Thomas Mann, Three meetings discussion group—February

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 sanitorium 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 sanitorium, 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 sanitorium: 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 sanitorium 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?

<u>The Magic Mountain</u>, chapter 4

1. Hans Castorp meets a wide panorama of characters during his stay at the sanatorium, and the reader needs to keep everyone straight. What forms of speech, gestures, details of appearance, preoccupations, etc. does Mann's narrator repeat in describing the following denizens of the sanatorium?
   - Joachim Ziemssen
   - Dr. Behrens
   - Dr. Krokowski
   - Herr Settembrini
   - Marusya
   - Clavdia Chauchat

   Critics often claim that Mann was influenced by Richard Wagner's use of *leitmotif ("*a short, recurring musical phrase associated with a particular person, place, or idea"—Wikipedia). Besides helping the reader keep the characters straight, what functions might Mann's repetitive descriptions serve in his narrative?

2. Withing days of his arrival at the Alpine sanatorium in Davos-Dorf, Switzerland, Hans begins to feel ill.
   - What are his symptoms? Does the trajectory of the narrative lead the reader to ask: Are his symptoms caused by overwork? by the change in altitude between Hamburg, Germany (a port city) and the Swiss Alps? by anemia?
   - Is the reader led to ask if his symptoms are caused by psychological shock?
     - What sights, sounds, smells, and stories of sickness and death assault Hans's sensibilities? How does he react?
     - How has the sanatorium routine altered his sense of time? (e.g. See the section entitled "The Thermometer.")
     - What troubles him about Joachim? What does he find shocking about Madame Chauchat? Why does he find the "bad Russians" so scandalous?
   - When does the reader begin to realize that, along with all these other provocations to illness, Hans suffers from tuberculosis?

3. Hans becomes obsessed with Clavdia Chauchat ("hot cat").
   - How does this obsession erupt from the powerful emotions that Hans experienced as an adolescent?
   - How does the story of Hans's obsession reimagine themes Mann had broached in "Tonio Krüger"? in "Death in Venice"?
   - What conflicts does Hans experience in his obsessive observations of Madame Chauchat's body? What kind of relationship does he want with her?
   - Do Hans's experiences enact the theories Dr. Krokowski propounds in his shocking lecture on "love," which is really a lecture on Freud's theories of the Id, the Superego, and the processes by which sexual repression produces physical symptoms? Is Hans sick, in part, because he is sexually repressed?
   - What do Hans's meditations on "honor" and "disgrace" have to do with his obsession with Madame Chauchat? Which does he prefer—honor or disgrace?

4. While Hans is assaulted by these new bodily and emotional sensations and experiences, his mind is challenged to rethink old assumptions and confront startling, new ideas.
   - Herr Settembrini confesses to being a humanist and a "pedagogue," that is a teacher (with the connotation of being "pedantic").
     - What political views does the Italian espouse? How do the views he shares with his revolutionary forebearers contrast to the views of Hans's German forebearers?
     - Who are Settembrini's cultural enemies?
     - What views of literature does he espouse, in contrast to the brewer who had dismissed literature as mere "beautiful characters"?
     - Why is Herr Settembrini suspicious of the powers of music?
     - How does he expand Hans's vision of European history and culture as it has developed from the Enlightenment to the eve of World War I?
   - What does Hans think of this critical pedagogue: his thread-bare clothes, his extravagant manner of speech, his love of gossip, his suspicion of Drs. Behrens and Krokowski?

5. What does Hans learn about the business side of the sanatorium in his conversations with Joachim and Herr Settembrini? Is there any suggestion that the sanatorium personnel have other interests besides curing tuberculosis patients? What interests?

The Magic Mountain, chapter 5

1. In chapter five Lodovico Settembrini becomes a more intrusive presence in Hans's life. He even calls Hans "one of life's problem children, a fellow whom others must look after" (p. 303).
   - What values does Settembrini preach? In what direction does he try to steer Hans's young life?
   - How is the reader to view Settembrini's project, the catalogue of suffering in world literature? What, according to Settembrini, is the ultimate cause of sickness and suffering?
   - How is the reader to view the project of the encyclopedia to which he is contributing? Does Settembrini's pride in his contribution characterize him as a pompous, ridiculous "pedagogue," worthy of being compared to an Italian "organ grinder." Or is the reader to see Settembrini as part of a European movement of visionary intellectuals, whose ideas will lead, after World War I, to the League of Nations and eventually the United Nations?
   - Why does Settembrini see Clavdia Chauchat as his nemesis? Why does he call her "Circe" and "Lillith"? Why does he have such a negative view of all the Russian patients at the sanitorium?
   - How does Hans react to his mentor's guidance?
2. How does Hans's discovery of his own illness affect his obsession with Clavdia?
   - Why does he quiz Dr. Behrens about the portrait he painted of Clavdia, especially about the physiology of human skin?
   - Why does Hans ostentatiously perform his obsession for Clavdia before the other patients at the sanitorium?
   - What connection does Hans experience between his own and Clavdia's sickness and his passion for her body, even his fetishization of her arms? Does her sickness eroticize her body? Must Hans also be sick in order to be close to Clavdia?
   - Why does Hans initiate his first conversation with Clavdia by asking for a pencil during the Mardi Gras revelry? Why is the chapter that narrates the Mardi Gras revelry entitled "Walpurgis Night"? See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walpurgis_Night.
   - In this, their first conversation, why does Hans so openly declare his love only after Clavdia tells him that she is leaving the sanatorium?
   - What does Clavdia want? Is she just a flirt and a tease? What does her sickness mean to her?
3. After seeing the x-ray of his own lung and contemplating Behrens's painting of Clavdia's skin, Hans embarks on an extensive study of what was known before World War I about human physiology, pathology, evolutionary biology, even atomic physics and astrophysics.

- What does Hans learn about sex from his research? How do Hans's studies emerge from and merge with his erotic fantasies?
- What does Hans mean when he says that he is now seeing the body from "lyrical," "medical," and "technical" perspectives? How do his earlier studies as an engineer inform his understanding of the human body? How do his studies alter his sense of what it means to be a "humanist"?
- How does Hans come to understand the genesis of life? How is his view of the genesis of life related to both sickness and sex? Why does he never once mention Genesis and its version of the beginning of life?

4. Why does Hans embark on a mission to visit dying patients?
   - Are his actions motivated primarily by scientific curiosity, human fellow feeling, self-congratulatory do-goodism, rebellion against the sanatorium's policy of hiding death, or . . . ?
   - Why is the chapter that narrates Hans's mission entitled "Danse Macabre"? See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danse_Macabre.
   - Does Hans's mission call into question the narrator's description of him as "ordinary" and "mediocre," and even Settembrini's labelling him as "one of life's problem children"?

5. Mann's descriptive powers are on full display in this chapter—whether he is describing the landscape of an Alpine winter (e.g., p. 264) or the inner workings of the human body (e.g., p. 271). But Mann not only demonstrates literature's power; he also questions it.
   - Settembrini was horrified that the brewer Magnus had no use for literature, which he saw as nothing but "beautiful characters." But Hans thinks, if literature is not merely "a matter of beautiful characters, then evidently it's a matter of beautiful words" (p. 99). Despite his own florid speaking style, Settembrini seems to see literature not as "beautiful words," but as a tool for advancing human progress. Given what you have read of Mann's descriptive and narrative powers, where do you think he stands in the debates about literature that he stages among his characters?
   - How does Mann's narrator describe the silent film and travelogues that he, Joachim, and the dying girl Karen Karstedt watch at the Bioscope Theater (pp. 310-12)? Why does the narrator find it problematical that the audience watches "only phantoms, whose deeds had been reduced to a million photographs brought into focus for the briefest moment"? that at the end of the show no one applauds? that travelogues annihilate space and time? that the experience of watching a film is infinitely repeatable?
   - What seems to be Mann's aesthetic judgment on literature and film as art forms?