Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (Books I–VIII)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe · *1795–1796 · Thomas Carlyle translation (1824)*

Wilhelm is the son of a merchant in a German town, a dreamy young man who has fallen in love with the theater and with an actress, Mariana. When he thinks she has betrayed him he falls ill and gives up the stage. The novel follows his wanderings through theatrical companies and a mysterious society, and it gave the Bildungsroman its name. The library hosts Carlyle's translation of the eight books of the Apprenticeship.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How does a young man find his place in the world, and what does he learn from trying one life after another?

Wilhelm tries trade, then the stage, then a life of cultivation. He rescues Mignon and the harper, plays Hamlet, and reads the memoir of a devout woman. At last he finds that a hidden Society of the Tower has been watching and guiding him. The book argues that education comes through experience, and that errors are part of it. The ending is a promise of a fuller life and not a settled one.

KEY CHARACTERS

Wilhelm Meister
The hero, a dreamer and seeker.

Mignon
A strange child whom he rescues.

the Harper
An old wanderer.

Philine
A light-hearted actress.

Serlo
A theater director.

Aurelia
An actress in despair.

Natalie
The woman Wilhelm finally loves.

the Abbé
The head of the Society of the Tower.

Grades 11–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Theater and Mariana

BOOKS I–II

Wilhelm loves the actress Mariana, believes her faithless, and falls ill. He gives up the stage and takes up trade.

- His love of the theater begins in childhood puppet plays.
- He thinks Mariana is untrue.
- He turns to business in despair.

02

The Company

BOOKS III–IV

He travels on business, joins a company of actors, and rescues Mignon and the harper.

- The company is a world of pleasures and troubles.
- Mignon is a strange, intense child.
- The harper is an old wanderer with a secret.

03

Hamlet

BOOK V

Wilhelm interprets Hamlet and plays the part in Serlo's theater. Aurelia's despair deepens.

- Wilhelm's reading of Hamlet is a famous piece of criticism.
- Serlo runs the theater.
- Aurelia's unhappiness shows the price of the stage.

04

Confessions of a Fair Saint

BOOK VI

Wilhelm reads the memoir of a devout woman, the aunt of Natalie.

- The memoir is a spiritual autobiography.
- It contrasts with the theater's world.
- Natalie's family is introduced.

05

The Tower

BOOKS VII–VIII

The Society of the Tower reveals itself. Wilhelm learns of his son, Mignon dies, and he is engaged to Natalie.

- The Abbé and the Tower have guided him.
- Mignon's death is a great sorrow.
- The engagement closes the Apprenticeship.

Education | Art and the Stage | Love | Self-Cultivation

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. This book gave the genre its name. Ask what 'apprenticeship' means here.
2. Notice how Wilhelm's views change with each setting.
3. The Hamlet chapters are famous. Ask what Wilhelm's reading tells you about him.
4. The Tower's role is a surprise. Ask how Goethe treats guidance.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the Thomas Carlyle translation (1824) (Project Gutenberg #36483 and #78139 (Books I-VIII only; Meister's Travels not hosted)), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/goethe-wilhelm-meisters-apprenticeship/.