

Heinrich von Ofterdingen Study Guide



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Analysis

Analysis: The Plot

Heinrich von Ofterdingen was published posthumously and remains a fragment. It is questionable whether Novalis could have taken the novel much further, for it progresses rapidly from the outer to the inner world, with associations increasing exponentially. Part 1 ends with Klingsohrs fairy tale, an extremely dense and complicated story that remains impervious to consistent interpretation. Some regard it as the epitome of a Romantic literary fairy tale. Others reject it because it does not make sense. The Germanist Emil Staiger omitted Klingsohrs fairy tale from his 1968 edition of Novalis works for that reason. To appreciate Novalis fully, the reader must be prepared to follow his flights of fancy.

At the beginning of the novel, Heinrich is twenty years old. He dreams of death and rebirth, of entering a cave and experiencing great longing, and of seeing a blue flower with a delicate face hovering in its center. Heinrich travels to Augsburg, in Swabia, to visit his grandfather Schwaning for the first time. As the coach heads into the distance, it seems as if he is actually going home. His traveling companions entertain him with the story of Atlantis. Novalis links this to Heinrichs dream of the blue flower, because when the kings daughter finds her future husband, a silent blue flame is burning in his fathers house.

Chapter 5 moves directly into the realm of fantasy. On an exploratory tour of caves, Heinrich encounters a hermit, Friedrich von Hohenzollern. In one of Friedrichs books, Heinrich is amazed to see pictures of himself with people he knows and people he does not yet know, including a man who seems to be of considerable importance to him. Friedrich explains that the book, written in Provençal, is a novel about the wonderful adventures of a poet and in praise of poetry itself in all of its diversity. The end of the novel is missing.

At his grandfathers house, Heinrich recognizes the important man from the book as Klingsohr the poet. Heinrich also immediately falls in love with Klingsohrs daughter Mathilde, whose face is the one that appeared to him in the blue flower. He dreams of being under a blue stream with her. She says a wonderful, secret word to him that rings through his entire being. His grandfather wakes him, and he cannot remember the word.

Klingsohr tells his fairy tale, a capricious condensation and combination of many fairy tales and myths. It takes place on three levels: the frozen world of Arcturus, the main world of the family, and the underworld where the three fates spin. Evil appears in the person of the rational family scribe, who plots to overthrow the family, but the child Fable outsmarts him and, together with Sophie (wisdom) and Eros, brings about the unfreezing and rebirth of the world. Eros dream of a flower floating on a blue stream provides the symbolic link to the main work.

Part 2 of the novel shows Heinrich in deep mourning after Mathildes death. Zyane, the daughter of Friedrich von Hohenzollern, appears to him, saying that her father is also his father. In answer to Heinrich's question "Where are you going?" she replies, "Always home."