



The Ambiguity Commune of The Novel “*The Magic Mountain*”: Social Class Tensions and Inquiry of Self

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Abstract

This article aims to delve into the assertion of social and personal change at the dawn of World War I as reflected in Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. Hans Castorp, the central character, undergoes a profound journey of experience and growth, which is divided into two stages: before and after his stay at the sanatorium. Initially depicted as a young man engrossed in leisure and superficial pursuits, indifferent to societal changes and personal pleasures, Hans undergoes a significant transformation during his time at the sanatorium. This period sparks deeper intellectual and moral engagement, mirroring T.Mann's vision for the elite class in early 20th-century German society. T.Mann envisioned a shift from apathy and detachment to active involvement with the community and a clearer sense of purpose. Through Hans Castorp, T.Mann explores the potential for personal and societal renewal. This study employs literary textual analysis to examine Hans Castorp's unique characteristics, contradictions, and development, providing insights into the evolution of T.Mann's artistic and philosophical ideas. By analyzing Hans's character, this research highlights T.Mann's critique of his contemporary society and his hope for a more engaged and purposeful elite. It underscores the enduring relevance of *The Magic Mountain* in exploring themes of personal growth and social transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Mann's seminal work, *The Magic Mountain*, profoundly examines societal and personal upheavals at the dawn of World War I. Utilizing the perspective of the protagonist, Hans Castorp, and the microcosm of a Swiss sanatorium, T. Mann intricately explores the complexities of a world poised on the brink of monumental change. This paper analyzes how *The Magic Mountain* reflects the social and personal transformations of the early 20th century, with a focus on themes such as class tension, intellectual inquiry, and the search for identity.

The tension between different social classes is a central theme in *The Magic Mountain*. The Berghof sanatorium, where Hans Castorp retreats, serves as a microcosm of pre-war European society. Patients from diverse social strata and national backgrounds converge in this isolated setting, enabling Mann to delve into the underlying class dynamics and conflicts.

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Characters at the Berghof embody a broad spectrum of social classes and ideologies. Settembrini, the Italian humanist, represents the progressive and rationalist ideals of the bourgeoisie, advocating for enlightenment and democratic values. In contrast, Naphta, the Jesuit scholar, symbolizes the authoritarian and reactionary currents within European society. The intellectual debates between these two characters highlight the ideological clashes of the time, illustrating the friction between conservatism and progressivism, tradition and modernity.

Hans Castorp's interactions with these characters reflect his journey through the social and intellectual landscape of the period. By engaging with their contrasting views, Hans Castorp becomes a conduit through which Mann explores the complexities and contradictions of early 20th-century European society. The sanatorium, with its rigid hierarchy and strict routines, mirrors the class structures and societal norms increasingly questioned and challenged on the eve of World War I.

The Magic Mountain is also a profound inquiry into the self, reflecting the personal transformations experienced by many during this tumultuous period. Hans Castorp's extended stay at the sanatorium, initially intended to be brief, evolves into an exploration of time, illness, and mortality. The monotonous and repetitive nature of the sanatorium's routine forces Hans to confront his own existence and the passage of time, intensified by isolation and detachment from the outside world.

The relationships Hans forms at the sanatorium further catalyze his personal transformation. His infatuation with the enigmatic Claudia Chauchat and his friendship with the ailing Joachim Ziemssen push him to confront his own desires, fears, and uncertainties, leading to a profound inner transformation. Intellectual debates and philosophical discussions with Settembrini and Naphta also play a crucial role in Hans's self-discovery, as he grapples with complex ideas about life, death, and the human condition. This intellectual engagement mirrors the broader quest for meaning and understanding that characterized the early 20th century, as individuals sought to make sense of a rapidly changing world.

The Magic Mountain is not merely a reflection of individual and social change but also a prescient commentary on the broader transformations unfolding in Europe at the time. With its insular and self-contained world, T.Mann's depiction of the Berghof sanatorium serves as a metaphor for pre-war European society—a society increasingly isolated and detached from external realities. The outbreak of World War I shatters this insularity, bringing underlying tensions and contradictions to the fore and disrupting the established social order.

Mann's portrayal of the sanatorium as a microcosm of pre-war Europe underscores broader themes of decay, disintegration, and renewal. The characters' illnesses and varied responses to treatment reflect societal malaise and the quest for new values and meanings in a changing world. The novel's ambiguous and open-ended conclusion suggests that the process of transformation and renewal is ongoing, with the search for meaning and identity continuing beyond the confines of the sanatorium.

In *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann offers a nuanced and multi-layered exploration of social and personal changes at the dawn of World War I. Through the experiences of Hans Castorp and the diverse cast of characters at the Berghof sanatorium, Mann delves into class tensions, intellectual inquiry, and the search for identity, reflecting broader societal and existential transformations of the early 20th century. This analysis highlights the enduring relevance of these themes in understanding the human condition.

T. Mann's 1000-page novel *Der Zauberberg*, first translated into English by Helen T. Lowe-Porter and published in 1927 as *The Magic Mountain*, tells about the journey of Hans Castorp, a typical, educated youth from Hamburg, Germany, to visit his sick cousin in a sanatorium high in the Swiss Alps. It is considered one of the most significant works of 20th-century German literature and Western literature in general, "one of the masterpieces of European modernism and a powerful symbol of traditional learning and encyclopedic erudition" (Watroba, 2022). Several studies have been conducted worldwide on *The Magic Mountain* and its central character, Hans Castorp.

Since 1960s, *The Magic Mountain* attracted the interest of scholars such as H.J. Weigand, J.A. Gaertner. These researchers analyzed the dialectic thought in T. Mann's novel and raised the questions on Joachim Ziemssen's military disposition with Hans Castorp's civilian outlook, and personality with intellect in the interactions between Peeperkorn and Settembrini. Even Hans Castorp's dreams reflect a dialectical contrast between ideal human behavior and the savagery of cannibalism (Weigand, 1965), (Gaertner, 1965).

Eva Wessell in the chapter "Magic and Reflections: Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and His War Essays" in the book of *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Mann* analyzed the thinking of Hans Castorp in the chapter "Schnee": "he has a dream about an Arcadian settlement filled with young and happy people. But he also finds a temple in its center where witches kill and devour children. The dream shows the beautiful and horrid coexistence. Castorp concludes that these two radical expressions of his vision belong together and must be kept in balance" (Wessel, 2004, p.140). In this book, Wessel focused on the message that

society is held together by love and power and there is an unstable relationship between the extraordinary individual and love, power, and society.

In the chapter 8, “The Magic Mountain” of the book *Understanding Thomas Mann*, Hannelore Mundt contended that the novel provides not only a glimpse into a world of human disappointment and suffering, but it also an indictment of narrow-minded bourgeois morality (Mundt, 2004, p.116). The author also stated: “Interpretations of *The Magic Mountain* have largely centered on those narrative strategies of the novel that align it with the genre of the bildungsroman, a characterization of the novel Mann welcomed as it placed him in the footsteps of Goethe...What has Castorp learned in seven years? From a dilettante’s perspective, he has studied anatomy, biology, physiology. He has listened to the deliberations of Settembrini and Naphta and understood the anti-individualistic, inhuman dimensions of their dogmatic thinking” (Mundt, 2004, p.129).

The authors thus mention the cognitive journey of the character Hans Castorp in T. Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. During the seven years at the sanatorium, Hans Castorp continuously affirmed and negated to determine the social and ideological value systems.

Recently, the novel of T.Mann continued attracting the interest of literary researchers including K. Kosecki, K.P Eubanks, A. Nushi, A. Bielskis. These authors studied the art techniques of T.Mann and the human social values of T.Mann based on an interdisciplinary approach and comparative literature Kosecki, (2020), Eubanks, (2021), Nushi (2021), Hazhar and Mohammed, (2021) and Bielskis (2022).

This article uses textual analysis to understand how Hans Castorp changes his views on society during his stay at the sanatorium in Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. The analysis focuses on two main themes: the transition from nobility to bourgeoisie and the satirical reflection of the bourgeois lifestyle, and Hans Castorp's self-development as he faces the reality of death and the ambiguity among those gathered at the sanatorium due to tuberculosis.

By examining the text in detail, this study explores the characteristics of Hans Castorp, the central figure in *The Magic Mountain*, and his journey of experience and growth. The textual analysis investigates how Hans Castorp's societal views evolve while he resides in the sanatorium. This methodology allows for a comprehensive examination of Mann’s text, identifying the unique ideological and artistic features of the work. This approach provides

insights into the protagonist's character transformation and the broader social commentary embedded in the novel.

2. SOCIAL CLASS TENSIONS: THE AMBIGUITY BETWEEN NOBLE AND BOURGEOIS LIFESTYLE

Hans Castorp is the only son of a wealthy merchant family in Hamburg, owners of the family business Castorp & Son. From a young age, Hans experienced profound personal losses, with his parents passing away when he was five and seven years old, respectively. Following their deaths, Hans moved in with his grandfather, Senator Hans Lorenz Castorp, in a classic North European mansion on the Esplanade. This house, described in vivid detail by Mann, embodied the fading grandeur of a once-glorious noble family. During his year and a half with his grandfather, Hans was immersed in the noble atmosphere, surrounded by objects that echoed the family's magnificent past when Senator Hans Lorenz Castorp held significant influence and power. His grandfather, a devout politician in a Protestant parish, deeply valued family lineage and staunchly preserved the privileges of the noble class.

With its imposing architecture and ornate decor, the mansion itself stood as a testament to the family's former status. Mann's novel detailed the house, including its severe yet elegant North European style, pilasters flanking the entrance, and wrought-iron grilles, evoking a sense of an era long past. This environment nurtured Hans's early development, embedding in him a sense of tradition, respect for lineage, and a nostalgic attachment to the bygone noble era.

Two objects that significantly impacted Hans during his childhood were the baptismal basin and the portrait of Senator Hans Lorenz Castorp. The baptismal basin, described as elegant and simple in early 19th-century style, and the intricately carved plate with family crests symbolized the family's heritage. The portrait of Senator Castorp, depicting his dignified features from a bygone era, reinforced the connection to the family's past glory. These artifacts were not merely decorations but powerful symbols of the family's historical significance and the weight of their legacy. They served as constant reminders of the Castorp family's noble roots, instilling in Hans a sense of pride and awareness of the decline they were facing.

After his grandfather's death, Hans moved to live with his uncle and guardian, Consul Tienappel. This move marked a significant shift in Hans's upbringing as he transitioned from the nostalgic and conservative environment of his grandfather's home to his uncle's practical, profit-driven world. Consul Tienappel, a representative of the rising bourgeoisie, was skilled

in calculations and always sought ways to maximize profit. He sold the family estate, dissolved the Castorp & Son import-export firm, and invested in secure stocks, transforming the family's assets into liquid capital. This shift from tangible heritage to financial security underscored the changing values and priorities of the bourgeois class.

Tienappel's portrait, representing the typical bourgeois class of late 19th-century Europe, further highlighted the stark contrast between the two lifestyles. His watery blue eyes, ruddy nose, and gold-rimmed glasses, along with his English cloth suits and flashing diamond ring, symbolized the practical, materialistic values of the bourgeoisie. Under his uncle's roof, Hans experienced the practical, bourgeois lifestyle, which contrasted sharply with the noble, idealistic values he had been raised with. The atmosphere of Hamburg, with its bustling port, stormy weather, and clamorous life, nurtured Hans's development, embedding in him the practicalities and ambitions of the bourgeoisie.

This juxtaposition between noble and bourgeois values created a profound ambiguity in Hans's identity. Before going to the international sanatorium, Hans was a leisurely and honorable young man, carrying the heritage of a high civilization and the assets inherited from his forefathers. He valued outward appearances, meticulously maintaining his clothing and personal grooming, reflecting both his noble upbringing and bourgeois sensibilities. His meticulousness about appearances was evident in his habit of sending his clothes back home to be washed and ironed by Mrs. Schalleen, the Tienappel family's housemaid, believing that only she could do it properly.

Academically, Hans was an average student who chose to study shipbuilding engineering for its financial prospects. He disliked work and the military, preferring leisure and comfort. At twenty-three, Hans was ready to start his career as an apprentice engineer at Tunder & Wilms, living a life of luxury and leisure in Hamburg. However, he lacked a sense of community responsibility, lived without motivation, and was somewhat lazy, nurtured by both the pride of his noble lineage and the practicality of the bourgeoisie. This duality in his upbringing left him without a clear sense of purpose or direction.

Hans's stay at the sanatorium marked a turning point in his life, where he began to confront the realities of death, illness, and the ambiguous differences among the patients gathered due to tuberculosis. This experience forced him to reconcile the noble ideals and bourgeois pragmatism that had shaped his identity. The sanatorium, a microcosm of European society, exposed him to a diverse range of individuals and ideologies, challenging his preconceived notions and prompting a profound transformation.

Through Hans Castorp's character, T.Mann explores the tensions and ambiguities between the noble and bourgeois lifestyles. Hans's journey reflects the broader societal shifts occurring in early 20th-century Europe, where traditional noble values were increasingly overshadowed by the pragmatic, profit-driven ethos of the bourgeoisie. This tension is central to understanding the character's development and the novel's exploration of social class dynamics.

Hans Castorp's life encapsulates the ambiguity between noble and bourgeois lifestyles. His upbringing in a noble household, followed by his exposure to bourgeois values, creates a complex identity marked by conflicting ideals. The sanatorium serves as the crucible where these tensions are confronted and reconciled, reflecting Mann's broader commentary on the evolving social landscape of his time. Through Hans's journey, *The Magic Mountain* delves into the intricacies of social class tensions and the search for identity amidst a rapidly changing world.

3. INQUIRY OF SELF

The International Sanatorium at the Mountain, situated in Davos near the Davos mountain in the Graubünden canton of Switzerland, serves as a unique setting where wealthy patients from various social classes across Europe gather, united by their struggle with tuberculosis, a challenging disease to treat during that era. At an altitude of 1560 meters above sea level, the sanatorium is metaphorically described as an elevated world, sharply contrasting with the lowlands, such as the bustling port city of Hamburg. This mythical and fairy-tale-like setting of the Davos mountain is a crucible that challenges and matures the protagonist, Hans Castorp.

Hans Castorp immerses himself in the breathtaking scenery of the pristine mountain region, perceiving it as both dreamlike and romantic, as well as fierce and majestic. Davos's grand, wild, and poetic natural landscape starkly contrasts with the crowded, humid, and bustling environment of Hamburg. Thomas Mann dedicates extensive passages in "The Magic Mountain" to describe the beauty of the four seasons in Davos. For instance, autumn is depicted with shades of rust-red that signal the year's decline, while summer is full of vibrant colors and sounds, from the deep blue sky to the sound of cowbells. Winter, conversely, turns Davos into a fierce environment with harsh snowstorms. This idyllic yet challenging setting provides an ideal atmosphere for Hans to reflect on life's values and the meaning of existence, nurturing new ideas about social responsibility.

Hans deeply experiences the contradiction between beautiful appearances and internal decay at the sanatorium. The sanatorium, resembling a luxurious hotel, caters to wealthy patients from European society with abundant and excessive meals, such as marmalade, honey, rice, oatmeal porridge, cold meat, scrambled eggs, butter, and cheese. Despite their decaying lungs due to tuberculosis, the patients dress elegantly in silk coats and linen suits. This stark contrast between their stylish appearances and the pervasive fear of death highlights the underlying decay. The seemingly healthy and vital young men and women, including Hans's cousin Joachim Ziemssen, cannot escape the fatal grip of tuberculosis. Random deaths and bodies being secretly removed in the night become commonplace.

Hans's introspective journey at the sanatorium is significantly shaped by his conversations with Settembrini and the ideological conflicts between Settembrini and Naphta. While Hans's grandfather represented conservative values and the protection of noble privileges, Settembrini's grandfather symbolized revolution and progress. Hans ponders the meaning of life and death, contemplating the extremes of surrendering to life's challenges or fighting until the end. This internal struggle is symbolized by the contrasting choices of characters like Peeperkorn and Naphta, who choose suicide and those who continue to fight.

By the final chapters, Hans Castorp has undergone significant changes. From a young man who loves glamorous appearances and meticulous grooming, he transforms into someone with a small, straw-yellow beard, indicating his shift away from superficial concerns. His interests have broadened from visual arts to medicine, humanities, and social history. This change in perspective is evident in his newfound passion for Franz Schubert's piece "Der Lindenbaum," a composition about the journey of life and the struggle against challenges, symbolizing Hans's journey and growth.

Hans's stay at the sanatorium, initially due to a wet spot on his lungs, becomes prolonged due to his passionate love for Clawdia Chauchat and the intellectual and existential awakenings he experiences. His dialogues with Settembrini and Naphta about the meaning of life play a crucial role in his transformation, keeping him at the sanatorium for seven years.

The sanatorium plays a pivotal role in Hans Castorp's life, catalyzing profound changes in his character and worldview. Initially absorbed in leisure and superficial pursuits, Hans's extended stay at the Berghof sanatorium forces him to confront deeper existential questions about life, death, and his identity. This introspective journey leads him to greater intellectual and moral engagement, shifting from apathy to a more thoughtful and purposeful existence. The sanatorium is a crucible for Hans's personal growth, reflecting Mann's broader themes of

renewal and transformation against the backdrop of a society on the brink of monumental change. Through his experiences at the Berghof, Hans embodies the potential for personal and societal renewal, mirroring the shifts occurring in early 20th-century European society.

The International Sanatorium at the Mountain is not merely a physical location but a symbol of the internal and external conflicts Hans Castorp faces. The sanatorium is a transformative space where Hans undergoes a profound inquiry of self, grappling with life, death, and identity complexities. Mann's meticulous description of the setting and the diverse characters Hans interacts with provide a rich backdrop for exploring the protagonist's intellectual and moral evolution. This detailed examination of Hans's journey underscores the novel's exploration of social class tensions and the search for self amidst a rapidly changing world.

4. CONCLUSION

Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* meticulously explores bourgeois hypocrisy and egoistic behavior juxtaposed with the potential for spiritual elevation through self-inquiry, particularly in the face of death. The central character, Hans Castorp, symbolizes this theme of transformation, symbolizing life's temporality and fragility.

Hans Castorp's personal development is delineated into two distinct stages. Initially, Hans is portrayed as a young dandy who prefers leisure and maintains a fashionable appearance. His professional life is limited to a job that provides financial stability but lacks intrinsic passion, allowing him to sustain his indulgent lifestyle. During this phase, Hans's engagement with life is superficial, driven by a desire for comfort and aesthetic pleasure.

The second stage of Hans's development unfolds during his seven-year stay at the Mountain Sanatorium, marking a profound transformation in his character. Hans transitions from a state of health preoccupation and fear of death to a reflective and purpose-driven existence. He overcomes his habits of idleness and embraces a life of meaning and intellectual curiosity. His interests expand to include medicine, humanities, and social history, moving away from earlier superficial pursuits.

This metamorphosis is intricately tied to the novel's symbolic elements, such as the magic mountain and the Linden tree, which underscore the thematic depth of Hans's journey. Through Hans Castorp, Mann conveys a broader philosophical message about the essence of a meaningful life. Mann posits that a meaningful life involves personal growth, acceptance of

life's inherent challenges, and a willingness to make sacrifices for the greater good of the community.

Hans Castorp's evolution from superficial indulgence to profound introspection and purpose illustrates the potential for personal transformation. Mann emphasizes the importance of intellectual and moral engagement, resilience in the face of adversity, and a dedication to societal welfare. Through Hans's character, Mann provides a compelling narrative that explores the complexities of human existence and the pursuit of a significant life.

Thomas Mann's sharp critique of society and his vision for creative renewal beyond the decadence of the present are reflected through Hans Castorp. The positive changes in Hans represent Mann's evolving social thoughts and his aspirations for the intellectual generation in early 20th-century German society. In summary, "The Magic Mountain" offers a profound commentary on personal and societal renewal, underscoring the enduring relevance of Mann's work in understanding the human condition.

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