

### READING QUESTIONS FOR *MAN OF STRAW*

#### The Novel

Heinrich Mann (1871-1950), *Man of Straw*. Originally *Der Untertan*, 1918, authorized translation by Ernest Boyd as *The Patrioteer* (1921), *Little Superman* (1945), and *Man of Straw* (1947); newest edition: Penguin, 1984, 1993.

The German title translates literally as "The Subject" (as in "all of the king's subjects"). The original manuscript, completed in 1913-14, had the following subtitle: "History of the Public Soul under William II." It was the first novel in a trilogy including *The Poor* (*Die Armen*, 1917), which was a sequel to the *Untertan* going up to World War I, and *The Head* (*Der Kopf*, 1925), about an industrialist (modeled after Krupp in Essen). Neither of these other two works was ever translated into English.

The following dates help to place the novel in its historical setting:

- Dietrich Hessling is born ca. 1868-70 (Heinrich Mann was born in 1871, died 1950 in Santa Monica);
- in chap. 1 Bismarck is still Reich chancellor (he was dismissed by Wilhelm II in March 1890);
- at the end of ch. 1 Hessling witnesses a demonstration that took place in Feb. 1892 (*Februarkrawalle*);
- Hessling's honeymoon at the beginning of ch. 6 takes place during W. II's trip to Rome in Apr. 1893;
- later in chapter 6 the Reichstag is dissolved because it refuses to pass the Army Bill (6 May 1893);
- Hessling's children are born in 1894 (Gretchen), 1895 (Horst), and 1896 (Kraft="power");
- the novel ends with the nationally celebrated 100th birthday of Wilhelm I on 22 March 1897.

**Study questions** (any of questions 1-3 can be submitted as Q8 on Nov. 20)

1. This book is a satire life in Germany in the 1890s, and many of the characters are caricatures of prominent figures in the Kaiserreich. Sötbier, for instance, has similarities to the hard-drinking (whence the name) Bismarck. Other figures are more allegorical, for example old Buck, a prototypical 1848 revolution democrat, or Wulkow, a member of the landed aristocracy.  
 Make a cast of the more important characters, indicating which historical persons or ideal types they could represent. If appropriate, give a brief explanation or characterization.
2. The Kaiser and his subject Hessling meet twice (end of chapter 1 and beginning of chapter 6), but the novel connects them in different ways at the end of each chapter. Based on these scenes, show how the "subject's" personality and life merges with that of the Kaiser. In addition to the Hessling-Kaiser meetings, there are a number of other scenes in which a certain situation or constellation of people recurs, e.g.
  - a) Hessling and old Buck (chap 1, 3, 5, and three times in 6);
  - b) Hessling and Wolfgang Buck (chap 2, twice each in 4, 5 and 6);
  - c) Hessling and Napoleon Fischer (chap 3, twice each in 5 and 6);
  - d) Hessling and Göppel (chap 2) vs. Hessling and Brietzen (chap 6);
  - e) Worker-couple in the rag pile (chap 2) vs. Hessling and Guste in the same place (chap 5);
  - f) Hessling and Guste in the train (chap 3) vs. honeymoon night (chap 5);
  - g) Trials against Lauer (chap 4) and old Buck (chap 6);
  - h) Hessling's speeches to his workers (chap 3) and those of the merged firms (chap 6);
  - i) Hessling's family scenes (chaps 3, twice in 4; 5, 6) vs. Frau von Wulkow's play (chap 5).
 Draw a character sketch of the "authoritarian personality" (*Untertanenmentalität*--subject mentality) by comparing/contrasting/analyzing several of these situations.
3. By the end of the novel Hessling has become the most powerful man in Netzig. His speech at the unveiling of the monument can be read as a manifesto of the German upper bourgeoisie at the turn of the century. The unveiling scene itself can be read as a metaphor for the confrontation of the moneyed classes with the "turbid stream of democracy" (p. 292; *Schlammflut der Demokratie*).  
 What does this metaphor imply about the nature of the bourgeoisie in the Kaiserreich in general, and in particular how its attitudes and values were shaped by class relations?
4. After reading this novel, what do you think about the thesis of the "peculiarity" of the German bourgeoisie in that it retained an orientation on "feudal" (aristocratic) values? Is Hessling a bourgeois through and through, or does he strive to become an aristocrat? (Or isn't that a meaningful dichotomy?)