

Merton, Thomas (1915-1968)

Encyclopedia Article

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One of the most highly acclaimed writers of the twentieth century, Thomas Merton is best known in literary circles for his autobiographical novel of religious conversion, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948. In the same decade, Merton became a Trappist monk, entering the monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, in Kentucky. Continuing to write and produce books of poetry, spiritual meditations, and journals (many of which have been published posthumously) Merton found himself at lifelong odds with both the Order's plans for him and his own belief that writing was keeping him from achieving his full spiritual potential.

Merton was never able to completely resolve the conflict between his vocation as writer and as contemplative. He was also never able to reconcile his moral outrage at the state of America and the world, particularly during the Vietnam War era, with his desire to live a simple, quiet life. His protests and friendships with counterculture luminaries like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez earned him the admiration and respect of many young people in the 1960s, who saw in Merton the possibility to find spiritual nourishment while rejecting the perceived immorality of the establishment.

Further Reading:

Cunningham, Lawrence S., editor. *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*. New York, Paulist Press, 1992.

Hart, Patrick, editor. *Thomas Merton /Monk: A Monastic Tribute*. New York, Sheed and Ward, 1974.

Kountz, Peter. *Thomas Merton as Writer and Monk: A Cultural Study, 1915-1951*. Brooklyn, Carlson Publishing, 1991.

Mott, Michael. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1984.