

Thomas Mann, Every other month discussion groups—February

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 sanatorium?
 - 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 sanatorium?
 - 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?