

Klaus Mann as a Novelist: Human Relations and the Community in Klaus Mann's Novels

SELIM SIMSEK

MA Student

Department of German Language of Literature

Sakarya University, Sakarya

Turkey

Abstract:

*The topic of this study is to focus on three novels written by Klaus Mann (1906 – 1949) and analyze them in terms of relationships between characters and the social life depicted in these novels. Klaus Mann, oldest son of well-known writer Thomas Mann, was born into a family which was surrounded by prominent writers, notable intellectuals and artists of his time. Having witnessed the inter-war period (interbellum) in Europe, Klaus Mann gained a great sight into the social changes and defects in moral values of the time. Although he showed a scant interest in transformation of community at first, this has tended to change drastically with the threatening rise of fascism and so the Nazis at the end. Although being prolific in other areas of writing, his notable literary successes are his novels, which vividly demonstrate the interaction between characters and changing lives of them in a world that seems to bring about sorrow and grief to people. Thorough his novels, it is possible to learn about socio-economic and socio-cultural background of Europe, especially about Germany's changing face. Therefore, we will try to discuss and study three novels of him including *Treffpunkt im Unendlichen* (Rendezvous in Eternity), *Flucht in den Norden* (Journey into Freedom) and *Der Vulkan* (Volcano), all of which present an explanatory perspective to the reader about his novel writing and the themes preferred to use in his novels.*

Key words: Klaus Mann, novel study, Europe, human relations, interwar period, community

Introduction

Klaus Thomas Heinrich Mann was born in 1906 as a son of famous writer Thomas Mann and Katia Pringsheim. During his career, he was a prolific and versatile writer. His works range from theater plays to novels, from essays and book reviews to articles. Although he is evaluated sufficient in all these varying fields of writing, the essence of his literary works is mainly based on his novels. These novels have more contemporary themes and settings compared to the novels of his time (Choubey 2010). Having no fear of being condemned and scolded by the community and literature circles, he always wrote his novels courageously, which was not usual in his time because of the going on literary taboos. By the way, he takes advantage of the relatively liberal approaches of the Weimar Republic, which tried to render welfare in society and forbid censorship in writing.

He deals with the issue of drug, homosexual love between young people and Nazi Germany, which compose the reality of the 1920s and the 1930s. Although the plots of his novel show deficiencies, he compensates this lacking part of his writing by creating intense and deep characters who generally have problems regarding their political and moral differences to society.

Klaus Mann had seemingly the disadvantage of being scion of a literary giant, Thomas Mann. Even though he grew up in the great atmosphere of family home in which important faces of literature and significant intellectuals of that time often showed up, he continuously thought that the superiority of his father's name overshadowed his abilities in literature and prevented him from reaching to his real readers.

Aside from novels, he also published two autobiographies. First of them, *Kind dieser Zeit* (Kid of the Time) was released when he was only 25 years old. Other one, originally released in United States in the year of 1942 under the name of *The Turning Point*, was published as *Der Wendepunkt: Ein Lebensbericht* in Germany.

His first autobiography took miscellaneous reviews from literary circles. This attempt to publish an autobiography when he was still too young and inexperienced to do so, was criticized harshly by prominent writer and journalist of Weimar Republic, Kurt Tucholsky. In this book he mainly focuses on his childhood memories and tells the events of a period which covers the WW1, his boarding school experiences and great inflation era of Germany which is thought to be one of the apparent reasons of Nazi rise in this country.

The second autobiography of him, published 10 years later than the first one, was written when he was in exile in United State and deals generally with his exile experiences and other intellectuals from Germany who abandoned their country voluntarily or renounced from citizenship. With this aspect, it draws a panorama of writers and intellectuals of Germany's *persona non gratae* during Nazi regime.

On the other side, Mann's other writings including the diaries of him are important in term of understanding his mindset and attitude towards literature. His early works and theater acting seem to have affected his career planning. Seeing his inability in acting, he gave it up and began to put more emphasize on novel writing.

Klaus Mann had written eight novels till his suicide, one of which stayed only as a draft and therefore not released. As Clare Choubey indicates (Choubey 2010), Mann's four novels stand out: *Treffpunkt Im Unedlichen* (Rendezvous in Eternity), *Flucht in den Norden* (Journey into Freedom), *Mephisto* and *Der Vulkan* (The Volcano)

All these novels are of importance in terms of gaining a great insight into socio-economic situation not only in Germany but also in Europe. Through the characters, he manages to reflect the reader the ongoing situation within the society and state of people's mind living in it. In this study, I will approach three of them focusing strongly on the characters, interactions between them and the world created by the writer.

The Characters and Relationship between Them

Generally speaking, novels of Klaus Mann develop a more political voice as they are consecutively evaluated. (Choubey 2010) In *Treffpunkt im Unendlichen*, an active involvement of main characters into social issues is hard to trace. However, peripheral characters seem to have inclination to learn the real life and get involved in social and political activities.

This novel, as well as the other ones, is actually based on writer's own life experiences. It is beyond doubt that a writer always gets affected by the events he or she has experienced over the course of his/her life, and Klaus Mann is a writer who featured true life experiences in his novels. As we learn from Mann's autobiography, though not completely at all, he was indifferent to what was going around him, liked it a lot to demonstrate misbehavior against people with his close friends. Spending time at inappropriate place for their age like cabarets and night clubs had become gratification for him and his sister (Mann 2006,160), which resulted in being sent to boarding school to get disciplined. This novel, as written in opening sentence, portrays a time period from the beginning of 30s. This interbellum period (interwar period) was a time that embodies great contradictions and paradoxes. That is to say, while millions of people around the world were suffering from poverty relating to post-war period's high unemployment rates, some people turned it into an advantage and had more pleasant and comfortable life. It was partly due to a short-lived welfare time

called "Golden Twenties" which flourished in the United State at first and was delayed showing up in Europe because of continuing crisis on the continent. (Harman 2002, 465)

Treffpunkt im Unendlichen has a number of characters but Sonja, Sebastian, Gregor Gregori and Dr. Massis seem to be given more important roles in fiction. On the eve of great events of 30s, a group of people who generally gather around leading characters like Sebastian and Sonja endeavor to find meaning in their life through their relationships with others. Living conditions and mindset of the environment that change rapidly seem to regulate these relations and interactions between them.

Feeling unsafe about the world and so insecure of the future, we observe that people tend to use their relationship for their own interest. It is because they lose the affinity and sympathy towards each other very rapidly. This leads obviously to a kind of insincerity among them, excluding the relationship between Sonja and Sebastian which is deliberately postponed until the end of the novel. The affiliation between characters shown to the reader is considered by Clare Choubey as follows:

They view relationships with each other as a way of validating their existence, and making sense of the world, in particular searching for the intensity of being and cognition felt by becoming united with another person. This need to find a comforting compensatory relationship manifests itself in constellations where characters use and manipulate those closest to them, in order to gain power, self-gratification, even money. (Choubey 2010, 19)

As young writer and journalist Sebastian and Sonja, who tries her luck in Berlin, attract nearly everyone's interest upon themselves and are of central concern of writer in the novel. Even though they get to know each other at the end of the novel, Mann alluded to the reader from the very beginning that they have the similar philosophy of life and same concerns regarding world affairs. Sebastian evaluates his relationship

with Sonja as a new start to life and motivation to write books. He also asserts that he now has power to move mountains. (Mann 2005, 223)

Sonja also is indeed happy with Sebastian. After having unsuccessful relationships with three other men throughout the novel, she finally finds her soul mate, Sebastian. The reason why she breaks up with other men and leave them behind may be traced back to the degenerating nature of affiliation between people. These men, as mentioned before, want to marry to her by reason of gaining power and self-confidence over someone else.

Apart from Sebastian and Sonja, who demonstrate the bright side of characters, there are a couple of figures that are motivated only to take control of weak people around them. Dr. Massis, an independent scholar, is interested in conducting psychological experiments on people, especially on the young. Giving them opium, he pursues how they will change themselves in the future. Beside him, Gregor Gregori¹, a young and ambitious dancer, is another example for us to see the importance of getting a higher position in society. Having started his career as a simple dancer, he, then changes his mind suddenly, and questions the function of art in society which ends up in breaking up with Sebastian. As he gets more successful in his dancing career, he becomes more indifferent to other people around him, even to Sonja, with whom he wants to get married. This inclination to power carries him to a better position; he opens up his own theater and offers a job to Dr. Massis as an art consultant and propaganda chief. So the two dark figures get power and rise to eminences of newly flourishing regime of Germany.

In contrast to *Treffpunkt im Unendlichen*, *Flucht in den Norden* (*Journey into Freedom*) has a more political voice. Johanna, who appears as the leading character of the novel, is a

¹The figure of Gregor Gregori can be evaluated as a forerunner of Hendrik Höfgen from his later novel *Mephisto* (1936).

young German girl engaged in political affairs and therefore chased secretly by the government. Her political activities alongside the communists are surely not approved by the Nazi regime, which have already consolidated its position in Germany.

Just like his other novels, this one is also based on life experience of the writer. Klaus Mann leaves Germany on 13th May of 1933 and goes into exile.(Mann 2012, 392) His first destination becomes France and then he chooses to go to United States. The novel *Flucht in den Norden* is based on real life experiences of that time. Just before going into exile, Mann takes a trip to Finland, where he finds inspiration to write this novel. (Mann 2012, 457)

Flucht in den Norden is a novel, which tells a love story between Johanna and Ragnar but it also necessarily depicts the hardship of exile and lets the reader feel what potential outcomes of a repressive regime may bring for people. The plot is a precursor of writer's own destiny itself.

Johanna, who is watched by the government, once detained and released after a short while, is recommended by many to leave Germany at once. Just because of this, she leaves Germany with the help of a forged passport and goes to her Friend's Karin home, with whom she made friend while Karin was studying in Germany.

In this northern country, which may be alleged to be Finland, she knows Ragnar. As being the oldest son of family, he is responsible of running family business after his father's sudden death. He is not seen as a skilled man by his family members at managing the wood selling business, which leads to unease and discomfort in the family, especially between Ragnar and his mother.

Although the novel focuses on the relationship between Johanna and Ragnar, so on a love between them to a large extent, we observe that it doesn't constrain expressing political message and changing views of Mann's on the ongoing events in

Germany. In other word, he suggests a more direct and impressive involvement in social events over Johanna because Johanna comes face to face to make a decision between her love and realities of life. A moral paradox of staying with Ragnar in a world of peace and of finalizing her unfulfilled duty in her country against boosting fascism create a kind of challenge for her, which is really very hard to deal with.

At the end, reality prevail against emotions and she makes her mind to leave Ragnar and risking her life, she devotes herself to the unfinished duty of fighting against enemies, who have already had the ultimate power in Germany. Therefore, the love affair between Johanna and Ragnar comes to an end this short-lived love becomes the victim of time in spite of showing a great prospect to thrive.

Der Vulkan. Roman Unter Emigranten (The Volcano) was published in 1939 and with this novel he tells the history emigrants. Like *Treffpunkt im Unendlichen*, this novel has a great number of characters and thorough them he shows the world how cruel and dangerous it could be living under the management of Nazis for people who criticize and reject over-nationalist and fascist ideas.

Unlike other relations in his former novels, human relations in *Der Vulkan* have more sign of life and prospect. Although there is an abundant number of characters who have also prominent importance in the plot the leading figure of the novel is Marion. Most of the relations between characters are intensively influenced by the events of the time. It is clearly observed from Marion's own experiences, who appears to be the most politically-engaged character throughout the novel.

The World and Community Depicted in the Novels

These three novels are of great importance regarding the grasp of era which contains interwar period in Europa. Having been a member of that society himself, Mann describes in *Treffpunkt*

im Unendlichen the Bohème life, which was then a product of post-war period in some part of United States and Europa. On the background, it is emphasized that the community is suffering from unemployment; four millions of unemployed men are on the verge of starvation while some have the privilege to enjoy their lives.

This situation definitely causes a breakdown of moral values of society and lets anxiety spread throughout the people. As a matter of fact, human relations, which develop under such kind of effects of amorality are more prone to be insincere. On the other hand, the rising of Nazis creates concerns for those who have different origins and political inclinations. Oppressing some group of people indicating that they are actually not a part of the land alienate them and make them also outsiders who develop themselves a feeling of inferiority. Because of that, being unsure of the future and obscurity have great impact on some groups in the society.

The scene of *Flucht in den Norden* is different than that of *Treffpunkt in Unendlichen*. Johanna leaves Germany at the very beginning of the novel, realizing that it is high time that she escaped not to get tortured and even murdered because of her political engagements. Mann touches on the theme of exile in this novel. The concerns, fear and anxiety of the people which we read in the former novel comes to be true. Germany is from now on is not a safe place for people who are disagree with the Nazis and out of step with the mainstream of them.

Meanwhile, we conclude from the novel that the Nazis regime receives various reactions from people outside Germany. While Ragnar has a great antipathy against Germany and its constitutions, Jens, his younger brother seems to support the new flourishing idea of fascism within the borders of Europe.

Klaus Mann, who left Germany in 1933 had at first believed that the Nazis and so Adolf Hitler's management would last only for a while and just like former Weimar chancellors Hitler would lose power sooner or later. (Hauck

1997, 50) However, this turned out to be a delusive and groundless approach to the problems of those days. Instead of losing power and dignity, they became so aggressive and so oppressive that many intellectuals, including prominent doctors, writers, and artists who felt themselves forced to flee Germany, abandoned the country leaving all their belongings behind them.

Mann, unlike his father Thomas Mann, felt himself responsible of taking action against Hitler and his nationalist attitudes. He, after leaving Germany to go into exile, raised his voice against injustice, became a favorite intellectual among the exile society living in United States. He shares his emigration (exile) experiences in his novel called *Der Vulkan. (The Volcano)* Der Vulkan is mainly based on the exile/emigration experiences of people and their struggle against their enemies who threaten the peace not only in Germany but also all over the world. Choubey describes the general situation of figures in the novel as follows:

Though the reader is given the hope that love can survive the adverse circumstances within which the émigré live, the reality is that day-to-day existence is too hard for some of the gentler people to survive: Tilly commits suicide, Martin becomes a heroin addict, and evades all attempts to help him free himself from addiction, eventually succumbing to pneumonia at the age of twenty –eight. (Choubey 2010)

Conclusion

In his book *Thomas Mann and Seinen*, Marcel Reich-Ranicki writes that Klaus Mann was three times struck; he had a different sexual orientation, he was addicted and was the scion of Thomas Mann (Reich Ranicki 2011, 326). Moreover, he had developed a more political point of view over the years. All of these mentioned factors had been determining for his art and authorship.

Although all of them have seemingly a great and negative impact on him, he managed to prove that he was a good writer with a common sense. Thus, he became the voice of the youth and anti-nationalists when he was in exile in the United States.

Treffpunkt im Unendlichen was the least political novel we have discussed in this paper but over the peripheral figures it is implicated that the danger is at the gate. *Flucht in den Norden's* voice seems to be more political and cautionary and lastly *Der Vulkan* shows that how the fears and concern of the people come to be true.

We observe simply in all these three novels how human relations are related to the conditions of the time and worldview of ordinary people are shaped according to them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Choubey, Clare. 2010. *Künstler dieser Zeit: Klaus Mann's Novel of the 1930s*. PhD diss., University College, London.
- Ford, Alison. 1999. *Klaus Mann and the Weimar Republic: Literary Tradition and Experimentation in his prose, 1924-1933*. PhD. diss. University of Nottingham.
- Harman, Chris. 2002. *A People's History of the World*. London: Bookmarks Publications Ltd.
- Hauck, Gerald Gunter. 1997. *Reluctant Immigrants: Klaus Mann and Erika Mann in American Exile, 1936-1945*. PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin.
- Mann, Klaus. 2006. *Çağının Çocuğu*. Translated by Nafer Ermiş. Istanbul: Onk Ajans Turkuvaz Yayıncılık A.S.
- Mann, Klaus. 2007. *Treffpunkt im Unendlichen*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Mann, Klaus. 2010. *Kind Dieser Zeit*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag.

Mann, Klaus. 2012. *Flucht in den Norden*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag.

Mann, Klaus. 2012. *Der Wendepunkt: Ein Lebensbericht*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag.

Naumann, Uwe. 2006. *Klaus Mann*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag.

Reich-Ranicki, Marcel. 2011. *Thomas Mann and die Seinen*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.