

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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DEATH IN VENICE

Thomas Mann

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.

Story

Death in Venice (1913) is on the surface a seductive novella about pederasty and death—with perhaps a tinge of irony, which spares us the need to relate the tale too directly to Mann's own life. (Homosexuality, to be sure, was a perplexing and even agonizing issue in his personal life.) A lurid flicker of Mann's own concerns hovers just under the surface of this structurally simple tale.

The protagonist is a German writer/historian who has recently completed a major historical work on the life of Frederick of Prussia, the long reigning 18th century Hohenzollern monarch. The effort of this work has been exhausting to Aschenbach, who is a frail and intense personality, at best, and who can exhaust himself with an hour of good work. (We will come to know that he regularly sleeps twelve hours a night, and that he is fussily preoccupied with keeping himself in shape.) It is time for him to take a major break, to see the sunshine again, to go south into that world which also was the life center for Mann's Tonio Kroeger.

Aschenbach heads south. He takes the overnight train to Trieste, but is discouraged by the rain and the vulgarity of the people in the streets. He then takes the ship to Venice. One particular sight on the dock disgusts him, a dandified and pomaded old man, rouged up and on the make. Too close to home, for Aschenbach.

At first put off by the crowding and some impolite behavior directed at him, Aschenbach makes his way to a spa type hotel on the Lido, and feels immediately at ease, among the cosmopolitan crowds. While he waited for dinner, the first night, his attention was taken by a striking looking Polish family, three pallid girls and their fourteen year old brother, whose stunning beauty overwhelms Aschenbach. The writer goes to sleep that night, dreaming fantasias about young Tadzio. This preoccupation repeats itself throughout the next day, when Aschenbach fixates on the young boy, both at breakfast and on the beach during the day. While the writer tries to persuade his superego, that he is simply feeling paternal fondness, his id makes it quite clear to him that his sentiments are erotic.

Aschenbach passes the next month in a vortex of increasingly intense fantasies of Tadzio. Night and day he thinks of the boy, follows him and watches for him near the family's suite. He has himself made up by the hotel coiffeur—rouge on the cheeks, lipstick, pomaded hair. At just that point, however, he overhears Tadzio's mother saying that the family is going to be leaving very soon. For Aschenbach this news falls in place with the state of external affairs at the Lido. In fact from the moment of his arrival in Venice the writer has been conscious of a foul smell from the Lagoon. This smell has been growing worse, and seems to portend a cholera epidemic, of which Aschenbach picks up rumors; he has begun to feel the symptoms.

On the day Tadzio is to leave, Aschenbach is reclining on his beach chair, watching the beautiful youngster wrestle with a friend. He has the illusion that Tadzio is motioning to him, and he rises from his chair. The effort however is too much for his now infected health, and he slumps back dead.

Themes

Taboo Attraction As Aschenbach feels exhausted, from the continuous effort he has been making, to complete his book on Frederick the Great, he leaves himself open to a passion for youth and life's energy, and into that openness—and the imagination that goes with it—steps young Tadzio, who represents the beauty and energy Aschenbach has lost. That loss is the place where pederasty enters.

Discipline. The strength of Aschenbach's life has for a long time, during his book-writing, lain in his addiction to form on the page, and to a quiet bachelor life. (He hardly noticed it, when his wife passed away.) The relaxation of that discipline, as he traveled to Venice and the south, was too much for him.

Characters

Aschenbach is a writer and historian who has long been devoted to his study of the life of the Prussian king, Frederick the Great—himself the archetype of a disciplined and organizing monarch. The accumulated life-passions, which Aschenbach had long been repressing, bring to the surface his longing for youth and freedom. Unfortunately, the shock of change is too great, and it finishes him off.

Tadzio Is the handsome fourteen year old Polish boy Aschenbach falls for. The more unconscious he is, of the passions he arouses in the older man, the more totally himself Tadzio is, and the more he excites Aschenbach's fascination.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Aschenbach (open)

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?