

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in **THOMAS MANN'S DEATH IN VENICE**

(Gustave Aschenbach) *sensuous*

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

1 Uneasy/restless/tired Almost imperceptibly, the fatigue of his routine and writing slips up on Aschenbach. One day, after a hard three hours of concentrated writing, in which he was able to maintain his careful standards, and strong prose movement, he went out for a walk after lunch, and found that he was still in the midst of the writing process, in his mind. He had not slept well, and he could not relax—though there was no source of anxiety assailing him. He wished he could take a nap, as once he had been able, but no longer. He walked into the English Gardens, seeking peace, but he was still unable to find his center.

2 Startled/ close to the uncanny Aschenbach was returning home, from his walk in the gardens, but, tiring of the sultry weather, stopped at a tram-station to get a ride. While standing there he became aware of a strange looking guy, who gave him a major jolt. 'He was of medium height, thin, beardless, and strikingly stub-nosed...the man had a bold and domineering, even a ruthless, air, and his lips completed the picture by seeming to curl back...' Aschenbach realized that he was staring at the guy, almost inadvertently, and in fact, now, that the guy was staring back. It was a weird and unsettling contact for Aschenbach.

3 Bored/tired/restless/disturbed 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.

4 Startled/shocked/concerned Deeply self-aware, Aschenbach knew that he was heading south in search of fresh experience, and yet he was drawn up short by an exemplary experience that hit him on the boat he was taking to Venice. There was a man trying to recapture his youth, and doubtless telling Aschenbach something about himself. 'He was an old man, beyond a doubt, with wrinkles and crow's feet round eyes and mouth.' His false teeth were cheap and unconvincing, his little red dyed moustache was a poor excuse at virility. In short, Aschenbach saw himself in this guy, and worried lest he be sucked into a fake image of eternal youth.

5 Transfixed/delighted/charmed 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.'

6 Fascinated/overwhelmed 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, 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.

7 Mythologically-driven/ecstatic The literary cultural meaning of Tadzio competes, in Aschenbach, with purely sensuous attraction. Imagine the following, which comes from a world famous novelist: 'The sight of this living figure, virginally pure and austere...beautiful as a tender young god emerging from the depths of sea and sky, outrunning the element—it conjured up mythologies, it was like a primeval legend...' Aschenbach drives his jungle fantasy still deeper, into the place where he is touching not just his personal needs but the pure Platonic essence of beauty. 'This legend was handed down from the beginning of time,' thinks Aschenbach.

8 Narcissistic/aesthetic/decadent

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.

9 Conscientious/sensual/vulnerable Although the municipal authorities of Venice try to conceal the fact, rumor gets out that a wave of cholera is growing in the human and infected city. Aschenbach is deeply aware of the symbolic meaning of this sickness, which seems to interpenetrate with his own not quite balanced pursuit of southern needs, perhaps with the extravagant oversensitivity he has devoted to the meaning of Tadzio. Against his conscience, Aschenbach declines to tell Tadzio's mother of the impending danger, so that Tadzio will not leave the scene; but while dealing with this fault in judgment, Aschenbach himself falls ill of cholera, and dies in his beach chair.

10 Character interactions Aschenbach is a widower, with one daughter—to whom he seems to have no relation. We see him with no collegial/artistic relations, except the painter Lisabeta, whom he meets in the south, but with whom he barely intersects, contenting himself with

pronouncements to her about his views of art. The strongest feelings he expresses are of course for Tadzio, but though he admires the boy's grace, he is not uncomfortable thinking of him as an early death. Aschenbach is a severe aesthete, a loner and a visionary, but in the end sick as the world around him is, and no longer able to return to the productive—but exhausting—art routines that had made him successful.

THOMAS MANN THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN (Hans Castorp) *discovering*

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 Hans Castorp is a bland and 'ordinary' German who takes off from his job for three weeks, to visit a cousin who is in a sanatorium high in the Swiss Alps. As his train climbs into the mountains, and leaves daily business life behind, Hans finds himself being drawn up into a 'magic atmosphere' which he will find it hard to leave. He enters a society of recoverers from such ailments as tuberculosis, yet finds them reluctant to return to the world they had left behind; they are embossed, as he becomes, in a high-altitude, spiritually intense atmosphere from which they are barely capable of returning.

Parallels Homer and Dante loom over this novel. Hans Castorp is a kind of Odysseus, wandering through existential disclosures on the 'mountain,' while the entire 'quest for salvation,' that Dante enacts on the way to the Paradiso, is unforgettable when reading *The Magic Mountain*. Both Wagner (in *Tannhaeuser*, 1845), and Schubert, whose folk songs for Mann represent German nationalism, are part of the text's important artistic outreach. Hesse's *Demian* (1919) can represent the richness of the European *Bildungsroman*, which goes back at least to Rousseau's *Emile*, 1763, or, depending on your view, to Homer's Telemachus.

Illustrative moments

Character

1 Ordinary/rising/in mystery Hans Castorp first appears to us quietly: 'an unassuming young man was traveling, in midsummer, from his native city of Hamburg to Davos-Platz in the Canton of the Grisons, on a three-week visit.' The picture of Hans enlarges but remains quiet: 'he sat alone in his little grey-upholstered compartment, with his alligator-skin hand bag, his traveling rug, and his winter overcoat swinging on its hook. The window was down, the afternoon grew cool...' On all sides the narrow gauge railroad moved through a sparser, and more treeless rising altitude, the air thinning. We have a sense of mystery about this trip with the young man.

2 Transformative/discovering Hans is leaving his own world behind him. 'Two days' travel separated the youth'—he is 'a tender product of the sheltered life'—from his own world.' Spatial separation was working in him, even more powerfully than time can do, to remove him from the person he was a short time ago. His life back home, where he was just on the verge of entering his professional career as a partner in a firm of shipbuilders, began to slip away from him. Towering peaks began to appear in the distance, and he is relieved to see his cousin.

3 Disoriented/fascinated Directly upon arrival in the sanatorium, and after having met a number of the seemingly permanent guests, Hans begins to feel seriously disoriented, doubtless by the sudden change in altitude and breathing. When asked his age he is not sure. 'It seems to me I cannot anymore trust my five senses.' Hans has to lie down, to keep warm and horizontal, in order to remain in touch with his body. Yet when the impressive guest, Settembrini, suggests that

maybe Hans would like to descend the mountain and leave, Hans is plainly disturbed, and rejects the idea.

4 Vulnerable/transported With the passage of a couple of weeks, Hans begins to adventure out onto mountain paths where none of his fellow sanatorium guests are to be found. One afternoon as he is climbing a slope, and thanks to an altitude change, he finds himself beset by a nosebleed, and must lie down, staunch the blood, and for a prolonged time work to regain his oxygen level and balance. 'He felt no unpleasant sensation, the blood-letting had had a soothing effect,' but he was simply aware of himself breathing, being there. And only recently he had been immersed in daily commercial life, 'down there!'

5 Out of body/transported/loving While extended in the snow, during his nosebleed, Hans 'suddenly found himself in the far distant past'; so 'strongly, so resistlessly, to the annihilation of time and space; one might have said it was a lifeless body lying there...while the actual Hans Castorp moved in that far-away time and place...' The memory to which his body yields is of a brief teen- age love affair with a young man he never saw again. Slowly Hans returns into himself, finds his way down the slope, and exhaustedly returns to the sanatorium.

6 Absorbed/preoccupied Hans becomes increasingly involved in the social and cultural world of the mountain sanatorium, in which issues large and small pass in waves, preoccupying the guests. Hans hears wise and subtle men discuss politics, destiny, the meaning of life, and youngsters like himself play the games of their own ages. Madame Chauchat, seated at an adjacent table, becomes a flirt-and-glance partner of Hans, who dwells for hours, even days, on the implications of a glance, or a whispered conversation. These games are an end in themselves, and preoccupy Hans when he is not out on the mountain.

7 Searching/self-reflecting As winter slowly sets in, Hans—who by this time has virtually forgotten his plans to return to his former business role—finds himself increasingly absorbed with issues of science, and of the nature of consciousness and life. He spends his quiet days surrounded by books of anatomy, physiology, biology. He sought to know what life is, but found the answer elusive. '...between life and inanimate nature yawned a gulf which research strove in vain to bridge...' Were life and consciousness simply a fever in matter, which bubbled up into evanescent existence?

8 Fusing/becoming one/organic Hans Castorp is both a scientific realist, and a mystic of the meaning of life. 'He beheld the image of life in flower, its structure, its flesh-borne loveliness.' The organic branchings of life reach down over him, and embrace him, as he lies on his book covered bed. 'These arms were of unspeakable sweetness.' 'He laid his hands upon the flesh of her upper arms...and upon his lips he felt the moist clinging of her kiss.' For this instant Hans is at one with the organic, which, though constantly overwhelmed in the mountains by snow and ice, is the lifeline he continually recovers in the sanatorium.

9 Risk-taking/challenge-accepting Hans chooses to confront the grandeur and danger of the mountains on several occasions, as he becomes part of the sanatorium world. He chooses a pre-storm occasion, when white-out conditions are being predicted, for his boldest excursion out onto the highest peaks around the sanatorium. Knowing, at a certain point, that he should turn back, he accepts the challenge of the storm and continues climbing. Though he survives, the immediate consequence is that he must hole up in a mountain shelter, that he must fumble his way back down hazardous slopes. His survival, he tells us, is an essential part of the healing he is trying to promise himself in the sanatorium.

Character interactions

10 Profound/instructed/transformed Hans Castorp is 'unassuming,' both when we first meet him, in the train, and in his interactions within the sanatorium, where he is a small player—until one gets into his soul and sees that he is trying out the dimensions of a profoundly transforming

experience. With time in the sanatorium, with his exposure to the profound and speculative conversations that hold sway there, with the issues of the meaning of life he fields, Hans becomes a kind of barometer of his time and of its meanings. The magic mountain grows out of him, and he inhabits it as a growth process.

THOMAS MANN TONIO KRUEGER (Tonio Krueger) *sensuous-rational*

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Character *Tonio Krueger* was one of two early short stories—*Death in Venice* was the other—in which Mann dealt with the contrast between the cold bourgeois north, of his own Hamburg background, and the passionate, sensuous south—Italy especially. Tonio Krueger is himself a blend of these two cultural environments, a child of an upscale merchant family, whose Mother was from the south, and who brought into Tonio's life the passion and concern with art which his father didn't understand. Tonio defines himself by the search for the meaning of the art in life.

Parallels The great German classicists of the 18th century—Winckelmann, Herder, Goethe—all shared a longing for the south, by which they meant the classical remains of Greece and Italy. *Winckelmann's History of Ancient Art* (1764), Goethe's *Journal of my Trip to Italy* (1816), and Herder's *Journal of my Trip in the Year 1769*: all these works celebrate both the cultural and fleshly attractions of 'the south,' which seemed to provide an antidote to the cold North; the world which is forever inwardly distant to Tonio, who houses within him the classic Germanic debate of north with south. One can hear the same polarity pulsing in André Gide's *Journals* (1889-1927) or Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,' 1899, in the latter of which industrial society throbs with longing for the 'African primitive.'

Illustrative moments

Character

1 Lover/romantic/insecure We meet Tonio as a young schoolboy eagerly awaiting a rendez-vous with his friend Hans, to walk home together. Tonio loves Hans, who is outgoing, super handsome, and popular—none of which traits quite apply to Tonio, although his 'Latin looks' give him a mystery in his local environment. Tonio is aware that Hans has almost forgotten their rendez-vous, which means much less to Hans than to Tonio. 'He who loves the more is the inferior, and must suffer,' reflects the fourteen-year old Tonio. Hans is sensitive to Tonio, but cannot see the world from his point of view.

2 Handsome/sensuous Tonio is physically distinctive, standing out for his sensuous mien—and for distinctive eyes which will play a part in his later personal development as an artist. '...beneath Tonio's round fur cap was a brunette face with the finely chiseled features of the south; the dark eyes, with delicate shadows and too heavy lids, looked dreamily and a little timorously on the world.' Conscious of himself as a physical presence, Tonio will be drawn to inwardly beautiful people, throughout his maturing, and they will form the basis of his aesthetic philosophy of life.

3 North-south split/bourgeois/aesthete Tonio is very drawn to his 'southern mother,' though he finds her hard to understand, and out of tune with the Hanseatic business world in which married life has placed her. He accedes to the house rules imposed by his father, and considers them the norm of civilized life, yet at the same time suspects that his deeper self cannot be captured by such rules of middle class life. For his entire life he lives a provocative indecision of

whether he must return to the organized social being in him, or whether he should give freedom to the artistic impulses that wish to shape his whole life.

4 Sensuous/ searching/inner disorganization In late adolescence Tonio breaks from his northern world and moves to the south, the land of his senses. (Goethe was constantly thinking over the meaning of this journey south, and Thomas Mann builds on the same vision.) 'He lived in large cities and in the south, promising himself a luxurious ripening of his art by southern suns; but his heart being dead and loveless, he fell into adventures of the flesh...' For years Tonio sought for some harmony of discipline and art, but all the time grew more painfully troubled by the conflict between the two poles of his personality.

5 Aesthete/ innovative/daring Especially in extensive conversations with his painter friend, Lisabeta, Tonio deepens his sense of what art must be, to give life to a person. 'If you care too much about what you have to say, if your heart is too much in it, you can be pretty sure of making a mess....only the irritations and icy ecstasies of the artist's nervous system are artistic. The artist must be un-human, extra-human; he must stand in a queer aloof relationship to our humanity.' In such thoughts, Tonio comes close to his frontiers of aesthetic discovery, and to the territory where he will ultimately have to pitch his life-tent.

6 Northward drawn/bourgeois watcher Tonio Kroeger eventually returns on a trip to the north, and to his old homeland. He is shocked, on that return, to find that his old house has been converted into a Public Library, which pleases him, and to find himself suspected by the Police—his papers were non-existent—of being a fraudster. (The proper role of the artist is fraud, he reflects.) From these somewhat alienating experiences, Tonio makes his way farther north to Denmark, just across the North Sea from the land where he was brought up. There, as in Hamburg, he loves what he sees as the innocence of the bourgeois, friendly and innocent faces of people swimming and playing on the beaches.

7 Bourgeoisie-fascinated/self-understanding As Tonio was taking his ease, in a resort hotel in Denmark, he was astonished to see two visions from the past, who symbolized the world from which he had started his life. He saw Hans, the boy he loved when he was fourteen, and Inge, the sweetheart he had courted a few years later in Hamburg. There they were, united to one another, this perfect exemplar of the bourgeoisie, happy, 'having fun,' successful in life as the bourgeois sees it. 'They were Hans and Ingeborg not so much by virtue of individual traits...as by similarity of race and type...the blond fair-haired breed...'

8 Maturing/comprehending/synthesizing In a final letter to Lisabeta from Denmark, Tonio reflects on his return to the north and his attitude toward the bourgeoisie. Though he is returning to 'Arcady,' the south beloved of German writers and artists throughout modern times, the place from where he writes with great success, his heart, he says, remains deeply involved with the northern bourgeoisie. He promises that he will return to the south with a new love of mankind, even with the love Saint Paul adores in *Corinthians*, the absence of which leaves one 'sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.'

9 Suspected/enlightened In Munich, on his return north, Tonio had been questioned by the police. In retrospect, from the far end of his journey home, it seems to Tonio the whole conflict of the artistic with the bourgeois is summed up. Mistaken for a felon on his way to Denmark, Tonio seizes the symbolic irony, that he, the son of the north, who is in fact returning there to review the meaning of 'northern bourgeois' for his life, should be suspected of such a subversive act. As it turns out, of course, he is charged with nothing, but perhaps forced to realize, anew, that he must pay his dues to both his northern bourgeois soul, and his southern writerliness.

Character interactions

10 Symbolic figure/narcissistic Tonio Krueger is indeed a full character—not an empty drive, like Encolpius, nor a robust action-engaged figure like Oliver Twist—a narcissistic, self-searching symbol of the desire to harmonize art with life. He lives among people but with little

personal interaction—he loves Hans, but Hans is a blond outsider; he talks with Lisabeta, but only to ‘expound’ on his views of art—but he reflects, constantly, on the personal make-up culture and other people have made possible for him. Though he subscribes to a severe aesthetic of ‘inhumanism,’ he is profoundly susceptible to the bourgeois humanism he was born in.