

INTRODUCTION

The Black Swan is a disturbing little work. Frequently misunderstood by shocked male critics when it was first published in the United States in 1954, Mann's tightly written novella juxtaposes passages of lyrical intensity and quaint period dialogue with stark gynecological descriptions. Today, nearly four decades later, Mann's subject warrants the serious consideration which a pre-feminist reading public tended to deny it. This subject matter is the relation of a woman's sexuality to self-deception, illness, and death. The experienced novelist, aged eighty, writes directly about a woman's carnal desire and her terror of aging, about menopause and uterine cancer. The plot is simple, the tragic denouement comes fast; but a metaphoric intricacy lies below the story's surface like the veins and arteries of the female body that is Mann's focus.

During the past twenty years, we have become sensitive to the idea of an evolving feminization of culture. Yet as early as *Lotte in Weimar* (1939) and again in *The Black Swan* (first published in German as *Die Betrogene*, or *The Deceived One*), Mann was exploring the difference women's voices make in fictional narration. In 1901, as a young man writing to his brother, the novelist Heinrich, Thomas honored "the womanly ideals in culture and art. . . . It must appear likely that women, as artists, promise the most extraordinary and interesting things, yes, that one day they will become the leaders and greatest artists among us." *The Black Swan's* central character, the attractive widow Rosalie Van Tümmeler, embodies a traditional womanly ideal that Mann treats with both affection and irony. In contrast, Rosalie's daughter, Anna, the "cubistically mathematical" painter and intellectual, exemplifies a modernist rebellion from that ideal which foreshadows elements of radical feminism. Anna disdains "mere imitation of nature," while Rosalie immerses herself in the myth of nature's blessing and beauty and in the idea of women's special closeness to the organic world, with its "God-ordained and sacred pain

of childbirth.” Mann’s famous interest in the dialectic between opposite human propensities, the natural and the artistic, is played out through the mother-daughter relationship in dialogue whose stilted quality suggests ideological as well as generational tension. While the daughter cultivates self-reservation, the mother hurries into love. The widow’s name is derived from the German word *tümmeln*, to play or hurry; and Rosalie Von Tümmeler, with her desire for sexual pleasure and her adoration of what Mann ironically apotheosizes as “Nature,” both plays and hurries to her end.

Unlike Mann’s epically proportioned man-centered works, from *Buddenbrooks* and *Death in Venice* through *Joseph and His Brothers* to the complex *Doctor Faustus*, *The Black Swan* is woman-centered and bare-boned. It describes Rosalie’s domestic life in Düsseldorf, where she lives with her grown daughter and teenaged son. More concisely than ever before, Mann explores themes that occupied him all his life: nature’s deception of its creatures, the link between love and death, the dialogue between persons with different visions of life, the erotic longings of the middle-aged. Two of these themes make

their appearance on the novella's first page: the reference to loss of life as "something perfectly senseless" and the allusion to "superabundant [sexual] vitality." The relation of mother and daughter, "affectionate and confidential," is based on the experience of passion each has felt for a man's physical beauty. While the twenty-nine-year-old Anna, club-footed and quick-witted, has detached herself from this passion, Rosalie indulges it. The major theme, which will remind some readers of *Death in Venice*, appears when Rosalie, after lamenting the extinction of her menstrual cycle at age fifty, falls in love with her son's tutor. Ken Keaton, a young American more than twenty years Rosalie's junior, is handsome and uncomplicated. But he is also sophisticated enough to respond energetically to the "lax" mores of 1920s Weimar culture and to the passionate widow. Anna warns Rosalie against love's madness, but Rosalie's desire for Ken develops. Kind-hearted and capable of shame, Rosalie suffers until the moment that "Nature" seems to reward her erotic longings by restoring "her physical womanhood." The middle-aged woman bleeds with joy. Her heart is

“swollen with happiness,” and she imagines a “transformation of the indestructible youth of [her] heart into an organic phenomenon.” Rosalie’s sensations may be familiar enough to some readers: “I am a woman again, a whole human being again, a functioning female, I can feel worthy of the youthful manhood that has bewitched me, and no longer need lower my eyes before it with a feeling of impotence.”

Longing for consummation, Rosalie arranges a holiday journey with her children and Ken to Holterhof Castle. There she feeds the famous black swans of the novella’s title and declares her love to Ken in the castle’s secret rooms. Symbols of darkness enter the story through the mouldy, death-smelling passageway where Rosalie and Ken kiss. Mann’s imagery suggests the secret canals of the human body, vulnerable to decay and disease. The demonic hiss of a black swan signals to Rosalie the meaning she believes she has escaped.

“How beautiful they are! Anna, do you recognize them? How majestically they carry their necks! Where is the bread for them?” Keaton pulled it out

of his pocket, wrapped in newspaper, and handed it to her. It was warm from his body, and she took some of the bread and began to eat it.

“But it’s stale and hard,” he cried, with a gesture that came too late to stop her.

“I have good teeth,” she answered.

One of the swans, however, pushing close against the bank, spread its dark wings and beat the air with them, stretching out its neck and hissing angrily up at her.

In this passage, as in others of ironic intensity that mark Mann’s style, nature is conceived as a demonic force that mocks human hope. The caught gesture—an older woman stuffing bread warm from a young man’s body into her mouth—speaks volumes. When Rosalie discovers the meaning of her “blessed” blood flow, undergoes an operation for cancer, and awakes in hospital from a “post-narcotic sleep”—she, like the reader, experiences a chilling mystery. “He hissed at me,” she tells Anna. In the moment before her death, Rosalie no longer refers simply to the black swan, but to the betraying serpent of nature’s Eden.

Through the power of the swan as an ancient and

complex symbol, Mann hints to us in this novella that he was writing his own swan-song; he was preparing for his own death, which would come in 1955. Mann's use of the swan's hermaphroditic image, with its long, phallic neck yet rounded, female body, also suggests his own erotic experience—his identity as a husband and father complicated by his homoerotic relationship with Paul Ehrenberg. No doubt Mann was able, as in *Death in Venice*, to feel the seductive powers of the beautiful male body as Rosalie felt them. The sources of *The Black Swan* are Mann's experience of love for both sexes and his sensitivity to the connection of our organic to our emotional lives.

An earlier generation of readers, with the exception of Carlos Baker,¹ evaded the novella's poignant and thought-provoking subject. Some described it as a minor or trivial work, some few found it "disgusting," and others read it allegorically. Considering the plot an "echo of Mann's reaction to the United States after the war ended," Henry Hatfield

¹ See Carlos Baker's review in *The Nation* 178 (June 19, 1954): 526.

more recently found in the widow Rosalie's deeply sexual attraction to the young American Ken Keaton an allegory of "Mother Europe's infatuation with young America." *The Black Swan* indicated that "Marshall Plans will fail and Fulbright Programs are futile," that "Europe is dying; callow America is none too healthy." Hatfield's 1979 interpretation, which enabled him to express his own political views, forced him to find the novella "dangerously close to being thoroughly bad."² But Mann was not writing allegory; he was writing about the embodied feelings of a sexually alive woman. Mann's well-known American critic and translator either could not recognize that subject or did not believe it was worth considering.

If there is a political dimension to the novella in Mann's terms, it has more to do with the deceptively calm period of pre-Nazi Germany—the year 1925, when Rosalie experiences menopause and Hitler publishes the first volume of *Mein Kampf*—than it does with Mann's feelings about America in the 1950s. Mann was often irreverent politically, but in

² Henry Hatfield, *From the Magic Mountain: Mann's Later Masterpieces* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), 205–6.

The Black Swan he was irreverent in terms of sexual politics. The cool technology of Mann's female body language, his stark references to sexual organs, irritated his critics. What many of Mann's prurient American readers missed was the power of his ironic depiction of human longing, to *Sehnsucht*—his favorite word; and his capacity to take the longings of women seriously.

The story thus reaches back to early memories: to an era when Mann's beloved fifty-year-old widowed mother was as attractive to young men as was Mann's sister Julia. It was a well-known fact in Mann's family that Joseph Lohr, who courted Julia, was torn between mother and daughter. Mann must have imagined his mother's responses and to have become more curious about them as he himself grew old. The desires of experienced age, burdened by ironic self-knowledge, by the fact of life's transiency, inevitably fascinated the writer. It would take but an anecdote to bring the theme of *The Black Swan* to quick flowering, and Mann's wife, Katia, provided him with it. A middle-aged friend of Katia's had fallen in love with a younger man and had seemingly experienced the return of her menstrual cycle, only to be informed that she had cancer.

Mann could not get the story out of his head. A certain repression against his identification with women had lifted, as it had once before in *Lotte in Weimar*. At the age of eighty, Mann was imagining himself in a woman's body and writing under the influence of an impulse we might today call feminist.

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