

Thomas Mann Reads from *Tonio Kröger* (1903 / Recording: 1955)

Abstract

Thomas Mann's novella *Tonio Kröger* was published in 1903, two years after his first novel, *Die Buddenbrooks* (1901) had earned him a reputation as one of the outstanding literary talents of Wilhelmine Germany at the age of 26. Like *Buddenbrooks*, this novella also has clear autobiographical traits: its title character, Tonio Kröger, the son of a wealthy North German grain merchant and a southern European mother, grows up in an old trading town on the Baltic Sea. A gifted writer, he struggles with the irreconcilable contradiction between the expectations of bourgeois (middle-class) existence and his desire for an artistic life. He moves to Munich, home to a thriving, progressive cultural scene at the time, where he becomes successful as a writer. Yet he finds no emotional fulfillment as a human being.

The excerpt heard here, read by Thomas Mann himself, is the beginning of the sixth chapter of the novella, in which Tonio visits his hometown for the first time in many years while traveling to Denmark. Thomas Mann recorded *Tonio Kröger* on tape at his home shortly before his death in 1955, and this recording of some excerpts was published as a vinyl record in 1965.

Source

Translation:

VI.

And Tonio Kröger journeyed northward. He traveled comfortably (for he was wont to say that any one who has so much more distress of soul than other people may justly claim a little external comfort), and he did not rest until the towers of the cramped city which had been his starting-point rose before him in the gray air. There he made a brief, strange sojourn ...

A dreary afternoon was already turning into evening as the train pulled into the narrow, smoke-blackened, queerly familiar train-shed; under the dirty glass roof the thick smoke still gathered into roundish clumps and floated back and forth in long ragged ribbons, just as when Tonio Kröger rode away with nothing but mockery in his heart.—He attended to his baggage, ordered it brought to the hotel, and left the station.

Those were the black, immoderately broad and high two-horse cabs of the city, standing outside in a row. He did not take one; he merely looked at them as he looked at everything: the narrow gables and pointed turrets that greeted him across the nearest roofs, the fair-haired, idly awkward people round about him, with their broad yet rapid speech—and a nervous laughter rose up in him that was secretly allied to sobbing.—He went on foot, quite slowly, with the incessant pressure of the moist wind on his face, over the bridge on whose balustrade mythological figures stood, and then along the harbor for some distance. Good heavens, how tiny and crooked the whole place seemed! Had these narrow gable-fringed streets risen to the town in such comical steepness through all those years? The smoke-stacks and masts of the ships swayed gently in the breeze and in the twilight on the murky river. Should he go up yonder street, the one on which stood the house that he had in mind? No, tomorrow. He was so sleepy now. His head was heavy from the journey, and slow, nebulous thoughts crossed his mind.

At times, during these thirteen years, when his stomach was out of order, he had dreamed that he was again at home in the echoing old house on the slanting street, and that his father was there again too, chiding him severely because of his degenerate mode of life,— which censure he regularly regarded as quite proper. And this present moment now had nothing to distinguish it from one of those illusory and unending dream-fabrics, in which one may ask himself whether this be hallucination or reality, and of necessity and with deep conviction declare for the latter, only to wake up after all ... He walked through the sparsely peopled, draughty streets, lowering his head against the wind, and moved like a somnambulist in the direction of the hotel, the best in the city, where he intended to spend the night. A bow-legged man, carrying a pole surmounted by a flame, walked along before him with a rocking sailor's gait, lighting the gas-lamps.

How *did* he feel? What was all this that glowed so darkly and painfully under the ashes of his weariness, with out becoming a clear flame? Hush, hush, and not a word! No words! Fain would he have spent a long time walking thus in the wind through the dim, dreamily familiar streets. But everything was so cramped and so close together. It took no time to reach one's goal.

In the upper city there were arc-lights and they were just beginning to glow. There was the hotel, and there were the two black lions before it that had frightened him so as a child. They still looked at each other just as if they were about to sneeze; but they seemed to have grown much smaller since that day.—Tonio Kröger passed between them.

Source: *Thomas Mann liest aus Tonio Kröger*, Beginn des 6. Kapitels. Deutsche Grammophon, 1965.

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