore, the novel's context of illness presupposes Nietzsche's assertion that all human beings are sick. Sickness is the normal state of human beings (cf. Samuel Beckett in his play *Endgame*: "You're on earth; there's no cure for that"). Sick people are more aware of what they have, and illness promotes introspection. An interest in degeneracy is essential to self-analysis: without a feeling of disharmony, human beings have nothing to analyze.

Nietzsche held the view that the path towards health lies in recognizing decadence and overcoming it. Thus it is not wise to repress the signs of disease and death; rather one must acknowledge and face them. As Thomas Mann himself put it in 1925, not long after completing the novel: "One can come to appreciate life in two ways. The first way is robust and is entirely naïve, and knows nothing of death; the other way is familiar with death. I believe that it is only the latter that has any intellectual value. This is the way chosen by artists, poets and writers."

Another aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy that is embedded in the novel is the opposition between Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo, the sun-god, represents reason, enlightenment, progress—all the rational constructs that we enjoy in civilized society: laws, technology, ethical behavior, social manners, etc.; while Dionysus, on the other hand, represents all that endangers our rational world: the passions, the darker forces that lurk in the depths of our being, the world that we, as rational beings, attempt to repress. (These are the elements of human behavior that Freud described as “the dogs in the basement.”) From time to time, these repressed elements rise to the surface and may threaten to destroy all the civilized aspects of life that we have struggled to construct. In fact, Dionysus *always* surfaces eventually, no matter how hard we try to deny his existence. (That is why the Greeks acknowledged the need to purge the body of Dionysian urges, by holding an annual festival that served to cleanse the body.) We strive and strive to create Apollo's world, but Dionysus always threatens to destroy it.

In *The Magic Mountain* Settembrini, as the champion of reason, enlightenment, and progress represents Apollo, while Clavdia Chauchat, and later Naphta, represent Dionysus. It is, of course, highly significant that Hans Castorp listens with his rational mind to Settembrini's arguments, but cannot prevent himself from being fatally attracted to Clavdia Chauchat and all that she represents. Likewise, Naphta—ugly, unlikable, even corrosive—expresses views about the world and human history that are closer to the truth than Settembrini's fine phrases, as Hans Castorp comes to realize.

Once again, as with the issue of Schopenhauer's presence in the novel, it will be up to the reader to decide whether or not the novel ultimately sides with Dionysus and destruction, or whether it offers the hope that Apollonian principle will survive and triumph.

On another level Nietzsche's influence can also be seen in the musical elements in the novel. Nietzsche viewed German culture as essentially one that was centered on music, and Thomas Mann also adopted this view. But the German cult of music is not without problems: in the novel Settembrini declares music to be “politically suspect.” In its tendency to cloud the reason and to lead listeners to emotional extremes or lethargy, music stands in the way of progress and acts as both a soporific and escape from the obligations of bourgeois life. Furthermore, music has the capacity to enflame the emotions and to sway the listener towards irrational political or religious action. Nietzsche's condemnation of Wagner's music as a “narcotic art” certainly seems to apply to the effect that music has on Hans Castorp.

For Nietzsche the key concept for progress as an individual was the “conquest of the self” (“Selbstüberwindung”)—a realization of the innate problems of the personality and a conscious victory over them. This becomes Hans Castorp’s ultimate goal—and he achieves it while contemplating music.

## Wagner

Wagner’s music plays a comparatively small explicit role in *The Magic Mountain*; but Wagner’s influence and his musical technique (i.e. the extensive use of the *leitmotif*), on the other hand, infuse the entire novel.

In the 1920s classical music was appreciated by a much larger portion of the populace than it is today, so that Thomas Mann could assume that his readers would understand most, if not all of the musical references in his novel. Similarly, as a devotee of Wagner’s music himself, Thomas Mann could count on the fact that Wagner’s importance to German culture would also resound in his readership.

Furthermore, the essence of Wagner’s world-view and the implicit content of his works exert a profound influence on the entire novel. Thomas Mann’s views on Wagner’s music were strongly influenced by what Nietzsche had written about Wagner. Nietzsche, having been initially wildly enthusiastic about Wagner’s music and a devoted disciple of the composer, eventually turned away from him and called him “a master of hypnotic tricks.” For Thomas Mann, Wagner represents a world that runs counter to the expectations and conformism of bourgeois society. In Wagner Mann saw portrayed, among other things, the neglect of duty, eroticism, the fascination with death, and the metaphysics of Schopenhauer. In a word: Wagner is Romanticism, which stands diametrically opposed to the rational, enlightened attitude espoused by Settembrini. Hans Castorp’s innate inclination to lethargy, his loss of the perception of time, his abandonment of duty and obligations, and his fascination with the erotic, with disease and death—all that derives ultimately from Thomas Mann’s personal experience of Wagner’s works.

Thomas Mann adored Wagner’s music (he called it “my strongest, most defining artistic experience”), but he was also concerned about what he perceived as its dangerous effect: Wagner evokes a romanticized version of German history and encourages an unhealthy nostalgia for melancholy and death. His music seduces the listener into a mythical past that is infused with the powers of darkness. The ultimate motivation of Wagner’s music is the death wish and the yearning for the grave that is a hallmark of the Romantic temperament. Wagner’s music is unquestionably



Dionysian and leads us down the path to irrationality. Settembrini is undoubtedly right in his suspicions about the possible effect of music.

## Romanticism

When we employ the term “Romanticism,” we must be very careful not to use it in the loose sense (as so often happens nowadays) of something trivial. German Romanticism means something quite different and fairly specific. Broadly speaking, we can differentiate in German culture the set of values described by the term “Classicism,” and those that come under the heading of “Romanticism.” In the case of the former (whose primary representative for Thomas Mann, as for many Germans, was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe) the emphasis is on form, reason, harmony and balance; a positive outlook is stressed and the darker phenomena of life are consciously suppressed and rejected. Humans, in order to aspire to the highest ideals, must be prepared to renounce anything that might detract from that pursuit—including the passions that can endanger civilized behavior. (In the novel this attitude to life is represented by Settembrini.)

For the German Romantics, however, this view of life excluded from consideration many elements of our humanity that were indubitably there—and to suppress them meant to be less than whole. Thus the Romantics strove for universality, wishing to encompass all that it means to be human. The emotions, dreams, the subconscious, the supernatural—all those phenomena are part of life, and to ignore or to seek to repress them was unhealthy and self-defeating. Literature could only be genuine if it portrayed the totality of human experience—including death.

Naturally, the “darker” side of human existence is the more interesting (the Devil has the best lines)—and provides the better material for literature, as Tolstoy’s famous opening to his novel *Anna Karenina* recognizes: “All happy families are alike. Unhappy families are unhappy, each in its own way.”

For Thomas Mann, German Romanticism had a perennial fascination, for two reasons. First, it had been a fundamental element of German culture since 1800, and had exerted a very powerful influence on German thinking and writing in all fields, including politics. “We are all its sons,” he said on several occasions. Second, it placed Germans before a dilemma: should they venerate the ideals embodied in the works of the Classical writers such as Goethe, or should they adopt the “Romantic” view—with its concomitant dangers of excess? When the Nazis were on the verge of coming to power, Thomas Mann wrote: “The Germans must choose between Goethe and Wagner.” This implied that for Mann the choice was

between on the one hand self-restraint and reason, versus an involvement with the darker forces of existence on the other. Since Romanticism—or more accurately: the seductive dangers of Romanticism—are so deeply engrained in the German character, they must be overcome if one is to achieve a healthy view of life.

This was also Mann's own personal dilemma: while being by nature fascinated by and strongly attracted to the ideas of the German Romantics, he was intellectually fully aware of its dangers and therefore rationally drawn to Classical ideals. This personal struggle is also, in Mann's eyes a dilemma for the German nation—as his statement about Goethe and Wagner reveals. Thus in *The Magic Mountain* the struggle between the “classical” and the “romantic” views of life is transferred into a wider, general cultural context through the figure of Hans Castorp—with Chauchat, Krokowski and Naphta as embodiments of various aspects of the Romantic, and Settembrini and Joachim as their “adversaries.”

Thus overcoming Romanticism means at the same time “overcoming oneself” (“Selbstüberwindung”), which was as already noted a central concept of Nietzsche's philosophy. In a speech on the occasion of Nietzsche's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Thomas Mann said: “This is what he represents for us: a friend of life, a visionary of a higher humanity, a leader into the future, a teacher for overcoming all those elements within us that oppose life and the future, namely: Romanticism.”

## Spengler

In 1919 Thomas Mann read Volume 1 of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, (vol. 1 1918; vol. 2 1923). He called it “the book of the epoch” and compared it to his reading Schopenhauer for the first time. Spengler (1880–1936) saw history as cyclical, and his book enabled readers to view Germany's loss of the War as part of a larger historical process. Spengler theorized that Westerners were Faustian beings, and that they were now living in the winter-time of the Faustian civilization,—a civilization where the populace constantly strives for the unattainable, making western man a proud but tragic figure, for while he strives and creates he secretly knows the actual goal will never be reached.

Spengler rejected Western democracy and the Weimar Republic that had emerged after the First World War. He believed that individual desires should be subordinated to the will of the collective, and he called for a government of the élite with dictatorial powers. Spengler's two volumes contain much, much more, of course, but important for *The Magic Mountain*

is the overall message of the work: a sense of cultural pessimism, of an era coming to an end.

Although Thomas Mann came to reject Spengler's theses not long after he had praised them so highly, they did find their way into the second half of the novel, for example, in the arguments between Settembrini and Naphta, where the author has placed some of Spengler's ideas into Naphta's mouth.

## Sexuality

While working on the novel, Thomas Mann wrote: "*The Magic Mountain* will be the most sensual work that I have ever written, but in a detached style." To the casual reader, who witnesses no explicit sex in the novel, that may be hard to believe.

*The Magic Mountain* is set in a time when there was much more reticence about sex than there is today. Its portrayal of sex (as far as it is portrayed at all) is what we might call "old-fashioned." The Berghof is the site of numerous sexual liaisons, but none of them is a source of prurient interest for the narrator. There are certainly no graphic sex scenes, and the hints of sexual activity are always couched in vague and suggestive turns of phrase. The most significant sexual encounter in the novel (the hour that Castorp spends with Chauchat) is recounted by mere allusion.

But on a deeper level sex is always present in the novel. It runs like a thread throughout the text, but always with the implication that sex belongs to the realm of ideas that include lassitude, ethical freedom, disease, dissolution, and death. The chief preoccupation of the narrator is with the *nature* of sexuality in general and its influence on our psyche and actions. The erotic is everywhere in the novel, and by implication everywhere in life. In fact, Thomas Mann was correct in describing this novel as his "most sensual work," because in this novel almost every detail is eroticized: a pencil, a cigar, a thermometer, an x-ray picture, a deck-chair, etc.—the real objects of daily life assume also a connoted metaphorical significance infused with sexuality.

One writer described *The Magic Mountain* as a "novel of forbidden love," by which he meant not only the heterosexual activities in the Berghof sanatorium, but also the veiled homosexual references throughout the text. Hans Castorp's love for Clavdia Chauchat reprises his adolescent homosexual attraction to Pribislav Hippe. She is small-breasted, narrow-hipped, like a young girl in her physical appearance. Furthermore, her other physical characteristics repeat Hans Castorp's memory of Hippe: the similarities extend to the blue-green eyes, the mouth, the voice, and the

high cheek-bones. Chauchat's act of lending a pencil to Castorp rehearses his homoerotic experience in the schoolyard with Hippe. What is the nature of Hans Castorp's sexuality? Certainly, his sexual inclinations are somewhat ambiguous, and he is by no means alone in his being attracted to the androgynous Chauchat: after all, she has a husband, and both Behrens and Peeperkorn are drawn sexually to her, as is at least one other man.

But the veiled homosexuality goes further: the relationship between Hans Castorp and Joachim Ziemssen has definite homoerotic undertones, and the textual sexualization in the exchanges between Castorp and Behrens likewise reveal sexual ambiguities.

The intellectual duels between Settembrini and Naphta also have an erotic content, as Thomas Mann himself noted, being based, as he wrote, on "not only intellectual hatred, but also pedagogical rivalry (quasi-erotic)." Thomas Mann may have acquired this idea from his reading of Walt Whitman: in his copy of Whitman's works, he marked a passage in the Introduction that spoke of Whitman as a teacher possessing "something of that eros that is present in every leaning towards pedagogy."

The novel thus plays with the idea of bisexuality, not merely in the portrayal of the relationships. In nature there are many varieties of sexuality: flowers that reproduce themselves or that are bisexual. Does human sexuality also perhaps reflect such variety? Life is sexual—but what kind of sexuality is it? The novel seems to imply that sexual identities may be precarious and intrinsically unstable.

### **Allusiveness and modern myth**

To say that *The Magic Mountain* is rich in allusions is an understatement. The novel abounds in allusions. This allusiveness is of two kinds: first, allusions to things outside of the novel—to classical myth, to Germanic myth, to literature, to music, to history, geology, medicine, and so on. Second, the entire novel is "self-referential," that is, it refers to itself time and time again. All of this is expressed in language that is, itself highly connotative and allusive: one critic described the novel as consisting of a tissue of "magic words with indefinitely ramified associations."

Thomas Mann's knowledge was deeply rooted in German culture, but he was also extremely well-read in Classical and European cultures. All of this knowledge permitted him two things: first, to indulge in a game of allusiveness that is both good-humored (for example, by referring to characters in the novel as mythological figures), and serious (in so far as those allusions emphasize the themes of the novel). And second, to draw parallels between the people and events at the Berghof sanatorium and

figures and episodes from mythology—thus implying that the characters and events at the Berghof, though of our age, are mythical in nature.

The novel contains many allusions to both classical and Germanic myth. Krokowski and Behrens are called Minos and Rhadamanthus; Hans and Joachim are the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux; the thermometer is Mercury; the people in the dining-hall “burst into Homeric laughter.” The main protagonists in the novel are characterized both by their geographical origin and a mythological association. Germanic mythological sites, such as the Venusberg and the Brocken Mountain, permit the narrator to indulge in parallels that emphasize the timelessness of the events that occur in the novel.

There are also scores of literary and biblical allusions strewn throughout the text, and it would take an especially well-read reader (say someone like Thomas Mann) to spot them all.

Much of the allusiveness is playful and adds to the aesthetic pleasure of reading the novel. Despite all the serious themes that Thomas Mann addresses, and despite the formal style he adopts, *The Magic Mountain* is a novel infused with a great deal of humor, much of which occurs when the narrator draws allusive parallels.

All of this allusiveness is motivated by a very simple principle that Thomas Mann had been applying since he wrote *Death in Venice* (1911): Everyday events may be interpreted as mythical. In that story, Mann assures us, all the events actually occurred and he witnessed them. The genius of Thomas Mann resided in his ability to take everyday events (such as taking a gondola ride) and make out of them something highly symbolic and infuse them with mythological associations.

The conclusion he wants us to draw is that myth is not dead: we relive mythical events in our everyday lives. Mythology contains basic patterns of human behavior, and those patterns recur throughout history.

## Number symbolism

The novel also indulges in number symbolism that is closely interwoven with the novel's allusiveness. Thomas Mann was fascinated by numbers, in particular by numbers that he considered significant. He wrote, for example, about the number 7 that it was “a good, handy figure in its way, picturesque, with a savor of the mythical; one might say that it is more filling to the spirit than a dull, academic half-dozen.” The number symbolism of the novel influences both the structure and the content: there are at least sixty-one references to the number 7 in the novel. Among those references are the following:

The novel has seven chapters, and Volume 1 ends after seven months. The central sub-chapter “Snow” is the seventh section of Chapter Six. Hans Castorp meets seven major characters who have an influence on him. There are many characters with names of seven letters—and the name of Settembrini is based on the Italian for seven.

Hans Castorp is orphaned at the age of seven, when he has the important conversation with his grandfather, and seven of his forefathers had the christening cup before him. At 7 p.m. he sees day and moonlight. He leaves Hamburg in the seventh month (July) 1907 and arrives in Davos on August 7. He plans a visit of 21 days, but stays seven years.

Hans Castorp’s room is number 34; Clavdia Chauchat’s room is number 7. (She is 28 years old, at the most.) He exchanges looks with her seven times before she smiles at him, and has sex with her after having been at the Berghof sanatorium for seven months. There are seven tables in the dining-room, seven people sit at each table, and the evening meal is at 7 p.m. Frau Stöhr claims to be able to prepare 28 fish-sauces. The thermometer is to be kept in the mouth for seven minutes (the day’s first measurement is at 7 a.m.), and the mail is distributed every seven days. Castorp orders 700 cigars from Bremen. He gets his first bill after seven days, and he has his first x-ray after seven weeks. Joachim returns to the Berghof in the seventh month, is assigned to room 28, and he dies at 7 p.m., when Castorp has been at the Berghof for 28 months.

Hans Castorp leaves the Berghof at 7 a.m., in order to go to the duel between Settembrini and Naphta. Peeperkorn and his guests play “Twenty-One.” Seven people take the trip to the waterfall. In the First World War Hans marches for seven hours.

Such a dull listing of the occurrences of the number 7 is on the one hand somewhat tiresome, and the other hand tells us nothing about the reason for it and what it all means. The function of all of these references to the number seven is twofold: first, they divide up time, and they determine the situation of the characters in both time and space. And second, the figure 7 also symbolizes the magical nature of the Berghof environment in which Hans Castorp attempts to seek answers to the questions that trouble him.

The number seven figures prominently in the Bible (e.g. the seven days of Creation, the Seven Pillars of the House of Wisdom, seven days of the feast of Passover, seven loaves multiplied into seven baskets of surplus, etc., etc.). But the purpose of the number seven in the novel is not merely to create Biblical allusions; rather, it is to widen the allusiveness and carry the events onto the mythical level.