

Thomas Mann, Monthly discussion groups—November

Mario and the Magician

1. The tourist-narrator of Mario and the Magician characterizes himself, in contrast to the sun-loving denizens of the Italian resort, as having the deep complex needs of the “northern soul.”
 - How does the narrator view Italians?
 - What seem to be his views of social class?
 - What kind of language does he use to describe Cipolla’s body?
 - What do these descriptions and attitudes reveal about the narrator? How do they color the reader’s perception of the events he narrates?
 - Why might Mann have chosen to tell this story from the perspective of this type of narrator?
2. Given his dislike of Torre di Venere and of Cipolla’s spectacle, why doesn’t the narrator move his family to another resort? Why does he decide to take his children to such a late-night spectacle as the magic show in the first place? Then, at the intermission, why does he not take the tired children home?
 - What has happened to the power of his will?
 - What happens to the will of the audience members in the presence of the repulsive, insulting, and cruel “magician”?
 - Does the story call into question the very existence of free will?
 - Why is it that only Mario can liberate the narrator and the rest of the audience from Cipolla’s spell?
 - Should we read Mann’s simple vacation story as an engagement with the arguments about will (cf. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) that influenced much twentieth-century philosophy, psychology, and literature?
3. Does the narrator’s dismissive attitude toward “Southerners” take on a political slant?
 - When his eight-year-old daughter changes her bathing suit on the beach, the Italians are scandalized. How does the narrator view their interpretation of this innocent act as an offense against “the greatness and dignity of Italy”?
 - Why does the narrator refer to Italy as “the awakened Fatherland”?
 - Why does Cipolla brag about having performed for “the brother of the *Duce*”?
 - Why does Cipolla give “the Roman salute” to Mario whose name preserves “the heroic traditions of the Fatherland”?
 - Should we read Mann’s simple vacation story as an allegory about the rise of Fascism in Italy and even Nazism in Germany? If so, what is the significance of the story’s violent end?
 - If the story is allegorical, what do you think of Mann’s choice to make Cipolla a grotesque figure?

The Magic Mountain, chapters 1-3

1. Young Hans Castorp is no stranger to **SICKNESS AND DEATH**.
 - How has his life been impacted by sickness and death even before he arrives at the sanatorium?
 - How does what his cousin, Joachim, tells him about sickness and death at the sanatorium differ from what he experienced in his family? How does Hans react to what he hears and sees of sickness?
 - How do other patients cope with the ever-present evidence of sickness and death? For example, why do they call a thermometer a “mercury cigar” or a “silent sister,” a sputum vial a “Blue Henry,” and the recipients of pneumothorax surgery the “Half-Lung Club”? How do these reactions strike Hans?
 - What progressively happens to Hans’s own body during the early days of his stay at the sanatorium? How do we account for these rapid changes?
2. Besides the graphic descriptions of the effects of tuberculosis on the bodies of the patients at the sanatorium, the narrator devotes considerable attention to bodily pleasure in his descriptions.
 - Why are the meals at the sanatorium so lavish and so frequent?
 - Is Hans a pleasure-seeker? What pleasures does he allow himself?
 - How does Hans react to the sounds of the amorous Russians next door to his room, to the dinner-table gossip about “hanky-panky” among the patients, and to Joachim’s repeated coloring in the presence of Marusya? Is Hans in need of sex education?
 - Is a tuberculosis sanatorium the ideal location for such an education? Why does Mann call attention to the eruption of sexual impulse in this world of sickness and death?
3. When Hans arrives at the sanatorium, he is described as a “healthy,” “ordinary,” even conventional young man on the verge of a shipbuilding career. How does he begin to change even in the early days of his proposed three-week stay?
 - Following the prescribed and lengthy three “rest cures” a day, he begins to think—about what?
 - What thoughts does the plight of his cousin Joachim provoke?
 - What does he think of the veteran denizens of the sanatorium: e.g. from Drs. Behrens and Krokowski to “Tous-les-deux,” from Herr Settembrini to Frau Stöhr?
 - Do these thoughts begin to impinge on his own sense of self?
4. It is not surprising that **TIME** would be central to a novel set in a tuberculosis sanatorium, where every patient spends hours and hours every day simply resting and where any patient’s confinement could stretch from months to years.
 - What realizations about TIME strike the newly arrived Hans Castorp, despite his being an “ordinary” (p. xi), even perhaps “mediocre” (p. 31) young man, who was “not at all used to philosophizing” (p. 63)? What does he come to realize about what the Foreword describes as “the problematic and uniquely double nature of that mysterious element” (p. xi)?

- What relations does the novel establish between Hans and “the times” of his family—the names of whose seven generations of heads of household are engraved on his grandfather’s baptismal bowl?
- The narrator opines that “A human being lives out not only his personal life as an individual, but also . . . the lives of his epoch and contemporaries” (p. 30). How has Hans’s young life been impacted by “the times” of his epoch? What historical, social, technological, medical/scientific changes does the novel reference in its characterization of Hans and in its setting in the International Sanatorium Berghof?
- What do you make of the narrator’s theory of the relationship between a person’s physical sickness and “the times”?

“If the times respond with hollow silence to every conscious or subconscious question . . . about the ultimate, unequivocal meaning of all exertions and deeds that are more than exclusively personal—then it is almost inevitable . . . that the situation will have a crippling effect, which, following moral and spiritual paths, may even spread to that individual’s physical and organic life.” (p. 31)

Is Hans sick because European culture on the eve of World War I is sick?

5. In what ways does the sanatorium create a **MICROCOSM** of European society (in the words of the Foreword) “in the old days of the world before the Great War” (p. xi)?
 - What national/cultural characteristics do the patients exhibit? How do the various nationalities view each other? How do the members of the polyglot community of the sanatorium communicate with one another . . . or do they?
 - From what classes, professions, and lifestyles do the patients come? How do they view each other’s customs, dress, modes of speech, etc.?
 - In all this heterogeneity, what do they share? Do their commonalities create bonds or divide them from one another?