

CASTORP
by
Paweł Huelle



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Summary

The story is divided into twelve chapters and is told in the third person.

1. Despite his uncle's apprehensions about the place, 20-year-old Hans Castorp resolves to study shipbuilding in Danzig, and in autumn 1904 travels there from his native Hamburg by ship. He meets some unappealing, prejudiced fellow passengers (see first extract) and some inspiring crew members. He hears some patronising German attitudes to the Slavs who are native to his destination, and arguments that the local Poles may not be so happy to have German culture forced on them. His curiosity about the Poles is aroused.

2. Castorp thinks back to a childhood holiday on the Baltic coast when his parents were still alive. On arriving his first impressions of Danzig are positive. Instead of following the plans he has made, he accepts the breakfast invitation of Kiekiernix, the least unsympathetic of his fellow passengers, though a drinker, who shows him some of the city and predicts that war will come because of trouble from the unsettled east. Castorp, who is unworldly and thinks in a scientific, logical way, is surprised by Kiekiernix's predictions and negative view of Danzig and its inhabitants.

3. On the tram to his lodgings, Castorp's optimism gives way to irritation when the conductor tells him there is no stop where he wants to alight. Arriving at the villa where he will lodge, he is disconcerted by a maid who won't admit him in her mistress' absence. Forced to wander the area until her return, he walks past a barracks where he sees a soldier berated by an officer. Another onlooker makes an obscene remark; Castorp feels disoriented by the unpredictable atmosphere. When he returns to his lodgings, the owner, Frau Wybe, is back and explains that her maid has made a mistake. The voluble widow shows him his room and settles him in, though he finds her company stifling. Already he feels the provinciality and oddness of Danzig compared with the grander environment of Hamburg.

4. Castorp lunches with his hostess and notices that the maid seems to have the upper hand over her. He avoids getting trapped into regular dinners with Frau Wybe and does not get involved in her problems with the maid, despite her efforts to seek his help. Feeling agitated, he heads for the polytechnic and meets the same conductor on the tram, who further unsettles him by bearing an uncanny resemblance to the stranger at the barracks. Trivial, but unnerving events keep conspiring to disturb his equilibrium. After registering at the polytechnic, Castorp goes to a noisy student drinking place and befriends Baron von Kotwitz, a rowdy aristocrat, and also meets the earnest Willy Stockhausen who tries to recruit him for a hearty rambler's club. Rather than belong to any group, Castorp leaves and goes home hungry and anxious, thinking he is being followed in the fog by the same strange man he saw in the street. Forced to wake the rude maid to let him in, he regrets not sticking to his original plan at the start of the day and resolves to be more disciplined from now on.

5. Nicknamed 'Practical' by his fellow students, Castorp is studious and keeps to regular habits, avoiding social activities in favour of his work. Frau Wybe is disappointed by his refusal to keep her company on Sundays, when he prefers to go for walks alone. He enjoys exploring Danzig and plans to visit various sites. His routine is disturbed when he runs out of his favourite cigars; despite a long search he cannot find them in any shop. On Saturday he runs into von Kotwitz, who suggests a shop in the spa resort of Zoppot, just

north of Danzig. He goes there by boat, enjoys the atmosphere, buys his cigars and celebrates with a drink at the Kurhaus café.

6. He overhears a couple talking accented French at the next table (see second extract) and imagines them to be Russians. He finds the man off-putting, but the young woman intriguing. He walks along the coast, feeling anxious and remembering his mother's death. A latent melancholy seems to have awoken in him. That night his sleep is disturbed, but next morning he cannot make sense of the dreams about his childhood and the mystery girl. Forgetting to take a map on his Sunday outing, he finds himself drawn to Zoppot again, and goes there by train (see third extract). Reading another passenger's newspaper, he learns about a hideous local murder committed by a Pole; the passenger reprimands him and warns him about Poles and liberals. Castorp realises he has come in the hope of seeing the couple again, and wanders about the resort, a sad place at the end of its season. Suddenly he sees them, follows them to a hotel entrance where the man gives the woman a parcel and they part; Castorp follows her inside and almost accidentally picks up her parcel from the hotel reception desk while she is waiting for her key. Castorp follows the man to a different hotel. He feels depressed and resolves to forget the whole matter, but keeps the parcel – clearly a book – in his drawer at home, intending to post it back to the girl.

7. Castorp spends more time with other students including von Kotwitz; though superficially involved, his thoughts often drift. He falls asleep on the tram and has strange dreams of his relatives, of mountains and of the mystery woman again. The same forbidding conductor wakes him at the end of the line, and as he walks back he is still thinking of the woman, but rejects the illogical thought that he must have known her in a previous life. Worried that he is suffering from a nervous debility, Castorp refuses to join Frau Wybe for the anniversary of her husband's death; hearing her laughing and chatting with the maid and even teaching her to play the piano, he looks forward to telling his cousin about this eccentric household. Meanwhile he opens the stranger's parcel and finds a copy of Fontane's *Effi Briest*, a book he thought dull. But now it absorbs him, and he realises that he has fallen in love with the girl. He reckons the mystery couple are illicit lovers, and wonders, if both are Russian, why they converse in French.

8. Castorp goes to see Dr Ankewitz, a psychiatrist who has come here as a fugitive from the Russian partition of Poland. Castorp explains that his sleep and concentration are disturbed, and wants a sleeping pill. The doctor encourages him to unburden himself of whatever may be bothering him; though not eager for analysis, Castorp tells him all about his infatuation with the stranger, his nightmares and his lack of motivation, so strong that he did not even go home for the Christmas holidays. His efforts to rationalise his feelings have failed. He describes being taken by von Kotwitz to a bizarre New Year's orgy that challenged his innocence and sensitivity, and where he caught a glimpse of the same girl but lost her from sight (see fourth extract). Walking along a frozen river at sunrise, he was overwhelmed by a sense of melancholy that has not left him since; he feels haunted and his regular way of life has broken down.

9. On the doctor's advice he goes to Zoppot for a course of treatment involving bathing and electricity. At the baths he overhears the comical arguments of an odd couple, a thin Englishman and a fat German, who debate the nature of German culture and politics. Castorp follows the doctor's instructions, but also hires a detective called Tischler to find out more about the mystery girl. Tischler mentions that the Russian empire is beset by unrest and could erupt at any moment, even leading to war. Castorp feels well enough to go home to Hamburg for the spring vacation, but before leaving he learns from Tischler that the

woman is a 29-year-old Pole named Wanda Pilecka, and that her companion is a 30-year-old Russian officer named Davidoff.

10. Castorp continues to visit Zoppot after completing his course of treatment, enjoying the restful spa life. He is a less disciplined student nowadays, but can concentrate and work well again. He learns from Tischler that Wanda Pilecka is a well-off landowner from the east of Poland, and that Davidoff was in Zoppot under an assumed name. To follow the doctor's advice about exercise, Castorp buys a bicycle and tours the area, getting to know it well. One day he encounters Willy Stockhausen and his ramblers who insist that he join them at the campfire for soup. Castorp disagrees with Willy's pretentious idea that liking fresh air and pleasing yourself is a "philosophy". Castorp manages to get away, but the ramblers' soup makes him ill, and he lies down to recover; by a strange coincidence he overhears a couple picnicking – two of the disapproving passengers from the ship, who are clearly now involved in a furtive romance. Back at home, Frau Wybe tells him that Pudrowski, the murderer, has been condemned to death, and that there is unrest in the Russian empire. A letter from Tischler tells him that Wanda Pilecka has rented a room in Zoppot for the summer and will arrive soon. Castorp posts the book to her hotel, but is kept awake by the sound of heavy footsteps in the house – his rational mind dismisses the idea of ghosts.

11. Castorp learns that Tischler has been questioned about his interest in Davidoff by a policeman, who has warned him to back off. Castorp decides to spend the summer holidays in Danzig, where his studies are going well. He makes daily trips to Zoppot where he enjoys sea bathing, good food and fresh air and eats at Wanda Pilecka's hotel, but she doesn't arrive on time. When she does, Castorp thinks of approaching her but contents himself with worshipping her from a distance. Finally he manages to book the hotel room next to hers for a fortnight, happy to think he will be near her. He continues to lead the typical restful life of a spa guest, watching Wanda Pilecka but avoiding contact beyond polite bows and a very brief exchange at a tourist group outing when she asks if he is a theology student. Knowing that she is waiting for Davidoff to arrive, Castorp imagines their affair to be complicated and wonders what issues come between them as a Pole and a representative of Poland's oppressor. He wonders why the Slav races are not more united. He offers Wanda Pilecka deliberate signs, appearing on the terrace with his own copy of Effi Briest; she clearly notices but doesn't approach him. One day she seems to be heading his way, but passes him by to greet the newly arrived Davidoff.

12. Castorp is pleased to see Wanda's joy at meeting her lover, who has rented a coastal villa. Castorp often follows them discreetly and knows when she has gone to spend the night with Davidoff. Finally he thinks he should leave and tries to write her a letter explaining all, but changes his mind and stays. Next morning he is questioned by two police detectives who tell him that Davidoff has been shot dead at his villa. They ask why Castorp is interested in Wanda Pilecka and whether she spent the previous night in her hotel room. He lies and says he heard her in there, but doesn't know if he is helping or harming her. Sure she is not the murderer, he goes to her room, finds her there and offers his help. She tells him the police know she is innocent. However, they do not that she was hiding in the bathroom when the attackers broke in. Castorp's lie has helped her, because if the police were aware of her presence at the time of the murder, as a Pole she would be detained. She admits that she and her lover were aware of Castorp and his infatuation, and often talked about him. She confirms that it was her he saw at the New Year's party. Finally she kisses him on the brow and he leaves feeling confused.

Castorp returns to Hamburg for the rest of the holiday but resumes his studies in October. He is different now, more self-contained and absorbed in his work, but still misses Wanda Pilecka. He becomes interested in Schopenhauer (a famous son of Danzig) and feels an affinity with the philosopher, whose writing brings him consolation. He goes to look for the big house where the orgy took place but it seems to have disappeared. This time, as he stands on the frozen river, he feels a strong urge to live and enjoy life. His studies over, he returns to Hamburg, where he later learns from a newspaper that Frau Wybe and her maid have been convicted of poisoning her husband. In the final paragraph the author directly addresses Hans Castorp, imagining him cycling along the main avenue in Danzig/Gdansk today, when Polish is the only language to be heard there.

Assessment

This novel reads extremely well, retaining the reader's attention throughout. The period atmosphere is very well evoked by a wealth of historical detail as well as by the style. It has a lightness of touch that keeps the story moving, even though the events that happen are often apparently small and incidental.

The author successfully creates a rather sinister atmosphere by contrasting his hero's rational and rather immature nature with the inexplicable events that he keeps encountering – crimes without apparent motive in the newspapers, unreliable people who have secrets and behave unpredictably, strangers who seem to haunt him, and bizarre coincidences. While the unrest that is just below the surface in partitioned Poland unsettles him, it is love that disturbs him the most, stirring up new emotions that he cannot rationalise.

This book could belong to a number of genres: rites of passage as a young man falls in love for the first time; romantic thriller, as he tries to unravel the mystery of his beloved amid bizarre events; or historical novel of manners, presenting the society of turn-of-the-century Danzig and the sense of a storm brewing as Europe headed for war. It is often funny, featuring some comical caricatures, such as the passengers on the ship, Frau Wybe and the debating couple at the baths. It is full of details of the setting (all of which are genuine) and the era (its society and politics, spa life, the prejudicial attitudes of empires to their colonies). This makes it varied and rich, but it never feels cluttered.

Although the book stands alone as a novel, it has firm ties to Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, and for those in the know, is full of references to Mann's writing. Apart from borrowing the character of Hans Castorp, it mentions some other characters who appear in *The Magic Mountain* (Castorp's uncle and cousin) and hints at what is to come in Castorp's life, both through his obsession with Wanda Pilecka – which clearly paves the way for his love for the Russian woman, Klavdia Chauchat, and through details, such as his nightmares about bobsleighs carrying corpses down mountains, and other images that are derived from *The Magic Mountain*.

Intrigued by how their nation was perceived by the west, Polish intellectuals are fascinated by *The Magic Mountain* and Mann's other characterisations of Germans coming in contact with Slavs (such as Aschenbach's obsession with the beautiful Polish boy, Tadzio, in *Death in Venice*). In Mann, Slavs often introduce an erotic, troubling element and act as a contrast to the sober, predictable German nature. Mann apparently portrayed Slavs in general as representatives of an unfamiliar, threatening influence from the east – the source of the troubles that would wrack Europe and destroy its empires in the twentieth century. Polish readers also enjoy *The Magic Mountain* for its political debate, arguing between what was ultimately fascism and the liberalism that would engender communism.

So for lovers of Mann, this novel has another fascinating dimension. However, this book is more concerned with themes that though typical for Mann (whose stories are often about a carefully structured way of life being unexpectedly threatened by sexual passion) are universal and can be enjoyed by any reader.