

Aschenbach (in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*) [open](#)

Overview Thomas Mann (1875-1955) was a German novelist, short story writer, and literary critic, who came from a large and distinguished literary family. He flourished during the Nazi period, and became an emblematic exponent of *Exilliteratur*, the literature written in exile—much of it in the United States—during the Nazi period. (He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929, chiefly for his novel *Buddenbrooks*.) He was a staunch and outspoken critic of Hitler, and spent many years in Switzerland, during and after the War. He spent the war period in the United States.

Character Gustave Aschenbach is a highly successful writer, living in Germany, where he is well known, comfortable in his life and writing styles, independent—he was an early widower, and had one child, a daughter who is married and out of his life—and yet he is troubled. Is it a mid-life crisis? He is well into his fifties, for sure, and in addition is tiring of the routine successfulness that he can now guarantee himself, in his career. He feels the need to see the wide world again, to break out of his box into fresh experience. Homosexuality runs in his veins.

Parallels A wide range of fictions suggest the interest of the image of the sensuous, mid-life male, who is old enough to see life as an object of desire: in *The Renaissance* (1877), Walter Pater himself sees the world as a work of art; Oscar Wilde, in the *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1880), anatomizes the deliquescence of a mid-life aesthete; in *The Power and the Glory* (1940) Graham Greene's Mr. Tench, the whiskey priest, inspects life with midlife sadness and fascination; Humbert Humbert, in Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), is preoccupied with nymphettes, whom he follows with the kind of jaded if lusty eye we see in Aschenbach.

Illustrative moments

Bored The above challenges to routine—fatigue with his work, longing for the different and new—quickly become demanding forces in Aschenbach's life. 'This yearning for new and distant scenes, this craving for freedom, release, forgetfulness—they were an impulse toward flight.' Aschenbach was in fact ready for that flight, and decided to book passage first to the Adriatic, then to Venice, traditionally sunnier climes for the German tourist or intellectual, and as it happened—consider the story's title—the locale where Aschenbach would ultimately have to come to grips with his life.

Meeting In Venice Aschenbach hires a gondolier to his hotel, where he arrives to find a quite cosmopolitan gathering of European, American and Slavic tourists, and in his style he settles in a comfortable corner chair, to observe the milling crowd, as it takes drinks and aperitifs, and awaits dinner. His eye falls on a Polish family, with three children, and especially on the young son. He immediately falls for the 'spoilt, exquisite air' of the boy, who is flashingly beautiful: long golden hair flowing around his neck, delicate wrists, 'ivory white against the golden darkness of his clustering locks.'

Fascinated A few days pass, Aschenbach has ample opportunity to lounge and view the young Tadzio, in the surroundings of his family. What had at first been, for Aschenbach, a jolt of visual/sensual delight. The adoration of perfect sensual beauty has become deep for him, and its meaning has expanded. 'He was astounded anew, yes startled, at the godlike beauty of the human being. His (Tadzio's) head was the head of Eros, with the yellowish bloom of Parian marble.' Reluctantly Aschenbach rises to go out to the beach—he cannot stare forever—but from this point on until his death, this southern vacation is all about Tadzio and his meaning.

Narcissistic As a sophisticate and decadent—as well as a worshipper of Platonic beauty—Aschenbach has a fresh perception of Tadzio, on the rare occasion when he is near him. As he passes close to the boy, Aschenbach observes that Tadzio's teeth do not look healthy: 'He is delicate, he is

sickly, Aschenbach thought. He will most likely not live to grow old.' Then, in a twist which resets our imagination of Aschenbach, we read that 'he did not try to account for the pleasure the idea (of Tadzio's early death) gave him.' Aschenbach wastes no 'love' on Tadzio, but simply the adoration of perfect sensual beauty.

Discussion questions

What point is Mann making, by introducing the element of cholera into the conclusion of *Death in Venice*? Is cholera a symbol of moral devastation? Does it represent the paludic and threatening atmosphere of the City of Venice, which sits morbidly over its canals?

What makes Aschenbach decide to take a trip south? What is he looking for? Does the south in this Mann story resemble the south that Tonio Krüger loves in the story named for him?

Does Tadzio resemble Tonio Krüger? Eyes? Hair? Appearance? Kind of sensuality? What is the meaning of these physical traits in Mann's fictional sensibility?