

Thomas Mann, Monthly discussion groups—March

The Magic Mountain, chapter 6: from “Operationes Spirituales” through “A Good Soldier”

1. The section entitled “Operationes Spirituales” consists primarily of lengthy debates between Settembrini and Naptha. Since both men are suffering from advanced tuberculosis, it is not altogether surprising that they share an intense interest in questions of sickness and health, the body and the spirit—interests which, however, diverge into fierce debates about corporal punishment, the death penalty, cremation, and even torture.
 - In relation to these themes, what is each man’s view of the body in relation to spirit? How does each define “spirit”? Why does Naptha contemptuously accuse Settembrini of being “bourgeois”? What does that term mean to Naptha?
 - Settembrini’s grandfather was a revolutionary during the Italian Risorgimento, while Naptha’s father was a *shochet*, a Kosher Jewish butcher; Settembrini became a mason, while Naptha became a Jesuit novice. How does each man’s background influence his ideological position? Are their positions internally consistent? What do their debates suggest about European intellectual thought on the eve of World War I?
 - Why do both men seek out an audience for their intellectual duels? Hans knows that Settembrini has taken him on as one of nature’s “problem children,” whom he wants to educate. Also, Settembrini told Hans that he seeks out Naptha to sharpen his wits in the absence of other intellectual company. But what does Naptha want—both in seeking out Hans and in sparring publicly with Settembrini?
 - Spiritual operations are understood to be the conscious work that a devout person undertakes in order to bring him/her closer to the divine. Through prayer, meditation, reading of sacred texts, and ritual, the devout person seeks spiritual transformation. Who in this section is engaged in “Operationes Spirituales”? Who is capable of spiritual transformation?

2. Why does Hans decide to learn to ski and then, against doctors’ orders, go off alone into the snow?
 - Having been so content with his “horizontal life” at the sanatorium, why does he embark on such a demanding physical adventure, alone? What is he seeking?
 - How does his decision to defy the rules, to “let go,” relate to his relations with Joachim, the disciplined soldier, and with Madame Chauchat, the careless Siren?
 - How does Hans’s harrowing experience in the snow embody the abstract debates between Settembrini and Naptha that have so bewildered him?
 - What is the significance of Hans’s delirious dream of a paradise of health and happiness, undergirded by the horrific cannibalism of children? How might such a nightmare arise from echoes of the debates between Settembrini and Naptha?

- Does Hans’s skiing adventure represent a turning point in his development? If so, what has he learned? How might he be changed? If not, what has getting lost in the snow, going around in a circle, nearly freezing to death, having a brilliant realization, then forgetting it—what has this experience meant to him?
3. What is the significance of the title, “A Good Soldier,” for the section that narrates Joachim’s return to die at the sanatorium?
- Joachim yearned to remain in the “flatlands” to participate in his regiment’s planned war games. Given the Prologue’s claim that this novel is old-fashioned because it tells of a world before the great transformation of history, why is this detail about Joachim’s aborted plans ominous?
 - How has Hans’s relation to Joachim changed? What does Hans feel when his cousin returns? How does Joachim’s presence affect Hans’s experience of Settembrini’s and Naptha’s continued sparring (now over freemasonry, Virgil, public education, etc.)?
 - Earlier Hans had rebelled against the sanatorium’s measures for concealing the evidence of ever-present death. In his conversations with Dr. Behrens about Joachim’s illness and with Joachim himself, how does Hans now deal with the decline and death of his cousin?
 - Why do Marusya and Madame Chauchat reappear at this point in the novel? What effects do Marusya’s actual presence and Madame Chauchat’s possible return have on Joachim and Hans?
 - The concept of “a good death” was important in the Christian tradition. In fact, the death bed was sometimes seen as a stage on which the dying demonstrated that s/he was prepared to end this life (by saying good-byes and resolving earthly affairs), and that s/he was assured of the soul’s salvation despite the body’s decline (by suffering without complaint). How would you characterize the representation of Joachim’s death? Is Mann here imagining a modern “good death,” or does he emphasize needless waste and loss, or . . . ?