

**Modern Critical Interpretations
The Magic Mountain
Harold Bloom, Editor
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Harold Bloom Pg. 1 Introduction

Bloom calls *The Magic Mountain* “boring” and an antique period piece! Bloom frequently finds little value in what he reviews. He edited a collection of essays on Matthew Arnold and it was the same thing. MA is mediocre, etc., Wow!

I like his work on Shakespeare but, . . .

MY introduction: *The Magic Mountain* is a wonderful book about a young man, Hans Castorp, who goes to visit his cousin in a TB sanitarium on top of a mountain for 3 weeks; he ends up staying for 7 years!

While there he meets interesting people. The Enlightenment figure Settembrini, the chaos reactionary figure Naphta; his love, Claudia; and passion in the form of Peeperkorn. But, perhaps, the best part of the book is the narrator (Thomas Mann’s) direct editorializing on the characters and their meaning.

This collection provides sometimes widely different interpretations of MM. And, as such, reading this summary prior to reading the very long MM, will make the literary experience more enjoyable.

Now back to Bloom:

Detachment is Hans Castorp’s main feature, an everyman, his drive is towards self-education for its own sake. But it is not for power; he is in no way Faustian.

Castorp is content to be colorless and he is a survivor. He probably won’t die on the battlefield, but live, and write MM.

After Hans’ cousin, Joachim dies, all references to time stop. Hans’ watch breaks and no one cares about time anymore.

Castorp’s number one question is, “Who are you and what power do you seek to gain over my life?” In reading MM we are made to ask ourselves, “What is my dream of love, my erotic illusion, and how do these qualify my own possibility of unfolding?”

Disease Pg. 7 Hermann J. Weigand

Nietzsche and Goethe also found disease redemptive. Heine said health made people stupid. Bernard Shaw found no interest in disease and said it was just something to be gotten rid of. Germans were not so sure.

And disease takes one to an ecstatic anticipation of death.

In Christianity one aspires to self-consciousness of the spirit through pain. Said Heine. We need less spirit and more flesh. He was widely read.

Castrop says healthy people are usually stupid and Settembrini rebukes him. This dislodges Hans' normal thought. And he sees, empirically, that people can be diseased and stupid. Even those near death.

But he himself awakens partially out of disease.

He investigates disease. It becomes something non-bourgeois to study. He makes the past near to probe the meaning of disease.

Claudia wants life for the sake of living; Hans life for the sake of experience.

In part one he discovers and is sick. In part two he is healthy and more boring.

Joachim says we didn't come here for wisdom, we came here for health. Hans asks if we cannot have both. He comes more and more to want adventure and responsibility.

Is disease physical or psychological? Here is the mind – body problem. Behrens says the body and Kokowski says the mind.

Hans' heartbeat is irregularly fast. He has no reason. He has it when he finds Claudia the door slammer.

Joachim does all to get well, but doesn't get well. We cannot help but suspect he has psychic problems that keep him ill. He was a house divided against itself.

Krokowski says all disease is caused by the libido. And though we like him and Naphta less than their counterparts, we feel they are on to something.

Settembrini says disease is a form of immorality.

So we see him momentarily agree, in a way, with Krokowski. Mann certainly agrees. He left the German military with a willed ankle disease. Though this led to his admirably, perhaps morally, staying out of the war. In the book he says "form" of disease and this gives wiggle room.

This manifests in Hans wondering how life can come from the inorganic. For him both mind, body; spirit and matter are manifestations of an underlying reality that encompasses them both.

The unity eludes intellectual understanding.

What this aims at is body and soul being fundamentally united – one.

Conversation on the Magic Mountain Pg. 23 Erich Heller

Hippe means death (the boy he loves). And this is what attracts Hans. The gender is not important. (The pencil is very phallic though).

Hans doesn't want a wife he wants transcendental passion – an ideal.

He moves past her and makes connection with Peeperkorn – who represents life (while being a well-rounded character).

Remember, though, the extraordinary weapon he kills himself with. It is a mechanical snake contraption. With a scientifically constructed monster.

He dies fearing the loss of the ability to feel.

Before this he gives a speech in front of a waterfall, wherein he cannot be heard.

Beautiful.

Settembrini is mind dwarfed by life.

And Naphta never comes to life as a character because he is Mind without life. So Peeperkorn and Naphta's suicides reconcile opposites: Neither mind nor life can exist without each other.

Goethe said, "It is impossible to separate Nature from Mind without destroying both life and art."

Naphta and Settembrini are "categorical discord."

Living is dying. Love is disease. Music is death. Cludia is Pribislav.

With the chaos, Hans is tempted to jump into Naphta's morally untidy universe.

Mann thus creates a significant work of art based on meaningless dialogues. This lack of meaning colors all of his experiences.

Naphta's description of initiation into the mysteries of the Masons is a mirror of bildungsroman into mystery. It is a parallel into the novel itself.

But all are shadows of the mystery. So what is the mystery?

So the novel is symbolic of the difficulties of writing a novel when that is acknowledged as meaningless. All is falling apart and the novel tries to hold them together. (His talk reflects my assertion that even dark art is light in that it tries to communicate.)

It is both a story and a symbol of the limitations of stories.

This is like his realization near death in the snow that Hans embraces the contradictions between mystic community and windy individualism.

It is also contrapunctual to the regular bildungsroman. Usually the subject starts as an Originalgenie and ends as a useful member of society. Hans goes the opposite way.

He leaves to do his duty. But to an order that is about to destroy itself and him.

If he survives, having seen this meaninglessness and gotten such an education, he would likely write *The Magic Mountain*. *Eternal Recurrence*.

So two conclusions: The aim of education is to produce writers of fiction and to acquire true identity means to lose one's identity.

The loss of identity is an occupational hazard of literary men. Literature and nonidentity are the aesthetic icognito which a man, incapable of accepting a meaningless existence, chooses in a world which insists upon living as if life were meaningless.

In Search of Bourgeois Man Pg. 31 Georg Lukacs

The rationalist and the Protofascist (Settembrini and Naphta war over Hans Castorp's bourgeois soul.

These wear this German bourgeois into tired quietism far from the workaday world.

They learn nothing as all is at a distance.

The Weimar had a melancholy preoccupation with death. The history professors do not like history as it is, but as it is history. They like the present without chaos, - dead.

Hence his running off to war.

Settembrini lives in a cold world separate from the world so he has no defense against Naphta.

Castorp likes Settembrini more. There is hope. He senses his mediocrity and lightly struggles against it. There is hope in this instinct.

During Hitler, Mann wrote Lotte in Weimar to take Goethe down from lofty polish and made him a symbol of potentiality forward-pointing humanism.

Both are asking more of the Bourgeoisie and so believe it can happen and redeem them.

Not an Inn, But an Hospital Pg. 37 C. E. Williams

This chapter compares MM to the Cancer Ward by Solzhenitsyn.

Hans is rich and can be distant and leisurely. The main character in Cancer Ward, Oleg Kostoglotov has no money and barely eats.

While Hans debates the metaphysical, Oleg is trying to win a life that is worth living and come to grips with the Soviet system.

It takes the first world war to shake Hans from the aloof metaphysics of his thoughts. He goes to the real world as Oleg goes out of uniform and systems into life.

The Cancer Ward are compromised figures – a socialist who will pay to get ahead of the line in the Cancer Ward. People who sold out.

There are parallel characters. Vadim is Joachim. Yefrem is Peeperkorn. Naphta is Rusanov.

Mann's characters learn less about themselves than Solzhenitsyn's. Naphta and Settembrini seem unreflective – oblivious to their shortcomings.

The system bigwig Rusanov, finds he hasn't got self-reliance to rely on. Yefrem reads Tolstoy and gets insight on death, when he has always been a hedonist. Vadim then immerses himself in science to contribute to the collective good, but is shaken in his faith towards the end. The doctor Dontsova becomes a patient. The sexy Asya must lose a breast and cannot go forward with body image changed.

Both are metaphors for their respective societies. Mann tells us. Solzhenitsyn must drop hints.

Under Tolstoy's "law of violence" only being a victim is moral. The characters do not defy politically. But they retain some humanity in the system.

The Uses of Tradition Pg. 53 T. J. Reed

This compares MM and Death in Venice. Death in Venice had a theme of change and unburdening. MM is a counterpoint to the earlier piece.

Venice is a Satyr play with no Bildung in it.

Both involve an interruption in an orderly life. In Death, as a moralistic writer.

In both, there is a suggestion that the main character has a fate. Neither can escape their diseased environs. Note, when Settembrini tells Hans to leave, it is just then that he discovers Claudia.

But Hans' infatuation with Claudia are not the ultimate cause of his being there. He has a deeper wish to escape the laming effects of his age – the purpose of life. So is it emotions or to diagnose the age that keeps Hans?

In Venice it is more of the former in MM more of the latter.

From Nov of 1915 to the end of the War, Mann abandoned MM. In 1915 he described MM as humorously nihilistic. Now health (Enlightenment) and sickness (romanticism) are battling. It is art, not a pamphlet. He no longer finds his brother's Enlightenment disgusting, but also has sympathy for death.

So we see, in MM, Mann's move towards accepting both romanticism and Enlightenment in the face of death and moving forward.

“Bildung” in the Magic Mountain Pg. 67 W. H. Bruford

Mann's typical theme is modern man's search for bildung.

He quotes Claudia's criticism of Hans. You Germans live for the sake of experience – and not for the sake of life. This revolting egoism will make Germans the enemies of humanity.

The search is self-regarding and uncommitted, withdrawn from social ties. For half of his life Mann backed this high-minded indifference to politics. In part two, he embraced political connotations.

Sickness and death are not taken seriously in the sanitarium.

Early the fight is between Settembrini's Enlightenment and Claudia's Asiatic irrationalism and door banging. She is like death. It is in this context that the fight over being sick and stupid at the same time happens. The belief that sickness makes for wisdom is medieval.

Settembrini, notice, is very political. Not self-development, but world development.

Behrens gets him into medicine – something Goethe studied. Then he goes to the dying. This is like what Goethe found to be Christian, and praised, in *Wanderjahre*, 'reverence for what is below us,' suffering, disease, and all repugnant to living.

He uses a familiar with Settembrini as a foreshadowing of the informality with her. He is no longer a bourgeois, but adventurous. But chasing her is not real, it is a desire for experience.

In Book 6: There is a transition from Dr. Krokowski talking about abnormal psychology to Naphta's intellectual revolt against reason. He uses Marx to destroy Settembrini's humanism.

The discussion of Naphta's statue is mentioned. Settembrini criticizes it for not being naturalistically correct. Naphta attacks on the degradation brought upon man by science.

He dreams of a Marxist theocracy like the middle ages.

Evidence for change: When Joachim goes back to do battle, Hans, who came for 3 weeks, stays despite being cleared to leave.

His last statement in the dream is "I will allow death no control over my thoughts! For that is what charity and loving-kindness mean, and nothing else.

When Settembrini tells of being a Mason, Naphta says it was hard for him to enter due to it being expensive, "Bildung and money, there you have the bourgeois! There you have the foundations of the liberal world-republic." Settembrini agrees that Bildung is now middle class, but it is founded on literary genius, the highest expression of the human spirit. This is the foundation of modern sainthood. Naphta says, no, just bourgeois. Old stuff is not as good as cinema.

Now comes mynheer Peeperkorn, who is to remind Hans of what Goethe called the inexplicable quality of life.

Naphta welcomes war. He rants about the problems of freedom, and that is what sets off Settembrini.

At the end of the book, Mann calls Hans, Heroic, like pirates of the past, but in a quieter and more intellectual way. In his enjoyment of adventures of the heart and mind, which carry him to the cosmic and metaphysical and make him a Bildungsromans figure, in the great middle-class epoch.

MY commentary: In the war zone, Hans is singing, "Upon its bark I've carved there; so many words of love; And all its branches rustled; as I they called to me." This is an embrace, in the midst of terror, of the multifaceted miracle of life.

Mann says, more or less, that Hans had elevated himself from ordinaryness a bit by playing king. He "saw the intimation of a dream of love rising up out of death and this carnal body." He asks if out of the War will something rise up too?

The Magic Mountain Pg. 85 Henry Hatfield

Fighting the War may not seem like a glorious end, but it is sharing in the fate of his European generation.

Hans brings the séance to an end and tries to stop the duel. He is active. He pushes back his disease and goes to the war. He is cured. So it is bildungsroman.

It is also a "time novel" Talking about the circular nature of time. His mixing of lovers. It is an adventure in that he skis and loves, but it is also an intellectual adventure. The theme wherein Hegelianism and Catholicism is the same is interesting. But it is not truly intellectual as the human is at least as important as the ideas.

Like Nietzsche, conservative and daring, they think of the end but remember to live. He breaks the spell of the mountain and goes to battle.

Hans could be a businessman but feels "the way of Genius." Even though he knows it is dangerous and often evil. He withdraws from life, as is his ticket to contemplation, it gives him the freedom to wreckless love.

Hans considers death more dignified and noble than life.

He looks at his own grave and x-rays over and over again.

He loses Claudia to Peepkorn, this is a progression, love of an individual to that of life.

The quietude / inner nature of Hans is more typical of a 1870s German. They had been replaced by mercantile bustle. He is, in a way, more typical of 1914 British.

Joachim is called the best of all the people on the MM. But, he refuses love to Marusja so that he can join the army, not Puritanism. He lives "a purely formal existence."

Settembrini's failure comes from his failure to reconcile liberalism with the nation-state.

Georg Lukacs was the model for Naphta. What Naphta calls kultur is the existence of a high intellectual and aesthetic world in an atmosphere dominated by dictatorship and violence.

"Talent is always a rightist deviation." Says Naphta. He loves violence but is traumatized by his father's being killed in a pogrom. He is devoid of love; he cannot love himself and wants to die, so calls Settembrini a coward.

Edwin Krokowski teaches that love is multivalent. He stirs towards the occult.

Hofrat Behrens is the least pigeon-holed of the cast. He has personal tensions, sexually and with melancholy. He shows Mann's early obsession with the physician as a sick artist. The relationship between sickness and art.

Peepkorn is Dionysus.

The sex-death mix up in Claudia's x-ray locket is hilarious.

As it is in Goethe's Faust, the carnival scene is a death laden dream.

His drive South, purposeful getting lost, takes him to the beach scene which is like Greek calm - people of the sun - but then becomes cannibalism.

The light at the séance is a victory for Settembrini.

Naphta's suicide could represent that of the central powers.

At the end he is wasted as he was at school, lethargic like Siddhartha. His watch is broken and he is a man who refuses to read the papers, like Mann in 1914.

Hans fights, not idealistically, but on the side that his blood binds him. Settembrini on the other side. All in Europe acted this way.

The end echoes Mann's 1924 address on Nietzsche. Saying that, "the new world of love" requires that men overcome romanticism and are true to themselves and life.

Nietzsche in the Magic Mountain Pg. 105 Alexander Nehamas

This work was begun under the spell of Nietzsche, but was cast away, as Nietzsche was in all Mann's works of maturity – of which MM is the first.

There has been a dualistic reading of MM, wherein Settembrini and Naphta represent: West and East, classicism and romanticism, democracy and despotism; idea or will; reason and instinct. Ultimately, Hans refuses both sides.

Nietzsche denigrated metaphysicians for being slaves to opposite values. Settembrini is just such a dualist. He sees reason against instinct, mind against body, spirit against nature; work against lethargy; Europe against Asia; the Enlightenment against the Middle Ages.

Settembrini's tendency comes from his father but Nietzsche says, "One should not try to exceed one's father's industriousness; that makes one sick." His three generations go from the liberation of Italy, to the Uniting of Europe to the liberation of all of humanity. It broadens.

Settembrini hates moral laxness, but knows all the gossip and leers at girls. Theoretically he is against a duel.

Do such Enlightenment views originate in their fear of the opposite? Settembrini fears his irrational-self, personified by Naphta.

Naphta too is weak. He is an ascetic out of resentment and a stunted will to power.

Both N and S hate that which is low. Neither accepts his own sensuality. Each develops a metaphysics to cover up. Their ideals take them away from reality.

Neither really represents a side in a philosophical argument. Both represent a sort of bastardization; attempts to escape.

By contrast, Hans' experimentalism is a rejection of objectivity and more of a truth.

Hans is interested in many things, partially because he has no overarching meaning to which modes must adhere. Not having made up his mind, he has little to lose. That is why he is "life's problem - child." He gets used to not getting used to the infirmary. He tells Peeperkorn that he has a problem with his destiny.

Hans is not put forward as an ideal person. He deceives himself too.

As the novel progresses, the distance between Hans and the reader increases. After Claudia leaves the second time he is hardly ever quoted again. Perhaps he is not so special after all.

The narrator chides him just slightly for taking the shadow for substance and vice versa. But says, it is not a harsh judgment as the difference has "never been defined once and for all."

Hans tries to make his meaning. That is nice, even if he finds no meaning. Because he organizes himself he goes on to a no longer interesting fate. He escaped meaninglessness.