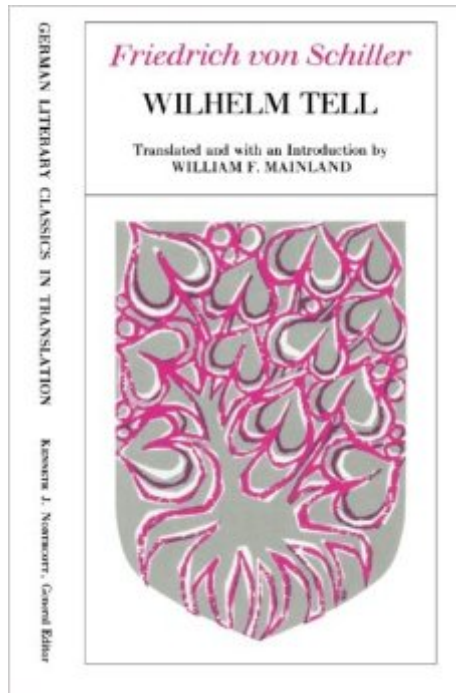


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# Wilhelm Tell (German Literary Classics In Translation)



## Synopsis

When Schiller completed *Wilhelm Tell* as a "New Year's Gift for 1805" he foretold that it would cause a stir. He was right. In the midst of Great Power politics a play which drew substance from one of the fourteenth-century liberation movements proved both attractive and inflammatory. Since then the work has become immensely popular. This new English translation by William F. Mainland brings out the essential tragi-comic nature of *Wilhelm Tell* but also emphasizes its impressive formal unity. Schiller based his play on chronicles of the Swiss liberation movement, in which *Wilhelm Tell* played a major role. Since Tell's existence has never been proven, Schiller, a historian by profession, felt he had to devise a figure who would bring the uncertainties and contradictions of the various Swiss chronicles into focus. Respected for his courage and skill with a bow, for his peaceable nature and his integrity, Schiller's archer "while always ready to aid his fellows" habitually seeks solitude. In the midst of political turmoil *Wilhelm Tell* is the nonpolitical man of action. Keenly interested in the problematic interplay of history and legend, Schiller turned it to be dramatic advantage. He constructed his play to illustrate the greatest possible development of the character traits suggested for Tell by the chronicles. The result of Schiller's supreme achievement in historical drama.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*Wilhelm Tell* is a great story of courage, friendship, and the will to help those who are in need. It is a

great translations, but if you can, read it in its original form of German, there are always, lines which are impossible to translate from one language to another.

In this book, Schiller takes the old legend of Wilhelm Tell and gives it the shape and structure of a novel. It is a wonderful tale about Tell, a mountain man who is very angry at the despotic and cruel ways in which Gessler, the representative of the hated Austrians, treats the peaceful Swiss people. Tell refuses to give in to Gessler's mischievous way, suffers a lot (remember that he has to shoot an arrow to an apple standing over his son's head) and eventually leads his people in a revolt against the Austrians. If this is perhaps not accurate history, it is the stuff national prides are made of. One thing to pay attention to is the marvelous scenery, the very old towns with their downtown parks, the mountainous Swiss Alps surrounding the small cities, and helping Wilhelm Tell escape Gessler's guardsmen. Schiller, as one of the leaders of the Romantic movement, creates a great story out of an old legend, giving shape to one of the most famous stories, justifiedly so.

This is a literary ancestor of Avatar. The people fighting for liberty here are not large and blue, but large and Swiss. They are fighting against Austrians, who are usurping rule over the mountain region. The issue is: are the Swiss directly under the roof of the Kaiser, or is there an intermediate power that can impose its tyranny? The Swiss think, no way, these foreigners have to be sent home. A rebellion starts over the silly issue of the stupid governor's rule that the populace has to respect his hat on the pole as much as himself. Most people do not appreciate this kind of humiliating gesture. Schiller's last play was first staged and also published in 1804. It is based on events in Switzerland 500 years earlier. Tell is a national hero in Switzerland. He was not a leader of the uprising, rather he tried to stay out of it and was pushed into action by another stupid provocation by the idiot of a governor, here called Reichsvogt. There was the famous scene when Tell shot the apple from his son's head with his crossbow. Awesome. As we all know, the Swiss are still managing to stay out of the NATO and the EU. Bless them! This play is a nightmare to all German HS students. I loathed it myself. Re-reading it again decades later, I must say: my teachers were right to praise this piece of great writing, but they were wrong in their selling methods. I am sure, a more flexible approach might have met with more appreciation. The play is overcrowded with lines that everyone knows in Germany (well, say, many, rather than everyone) without knowing the source. (Did Schiller coin those idioms or did he pick them up in the street or salon?) One of Schiller's plays that deserves to be kept on the stages and to be read!

This was apparently Schiller's most popular work during the 19th century with many, many performances in Germany in the century after his death. In the form of Rossini's famous opera, it probably reached an even wider audience. To modern audiences, however, this play has less appeal. Schiller's celebration of romantic nationalism and ethnic solidarity seems almost clichéd. This is not a criticism of Schiller's writing but a reflection of the extent to which nationalist assumptions have penetrated our culture. It's difficult to look at this play in the way that 19th century audiences in a Germany still fragmented on the basis of feudal political structures must have seen it. At the same time, Schiller was able to appeal to Liberal, reformist traditions by stressing the importance of individual freedom and dignity. The stagecraft of this play is impressive and Schiller includes enough psychological detail to prevent the characters from being stick figures. The dialogue is not Schiller's best work and some parts come across as bombastic. Well worth reading but this work will be of most interest to those interested in Schiller, German literature, or 19th century European history.

Yes, this play is a classic that inspired an opera from which we have the William Tell Overture and yes we love the episode in which the title character shoots the apple off his son's head but on the whole this short book is a slow go. There is a lot of vowing to defend the homeland from the evil leaders and a lot of angst about the desire for freedom but is a bit repetitious. Also, there is a good deal of organizing patriotic groups and traveling from spot to spot. I think I would rather see the opera than read the play because at least there would be some visual stimulation.

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