

# THE QUESTING YOUTH IN JAMES JOYCE AND THOMAS MANN

By Elaine Mingus

The Questor legend reaches far back in tradition and folklore, as in the Grail Legend. The seeker, the Questor, may journey into heaven and hell, and may try to come to terms with them.

As we consider the Questing Youth in the writings of Joyce and Thomas Mann, we will look at youths whose journey includes a quest. We will consider heroics and non-heroics, success and otherwise.

The lives of these two authors color their writing. Both Joyce and Mann published major novels in the 1920s. Both loved music and mythology; both were self-exiled from their native lands; and both had a strong religious background. But there are marked differences: Joyce's family had been "on the rocks" for quite a while, but Mann had more support from family; especially he had an older brother who was a successful writer. Mann clung to the standards of his bourgeois German background, conservative and conforming, while Joyce was more of a daring rebel from the start.

Thomas Mann's novel Buddenbrooks shows the success and fortune, then the decline and decadence of the Buddenbrook firm and family, of the bourgeois business aristocracy. It covers four generations but focuses mainly on the third generation: Thomas Buddenbrook, his siblings and his son Hanno. Since his sister Tony is "only a girl" and his younger brother Christian is not enterprising, the responsibility falls on Thomas to carry on with the firm. In contrast to Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, he keeps that silver spoon firmly between his teeth and also does everything required of him. He was a fine student (and conforming); makes a good marriage to increase Buddenbrook finances, and becomes a senator to enhance their status. He was loyal to the values of the merchant nobility. For instance, one must be honest but sometimes one can do "a wink and nod", if it helps win the day. Will and power were good, weakness bad. Music and art were - well, suspect.

Being a Buddenbrook meant the focus was on family rather than the individual. Thomas's wife Gerda happens to be a musician and he is exposed to the arts and philosophy just enough to realize that there is something terribly missing in his life, as a hard headed businessman. Here he can be likened to Gabriel Conroy in Joyce's "The Dead" in some ways: proud and successful, but suddenly realizes that he has little understanding about his life and about love. Thomas does not know what to do about this, he only knows that his spirit is not satisfied. His quest had been dedication to the family, but now that is not enough. His artificial and deliberate efforts sap his strength. The firm falls on hard times fast, partly because of outer circumstances and partly because his heart is not in it.

Thomas becomes obsessed with his clothing and grooming. When he dies, still fairly young, he falls on the street and is picked up with his immaculate clothing, even his white gloves, covered with mud and slush. The power of the Buddenbrooks ends with his death. But the real tragedy here, perhaps, is that Thomas does not question the group values that he no longer believes in, does not pursue the meaning in his life that he has glimpsed, and thus becomes a victim. His son Hanno, altogether an artist from the start, has no desire to restore the shaken fortunes of the family. In addition, he is sickly and dies of typhoid as a teenager.

Here we see in Mann's first novel the wide gap between art and life that continued in his stories, which has its origins in the bourgeois culture.

Mann's novel The Magic Mountain, which was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, take place in Berghof, a luxury TB sanatorium in Switzerland in the early 1900s. One is at times spellbound from the very start as the young engineer Hans Castorp rides in this slow train up this very steep mountain, leaving behind not only the flatland but its values, those of a workaday world, for isolation in this place amid snow and ice fields. Time and space seem not to matter here. His quest is to seek meaning that was not there for him down below, though he does not consciously realize this.

Hans comes here to visit a cousin but is himself diagnosed with TB and, although the diagnosis is doubtful, he stays *seven years*. He shrugs this off as, after all, what good care he gets! Doctors and nurses are at his beck and call, the best food is served here; also there is good conversation, with

Settembrini and Naptha and their philosophy. Hans steers between these two, the liberal and the rational, in his (I would say half-hearted) quest for knowledge. He also falls in love with Clavdia, a Russian girl there who is very ill, and their flirtation lasts for a long time. She finally goes home.

Hans loves music and plays the gramophone by the hour. His favorite song is Schuberts' "Linden Tree", a song of death. There is, then, the motif of death and decay in The Magic Mountain - a fascination with death.

In the "snow" chapter, Hans skis to wintry heights and spends hours in utter solitude where he has a sublime vision of love that conquers death, but he is soon back to the routine and into the old mental mist where all ideals seem to cancel each other out. Boredom takes over for him, even with music.

News of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War reaches the sanatorium and many readers find the end of The Magic Mountain too surprising and sudden, as Hans rushes to return to the flatland and join the German Army. One asks - is this the same character? The last pages show him on the battlefield in a war whose cause he does not understand, for almost certain death in the trenches. But the story must have an ending for Mann, and Hans *is* now the hero who will die for his country.

"Tonio Kroger" is Thomas Mann's character who is closest to Stephen Dedalus, in my opinion. In this story Tonio's quest seems to be to close the gap that he experiences between art and life. Like Stephen, he has an artistic temperament even as a small child; he feels "different" and, because of it, finally feels isolated from his bourgeois family and community. He hates school and writes poetry, which is frowned upon. But, different than Stephen, he feels that he *deserves* punishment for his bad grades or whatever, and wonders why he is as he is.

At the age of 14 he falls in love with another boy, his friend Hans, but his feelings are not returned. Then at 16 he falls in love with Ingeborg or Inge, a girl who rejects him, to his dismay. In part this is because she, as others, does not understand him being non-athletic, a clumsy dancer, and his talk of literature and poetry.

Finally Tonio travels south from his native Denmark to Munich and becomes a successful writer. But his relationships are short lived, or with prostitutes. He feels no more at home among the Bohemians than he did with the bourgeois back home, and here they see him as too formal. He has a sense of failure as a human being and feels that he is writing about life, not living it.

Tonio's artist friend Lisabeta, tells him that he is still bourgeois at heart, one who sneers at artists and writers, "a Bohemian with a bad conscience." Though he denies this, Tonio decides on a quest back north to his hometown to try and sort it all out. Back there, he soon sees this couple at a dance at his hotel and as they dance, they seem to him so much like Hans and Inge, the two he once loved. In this "moment of truth", he watches from a distance, still left out, cut off from human warmth, old feelings not resolved.

But here is another surprise ending as Tonio Kroger than writes a letter to Lisabeta saying that he is now content, reconciled to it all, and now accepts himself as a writer. To me, *this is not convincing*. His seeking for a bridge between life and art does not happen and I can imagine him still hating himself for being who he is. How different this is from Stephen Dedalus, who is still struggling at the end of his story.

In Joyce's Stephen Hero and A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man, we see at once that Stephen Dedalus does not fit the formula we find in Joseph Campbell, of the Hero Journey. But Stephen sticks to his ideals, aspirations and beliefs, in spite of circumstances and opposition, and his bad behavior. His quest is to create and he never loses sight of that as he rebels against his surroundings to try and become himself. Early on Stephen hears "Apologize, or the eagles will pull out his eyes." "When the soul of a man is born in this country", says Stephen later, "there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight."

It is "submit and admit" in this Jesuit School where he is later accused of heresy. It is pandybat morality and Dublin materiality. He is wounded where most vulnerable and reaching for the stars with idealism. He needs to save himself in this sordid tide of life, he thinks, since he cannot save others, most of all his family.

In the Catholic Church, Stephen first attempts conformity and is even offered the "good life" of the priesthood, but "the chill and order of their life" repels him." "He would fall". He declares "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe".

Stephen turns from the church and decides that art is a religion unto itself. No order and discipline for him, but error and possible glory. The girl in the stream is not a virgin or a whore, the two images of the female for him prior to this, but she is like a work of art. After this "vision" he feels a rebirth as an artist. "To recreate life out of life." But through art he *must* come to terms with the beast, with the down-dragging stuff of life. A sensitive introvert in proud isolation, he thinks of Cranley's common speech and of shop signs as "heaps of dead language". But they are the stuff of life, the material of art. Stephen is self-centered but that is perhaps what makes it possible for him to take the step into exile, the only answer for him.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man has no clear ending as far as action is concerned. But we do see here Stephen's determination of high endeavor. The whole book and his reaction to his struggles, leads up to it. Stephen says "I go to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." The quest of this idealistic and rebellious young artist has only begun.

We have a continuation of Stephen's story in Ulysses. His first trial at exile was not a success. "You were going to do wonders", he tells himself. He keeps on plodding to overcome his circumstances and become a successful writer, but falls into escapism and wild abandon at times. He has left his father's house "to seek *misfortune*" he says and is still in mourning for and haunted by his dead mother and her Catholic attachment which he refused to share, and has heavy guilt about: "agenbite of inwit". But his rejection of this is required before he can move on.

Stephen finds refuge in a Martello Tower with Buck Mulligan and English Haines, as Ulysses opens, but soon leaves there, calling them usurpers of his resources and chillers of his courage, as the English Throne has usurped so much of the Irish language and culture. He then leaves his teaching position and Mr. Deasy, the director at the school, saying that he is a "learner, rather". *These decisions were not easy!*

Stephen strolls on Sandymount Strand, seeking for answers, for meaning. But in spite of his lofty language here and his turning to philosophers for answers, at the end he is still in borrowed clothing and his situation is worsened if anything. There is also "love's bitter mystery". "Touch me", he sadly says.

We next find Stephen in the newspaper office where he is invited to become part of the gang there but refuses, tells his "Parable of the Plums" which is not understood by anybody, and winds up with them at the nearest pub. No satisfactory answers there.

Stephen then tries to cope with those literary successes in the library - doubters and mockers - his Scylla and Chrybdis - as best he can, at the same time grappling with questions about himself to himself. For instance the issue of fatherhood: I do not believe that Stephen is looking for a father here. His quest is rather seeking for his own fatherhood, which is being a creator. "When am I to father a work of art?" he asks himself. But immaturity must be burned out *and* he very much needs to kick the bad habits he has fallen into, having spent at least a week's pay today, and drinks until drunk.

During Stephen's fictional life here he does not reach those stars but he knows what his quest is and goes toward it, knows that it is "in here I must kill the priest and the king". The frightening thunder in the "Oxen of the Sun" chapter, shows that he still has that fear of the Divine. His freedom is in sight but he is not yet free. At the brothel he finally takes a step toward putting the ghost of his mother to rest as he strikes out at this terrible vision of her.

One comparison of Stephen with Mann's questing youths is that the process here is very slow, as it was for Joyce himself. There is no early success as with Thomas Buddenbrook.

Stephen and Leopold Bloom both benefit from their hours together. Only after meeting Bloom does Stephen begin to close the gap between his aspirations and reality. On one level they do unite "as wanderers like the stars at which they gaze". But it is a chance association, not a real father-son relationship, or even the beginning of one. Stephen is not Telemachus

who, with his father, slays the suitors and they all live happily ever after. But here Stephen walks off into the night to find his own Odyssey, perhaps to reforge experience in the smithy of his soul.

Shem in Joyce's Finnegans Wake is an extension of Stephen Dedalus and much more. His quest is the same - to create. But Shem *is* his art; he does not need any materials, he will "write on his own body with his own excrement"! Though his brother Shaun is opposite in disposition and they fight, Shem knows that Shaun the Post will deliver the letter to the world that Shem has written for his mother - that a hen has dug up from the midden heap (of the world's literature?) - and that they can get together and overthrow the father and take his place, to become another round in the great cycles of World Mythology.

Joseph Campbell says that in Joyce's Finnegan's Wake and in Thomas Mann's Joseph and His Brothers, both of them drop down deeply into the mythic. This to me is very true. But it seems that while Joseph, son of Jacob, can be untruthful, sly, manipulative, use his charm and wits for his own ends - whatever - and it is permissible, because his destiny is written by none other than God himself: whereas Shem the Penman, as well as Stephen Dedalus, sometimes has been likened to Lucifer the fallen.

Finally, although I greatly admire Thomas Mann, I think that James Joyce is the one who, with the most insight and realism, shows us the journey of the Questing Youth.

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