



# Tradition in Transition: Generational Conflict and Cultural Disintegration in the Works of Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Thomas Mann

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## Abstract

*This comparative study examines how Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Thomas Mann represent generational conflict and cultural disintegration in response to the upheavals of modernity. Both Nobel laureates explore the alienation of younger generations from inherited traditions, Agnon through the dislocation of Eastern European Jewish life, and Mann through the decline of the German bourgeoisie. The analysis focuses on Agnon's *Only Yesterday*, *A Guest for the Night*, and *The Bridal Canopy*, and Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Tonio Kröger*. Grounded in Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, Max Weber's concept of disenchantment, and Karl Mannheim's generational theory, the paper investigates how both authors use generational estrangement to reflect wider existential and cultural crises. It argues that Agnon and Mann employ generational conflict not merely as a narrative device but as a metaphor for the collapse of collective identity in the modern era. Their works suggest that cultural survival depends not on rigid preservation of the past but on meaningful intergenerational dialogue. The broader implication that emerges is clear: cultural continuity is essential to human belonging, and it must be actively renewed through empathy, memory, and critical engagement between generations in an ever-changing world.*

**Keywords:** cultural disintegration, generational conflict, intergenerational dialogue, modernity, tradition

## Introduction

Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970) and Thomas Mann (1875–1955) are key figures in twentieth-century literature whose works respond to the upheavals of modern life. Agnon, the central voice in modern Hebrew literature, captures the loss of traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe and the ideological tensions of the Zionist project in Palestine. Thomas Mann, deeply connected to German intellectual traditions, writes about the fading of bourgeois values and the spiritual confusion of Europe in the modern era.

Though they wrote in different languages and came from distinct cultural backgrounds, Agnon and Mann share a common concern with generational conflict. In their stories, younger characters either reject their inheritance or are burdened by it. This paper examines how both authors use the idea of generational tension to represent broader cultural and spiritual crises in their respective societies. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Jan Assmann, Max Weber, and Karl Mannheim, the study investigates the role of cultural memory and ideological rupture in shaping the characters' experiences. Through



a close reading of selected texts—Agnon's *Only Yesterday*, *A Guest for the Night*, and *The Bridal Canopy*; and Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Tonio Kröger*—the analysis reveals how both authors reflect on the moral and existential consequences of cultural disintegration, while subtly pointing toward the need for intergenerational understanding and renewal.

The study hypothesizes that both Agnon and Mann portray generational conflict not merely as a familial or interpersonal issue, but as a literary metaphor for the erosion of collective cultural identity under the pressures of modernity. Their works suggest that the alienation of youth from tradition signals a deeper cultural and moral disorientation, one that can only be reconciled through the conscious re-engagement with intergenerational memory and dialogue. Agnon and Mann reflect modern anxieties about identity and continuity through portrayals of generational conflict and tradition in crisis. While their cultural and historical contexts differ—Eastern European Jewry for Agnon and German bourgeois society for Mann—their themes and concerns significantly overlap.

This paper aims to analyze how Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Thomas Mann portray generational conflict as a reflection of deeper cultural and existential crises. It seeks to examine how the disruption of tradition impacts personal identity and societal roles in Agnon's *Only Yesterday*, *A Guest for the Night*, and *The Bridal Canopy*, alongside Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Tonio Kröger*. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Jan Assmann's cultural memory, Max Weber's disenchantment, and Karl Mannheim's generational theory, the study investigates how both authors use literary form to express the psychological and cultural consequences of modernity. By comparing the distinct yet overlapping historical contexts of Agnon's Eastern European Jewish milieu and Mann's German bourgeois society, the paper highlights the universal dimensions of cultural disintegration in modern literature. Ultimately, the objective is to demonstrate that both authors advocate, either directly or through implication, for the necessity of renewed intergenerational dialogue as a vital mechanism for restoring cultural identity and continuity in an increasingly fragmented world.

The title *Tradition in Transition* captures the central concern of the paper: the movement of cultural and moral values from one generation to another amid the disorienting forces of modernity. The phrase suggests that tradition is not static but undergoing transformation, disruption, or even erosion in the works of both Agnon and Mann. The subtitle, *Generational Conflict and Cultural Disintegration*, further clarifies the specific themes explored, how the rift between older and younger generations reflects a deeper fragmentation of identity, memory, and communal coherence. By naming Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Thomas Mann, the title signals a comparative approach across different cultural contexts—Jewish Eastern Europe and the German bourgeois world—revealing how both authors confront similar crises of continuity. Overall, the title encapsulates the paper's focus on how modern literature dramatizes the tension between preserving inherited traditions and adapting to changing realities, while also hinting at the authors' shared literary mission to find meaning in the midst of cultural loss.

Generational conflict refers to the ideological and emotional rift between the older generation rooted in tradition, religious or moral values, and the younger generation, shaped by the forces of modernity, secularization, and individualism. This conflict often manifests in literature as a struggle between duty and freedom, memory and progress, or reverence and rebellion. In both Agnon's and Mann's works, this tension reflects a broader cultural disintegration—the gradual breakdown of cohesive communal identities, shared beliefs, and inherited customs. Modernity destabilizes the continuity that binds one generation to the next, resulting in characters who are alienated, uncertain, and spiritually fragmented. Thus, the title captures the transformation of tradition as it passes through time, fractured by generational disconnect and the pressures of historical change. In this literary context, tradition is not merely lost but contested and reshaped, underscoring the psychological and societal costs of cultural disruption and the urgent need for renewal through intergenerational understanding.

In both the Jewish and German cultural milieus, modernity emerges as a disruptive force, severing



the bond between generations. Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Thomas Mann explore this disjunction through characters caught between inherited values and modern alienation. Their portrayals serve not only as cultural reflections but also as existential critiques of identity in transition.

Agnon's world, deeply rooted in Jewish ritual and communal memory, confronts the collapse of tradition. In *Only Yesterday*, Isaac Kumer arrives in Jaffa with hopes of national revival but slowly succumbs to madness. His breakdown symbolizes identity fragmentation. As Max Weber observes, "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'" (Weber 155). Isaac's fate exemplifies this disenchantment as he becomes increasingly unmoored from his cultural roots.

In *A Guest for the Night*, Agnon's narrator returns to a Galician town to find, "Nothing remains of what I remembered—not the people, nor the customs, nor the life" (Agnon, *Guest* 78). This loss aligns with Jan Assmann's theory that "Cultural memory is always bound to groups and situated in the present" (Assmann 38). Without continuity between generations, memory, and thus identity, falters.

In *The Bridal Canopy*, Agnon adopts a more humorous and nostalgic tone, chronicling the adventures of Reb Yudel. Yet even here, the traditional world appears quaint and out of step with changing times. Karl Mannheim's insight that "Generations are constituted in part by their opposition to inherited cultural patterns" illuminates the skepticism and detachment exhibited by Agnon's younger characters (Mannheim 306).

Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* similarly chronicles generational decline. The erosion of bourgeois values culminates in Thomas Buddenbrook's confession: "I cannot live for the firm as my father did. Something in me is broken" (Mann, *Buddenbrooks* 422). Mannheim's theory applies here as well, suggesting that younger generations, formed in a different historical consciousness, no longer find meaning in inherited roles.

The *Magic Mountain* explores modern detachment from time and tradition through Hans Castorp's philosophical stagnation. Mann writes, "Time has no divisions to mark its passage; it is like

a flat plain" (*Magic Mountain* 535). Hans's passive absorption of competing ideologies reflects a broader cultural paralysis.

In Tonio Kröger, the title character, torn between bourgeois identity and artistic calling, admits, "I stand between two worlds, and I am at home in neither" (Mann, *Tonio Kröger* 48). Like Agnon's characters, Tonio embodies cultural and generational displacement—his estrangement internal rather than communal.

Though Agnon and Mann differ in cultural setting and style—Agnon grounded in sacred tradition, Mann in psychological realism—both depict modernity as a force that unravels generational transmission. As Assmann explains, "When memory breaks, identity falters" (Assmann 54). Agnon seeks fragments of sacred continuity, while Mann exposes the spiritual emptiness beneath the bourgeois ideal. Both imply that renewal depends not on nostalgia, but on reflective engagement with inherited memory.

Agnon and Mann converge in their concern with cultural disintegration and the breakdown of generational continuity. Characters like Agnon's Isaac and Mann's Hanno are caught between eras. They struggle to reconcile inherited values with the realities of the modern world. Agnon's religious and cyclical narrative style contrasts with Mann's linear, philosophically charged prose. Yet both use these forms to convey a sense of loss. Agnon's narratives reflect a divine rhythm disrupted by human forgetfulness, while Mann's depict a world slowly losing its moral coherence. Gershon Shaked notes, "Agnon's characters are tragic not because of personal flaws, but because they live at the end of a world... They inherit a silence where once there was a covenant" (Shaked 202). Erich Heller makes a similar point about Mann: "Mann's genius lies in his ability to portray the cultural fatigue of an age that has lost the power to believe in its own values" (Heller 132). Both authors show that generational disconnect is more than a family issue—it reflects a cultural and historical rupture.

Agnon and Mann use fiction not just to depict generational tension but to encourage reflection on how cultural memory can be preserved in times of rapid change. They caution against completely discarding tradition and advocate for meaningful



engagement with the past. In an era where traditions are often sidelined, their call for intergenerational dialogue remains timely. This dialogue need not involve strict repetition of the past, but rather an effort to reinterpret and preserve its meaning for future generations. Their works invite us to consider how societies might restore conversation across generations not to fossilize the past, but to keep its essence alive in a changing world. In this way, both Agnon and Mann offer not just stories, but a vision for how tradition and modernity might coexist.

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