

The Man without Qualities (novel)

By [Walter Fanta](#)

Summary

Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (The Man without Qualities) is a novel by Robert Musil, begun in 1918. The first book was published in 1931, and the first part of the second book was published in 1932. The incomplete novel offers a panorama of social, cultural, and intellectual life in Vienna from August 1913 until the outbreak of war.

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The Theorem of Human Shapelessness

From 20 August 1914 through the end of 1917, [Robert Musil \(1880-1942\)](#) served as an officer of the Austrian Imperial Army on the southern front. After the war, the need to come to terms with the outbreak of war became the focus of Musil's literary ambitions. His essay-style reflections on the matter led him to formulate the *Theorem der menschlichen Gestaltlosigkeit* ("Theorem of Human Shapelessness"). This theorem postulates that humans are an "extraordinarily indolent mass" who are hollow when it comes to "every moral question"¹ and can be molded socially from the outside. A human is, according to Musil, "a creature of adaptation, who conforms himself to circumstances and situations."² The essay in which Musil formulated the theorem remained a fragment, but his published essay, "*Die Nation als Ideal und Wirklichkeit*" ("The Nation as Ideal and Reality"), made explicit that the theorem was a fruit of the war. He wrote:

I believe that what we have experienced since 1914 will have taught most people that, ethically speaking, the human being is almost formless, unexpectedly malleable, capable of anything; good and evil range equally widely in him, like the pointer on a sensitive scale.³

Musil later transferred this concept of human formlessness to the realm of his novel.

Kakanien and the Parallel Action

In an interview in 1926 Musil explained the aim of his project: “That war began, had to begin, is the sum of all conflicting forces and influences and movements that I show.”⁴ The chronotopic setting of the novel in *Kakanien* (derived from the term “k. u. k.,” the traditional shorthand for the Imperial and Royal insignia of the Habsburgs), as well as its cast of characters, serve to create a grand socio-analysis of the war in the manner of [Pierre Bourdieu \(1930-2002\)](#).⁵ Musil attempted a socio-psychological explanation of the deeper causes of the outbreak of the Great War. Even a traffic accident described in the first chapter of the novel is often interpreted primarily as a symbolic reference to the greater accident of the world war.

In reference to the the conflict of nationalities, the anticipated breaking point in *Kakanien*'s system, Musil writes ironically:

It was only that everyone's natural resentment of everyone else's efforts to get ahead, a resentment we all feel nowadays, had crystalized earlier in *Kakanien*, where it can be said to have assumed the form of a sublimated ceremonial rite, which could have had a great future had its development not been cut prematurely short by a catastrophe.⁶

In the novel, the *Parallelaktion* (Parallel Action), a planned Austrian event to honor the 70th jubilee of [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#) in 1918, is also meant to counter the German celebrations of [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#). This event proves to be a stage for what Musil calls *Seinesgleichen geschieht* (translated variously as “the likes of it now happens” or “the self-same occurs”). The parallel action is a brutally honest satirical description of somnambulance and pseudo-activity, which historian Christopher Clark has described as the characteristic behavior of the political elite of Austro-Hungary.⁷

Outbreak of the War as Final Destination of the Novel

In the face of political developments in Germany in the 1930s, Musil radicalized his intention of using the novel as a warning against the “next mass catastrophe.”⁸ He identified the takeover of the Nazis in 1933 as an even more horrific repetition of 1914 and regretted that his project had become a historical novel. Until the end of his life he meant for the novel to lead up to chapters depicting the mobilization, wherein he wanted to link the reality of the war, emerging from the civilizing fiction of an age of eternal peace, with the narrative

inversion of all characters in the novel. With the outbreak of the war arises the potential for the emergence of antithetical qualities in every human being. The main character Ulrich would, in accordance with this unrealized plan, go to war in an act of intellectual and moral suicide.

Reception

The first book was received with great interest, especially in critical circles. Thereafter, a silence prevailed around Musil's novel for a long time. Starting in the 1950s, however, its triumphal march around the world began with translations in many languages. *The Man without Qualities* was awarded its place as one of the most important German-language Modernist novels and as a unique literary-philosophical experiment; literary scholarship stresses, above all, the novel's significance for the explanation of the deeper causes of war.

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Notes

1. Musil, Robert: *Diaries 1899-1942*, (trans. Philip Panye) New York 1999, p. 267. [↑](#)
2. Amann, Klaus: Robert Musil und das 'Theorem der menschlichen Gestaltlosigkeit,' in: Beil, Ulrich Johannes / Gamper, Michael / Wagner, Karl (eds.): *Medien, Technik, Wissenschaft. Wissensübertragung bei Robert Musil und in seiner Zeit*, Zurich 2011, p. 239. [↑](#)
3. Musil, Robert: *Precision and Soul. Essays and Addresses*, trans. Pike, Burton / Luft, David S., Chicago 1990, pp. 113-114. [↑](#)
4. Fontana, Oskar Maurus: Was arbeiten Sie? Gespräch mit Robert Musil, in: Musil, Robert: *Klagenfurter Ausgabe. Kommentierte Edition sämtlicher Werke, Briefe und nachgelassener Schriften, Mit Transkriptionen und Faksimiles aller Handschriften. Lesetexte*, volume 14: *Selbstkommentare*, published by Walter Fanta, Klaus Amann and Karl Corino, with the collaboration of Rosmarie Zeller, Klagenfurt 2015 (digital edition). [↑](#)
5. Wolf, Norbert Christian: *Kakanien als Gesellschaftskonstruktion. Robert Musils Sozioanalyse des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Vienna 2011, pp. 43-63. [↑](#)
6. Musil, Robert: *The Man without Qualities. Volume 1*, trans. Wilkens, Sophie / Pike, Burton, New York 1995, p. 30. [↑](#)
7. Clark, Christopher: *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London 2012, pp. 551-552. [↑](#)
8. Musil, Robert: *The Man without Qualities. Volume 2*, trans. Wilkens, Sophie / Pike, Burton, New York 1995, p. 1127. [↑](#)

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External Links

- [Internationale Robert-Musil-Gesellschaft \(IRMG\) \(Institutional Website\)](#)
- [Robert Musil Literatur Museum \(Institutional Website\)](#)
- [Tiroler Soldaten-Zeitung 1915-1917 \(Österreichische Nationalbibliothek\) \(Primary Source\)](#)

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