

Thomas Mann, Monthly discussion groups—May

The Magic Mountain, chapter 7: from “The Great Stupor” to the end

1. Why does Hans not leave the sanatorium after Peeperkorn’s suicide and Clavdia’s departure?
 - Does the status of his health require further treatment?
 - After having educated himself in human physiology, biology, botany, astronomy, etc.; after having listened to Settembrini’s and Naptha’s interminable philosophical debates; and after having dedicated hours to “playing king”—what is the significance of Hans’s obsession with solitaire?
 - Among the pastimes of the other denizens of the sanatorium, the narrator lists modern technological advances (e.g. photography) and plans for social progress (e.g. recycling paper), along with pursuits of dubious value (e.g. attempts learn Esperanto and to solve the ancient mathematical puzzle of “squaring the circle”). How do these pastimes illustrate “The Great Stupor,” into which the sanatorium (and perhaps Europe?) has fallen in the years immediately preceding World War I?
2. Hans is not only freed from his obsession with solitaire by the installation of a gramophone, but he now becomes enthralled by the power of music. How does the narrator represent this enchantment? As a sublime emotional experience? As potentially dangerous to the psyche? As both?
 - How does each of Hans’s favorite pieces, which the narrator describes in detail, resonate with key experiences and/or relationships in Hans’s life? Below you will find links to performances of each:
 - Verdi, Aida, Act 4, tomb scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzD5mafrHZo>
 - Debussy, Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_7loz-HWUM
 - Bizet, Carmen, Act 2,
 - Duet, Carmen and José: https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=ffb1a34a2d49d962&rlz=1C5CHFA_enUS957US958&udm=7&sxsr=ANbL-n5itF83_DCIXoNh4dFos3O0aa4DpQ:1777155381683&q=Carmen+act+2+duet&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjipfHZg4qUAXVWoisGHVxIMDQQ8ccDKAJ6BAghEAQ&biw=2188&bih=1109&dpr=2 - fpstate=ive&ip=1&vld=cid:7c5b47a1,vid:9KtOo-4_Tb0,st:0
 - José’s aria: [https://www.opera-arias.com/bizet/carmen/la-fleur-que-tu-m'avais-jetee-\(flower-song\)/#google_vignette](https://www.opera-arias.com/bizet/carmen/la-fleur-que-tu-m'avais-jetee-(flower-song)/#google_vignette)
 - Gounod, Faust, Act 2, Valentin’s prayer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7WOG6D9kH4>
 - Schubert, “Der Lindenbaum”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V14UkfMyPkU>

The Linden Tree
English translation © Richard Wigmore

By the well, before the gate,
stands a linden tree;
in its shade I dreamt
many a sweet dream.

In its bark I carved
many a word of love;
in joy and sorrow
I was ever drawn to it.

Today, too, I had to walk
past it at dead of night;
even in the darkness
I closed my eyes.

And its branches rustled
as if they were calling to me:
'Come to me, friend,
here you will find rest.'

The cold wind blew
straight into my face,
my hat flew from my head;
I did not turn back.

Now I am many hours' journey
from that place;
yet I still hear the rustling:
'There you would find rest.'

- How do these pieces continue to resonate with Hans's future life and experiences, even beyond the safe confines of the sanatorium?
3. How does Krakowski, the proponent of psychoanalysis, reconcile his belief in the medium Elly Brand, his organization of séances, and even his efforts to summon a spirit from the dead with his scientific world view?
- Does this eruption of the supernatural into the orderly world of the sanatorium, which is dedicated to the latest medical treatment of tuberculosis, call into question the European valorization of human Reason as an adequate instrument for understanding Reality? Are both Reason and Reality insufficient terms for analyzing what occurs in Krakowski's sessions with Elly Brand?
 - Or are these strange goings-on just a "cunning fraud," as Settembrini believes? Do they have anything in common with Cipolla's performance in "Mario and the Magician"?
 - Why does Hans agree to participate in a séance to summon Joachim from the dead? How are we to understand his vision of his dead cousin? Are we to believe that Elly, as a medium ("an individual held to be a channel of communication between the earthly world and a world of spirits") actually summoned him from the dead? Or perhaps has Valentin's prayer from Gounod's *Faust* conjured Hans's vision of his beloved cousin?
 - Does Joachim's odd physical appearance have any significance?

- Why does Hans whisper a plea for forgiveness, abruptly terminate the séance by turning on the light, and exit, menacing Krakowski?
4. Most historians see the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand by a young Serbian nationalist in 1914 as merely the spark that set off the powder keg that Europe had become. Nations had polarized into alliances, rivals spent vast sums of national treasure to build and arm their militaries, and “the great powers” were all scrambling to acquire colonies in Africa and Asia. If, as we have discussed, the Davos-Dorf sanatorium is a microcosm of Europe between 1907 and 1914, how should we read the outbreak among the patients of “A love of quarrels. Acute petulance. Nameless impatience. A universal penchant for nasty verbal exchanges and outbursts of rage, even for fisticuffs”?
 - How does this eruption of the irrational in the chapter entitled “The Great Petulance” parallel the eruption of the supernatural in the previous chapter entitled “Highly Questionable”? How do both these developments call into question the illusion of a stable, orderly, rational world?
 - Mann’s narrator characterizes some of the patients’ quarrels as comical (e.g. “the Polish affair of honor”), but others as horrific (e.g. the fist fight between Wiedemann, the anti-Semite, and Sonnenschein, the Jew). How might these characterizations reflect aspects of a cultural crisis that explodes into World War I?
 - Was it inevitable that Settembrini’s and Naptha’s philosophical sparring would result in an actual duel? What is the spark that ignites the duel? Why can’t Hans stop this insanity? How does the way each philosopher conducts himself at the duel reflect his philosophical position? How does Naptha’s suicide differ from Peeperkorn’s?
 5. The last chapter titled “Thunderbolt” clarifies the enigma of the novel’s title: the outbreak of World War I “is the thunderbolt that bursts open the magic mountain and rudely sets its entranced sleeper outside the gates.” From a life of five lavish meals a day, a daily rest cure in the “horizontal position,” and interludes of “playing king,” Hans is thrust onto a World War I battlefield. Why is it a great irony of destiny that, in the end, it is “ordinary,” “mediocre” Hans who leaves the sanatorium to become a soldier?
 - Where does the narrator position himself and the reader in relation to the horrific scenes of battle that he describes? Why are we so positioned?
 - What is the significance of Hans’s singing “Der Lindenbaum” as he dodges bombs and staggers across a battlefield littered with bodies?
 - In the final sentences of the novel, the narrator reminds us that Hans, while “he ‘played king,’ . . . saw the intimation of a dream of love rising up out of death and this carnal body.” What gave Hans this intimation and other “Adventures in flesh and spirit, which enhanced and heightened [his] ordinariness”?