**Death in Venice** Thomas Mann

**Summary**

 Gustav von Aschenbach is an aging German writer who is the paragon of solemn dignity and fastidious self-discipline. Determinedly cerebral and duty-bound, he believes that true art is produced only in "defiant despite" of corrupting passions and physical weaknesses.

When Aschenbach has the urge to travel, he tells himself that he might find artistic inspiration from a change of scene. Aschenbach's subsequent trip to Venice is the first indulgence he has allowed himself in years; it signals the beginning of his decline. Aschenbach allows the languid Venetian atmosphere and gently rocking gondolas to lull him into a defenseless state. At his hotel he notices an extremely beautiful fourteen-year-old Polish boy named Tadzio, who is visiting with his mother, sisters, and governess. At first, Aschenbach's interest in the boy is purely aesthetic, or so he tells himself. However, he soon falls deeply and obsessively in love with the boy, although the two never have direct contact.

Aschenbach spends days on end watching Tadzio play on the beach, even following his family around the streets of Venice. Cholera infects the city, and although the authorities try to conceal the danger from the tourists, Aschenbach soon learns the facts about the lethal epidemic. However, he cannot bear to leave Tadzio and stays on in Venice. He becomes progressively daring in his pursuit of the boy, gradually becoming more and more debased, until he finally dies of the cholera, degraded, a slave to his passions, stripped of his dignity.

**Characters**

**Gustav von Aschenbach**  -  An aging writer, honorable, fastidious, and repressed, of high public status in Germany. He travels to Venice and stays in a hotel where the beautiful boy Tadzio is also a guest. As he gives way to his repressed sexuality and falls in love with Tadzio while embracing beauty and the sensual side of art, he also abandons morality and dignity, abandoning himself to passion, decadence, and ultimately death.

**Tadzio**  -  An intensely beautiful Polish boy of about fourteen. He stays with his mother, sisters, and governess at the same hotel in Venice as Gustav von Aschenbach. Tadzio is pure and innocent but also aware of Aschenbach's interest in him.

**Jashu** -  Tadzio's closest companion at the hotel. He seems to idolize Tadzio, acting as his "vassal." Jashu has glossy black hair, a sturdy build, and a rowdy temperament, serving as a polar opposite to Tadzio.

**Analysis**

*Death in Venice* is a story about the artist and the nature of art. At the opening of the novella, Gustav von Aschenbach, while possessing a latent sensuality, exists as a man who has always held his passions in check, never allowing them expression either in his life or in his art. Like the turn-of-the-century bourgeois European culture he represents, Aschenbach is, in Freudian terms, "repressed"; a state of such imbalance that, it was believed, could not long remain stable, nor could it produce truly inspired art. However, having kept his passions under such tight control for so long, once Aschenbach begins to let down his guard against them, they rise up in redoubled force and take over his life. Once Aschenbach admits sensual beauty into his life, represented by the boy Tadzio, all of his moral standards break down, and he becomes a slave to beauty, a slave to desire; he becomes debased. Thus, Aschenbach undergoes a total displacement from one extreme of art to the other, from the cerebral to the physical, from pure form to pure emotion. Thomas Mann's novella warns of the dangers--indeed, the deathly dangers--posed by either extreme. *Death in Venice* is written according to a method Thomas Mann called "myth plus psychology." Both elements play equally important roles in tracing Aschenbach's decline. Tadzio is described in mythical terms and compared to Greek sculpture, to the god of love, to Hyacinth and Narcissus, to Plato's character Phaedrus. Aschenbach's trip across the lagoon into Venice is portrayed in terms that suggest the legendary journey across the River Styx into the Underworld. Strange red-haired figures consistently reappear to Aschenbach, suggesting demons or devils. All of these mythological references serve to universalize the characters and their experiences in the story. Psychological elements also figure prominently in the novella: At the beginning of the plot, Aschenbach has firmly repressed his libidinal drives. Yet, as Freud would have predicted, repression only forces his drives to emerge by some other means, through dreams: Aschenbach has daydreams with the intensity of visions. His daydream of a tropical swamp and his dream of the orgiastic worship of the "stranger-god" epitomize the Freudian longing for the ultimate erotic abandon in death.

Thomas Mann was an economical and oblique writer. He does not waste a word: Every detail he includes is significant, and every detail serves his strategy of suggesting, hinting, rather than directly telling. Seemingly marginal particulars, such as a stormy sky, the stonemasons' yards selling blank gravestones, the black color of the gondola, or the long, exposed teeth of a grimacing figure, reminiscent of a skull, are all instrumental in establishing an atmosphere of foreboding and death. The reader need not wait for the end of the story to make the link between sensual art and death; Mann forges the link gradually through a variety of motifs working in concert.

## Chapter 1

 Summary

 Gustav von Aschenbach is an aging, nationally renowned writer living alone in Munich. The year is unspecified, but it falls within the early 1900s,and is described as "the year in which...so grave a threat seemed to hang over the peace of Europe." One morning, after a particularly demanding session of writing, Aschenbach goes on a walk to clear his mind. A storm begins to brew, and the writer turns homeward; he passes through empty streets past the stonemasons' yards, where the headstones for sale constitute a sort of graveyard, and stops to read the gilt lettering on a Byzantine mortuary chapel referring to the afterlife. Here, he suddenly notices a strange-looking man with red hair, dressed as a tourist. The man has a grimace that displays his long white teeth and gums, and Aschenbach realizes that the man is staring back at him aggressively. Though the meeting comes to nothing, the encounter stirs in Aschenbach a sudden desire to travel to foreign lands.

In a sort of daydream, Aschenbach vividly envisions a tropical swampland described in highly charged language evoking a sense of combined fertility and decay, eroticism, and the grotesque. He quickly masters his state of wanderlust, however, and returns to his habitual mindset-one of willful efficiency, moderation, and fastidious self-discipline. He believes perfectionism to be the essence of artistic talent and that excessive passion impedes a writer's pursuit of excellence. However, thinking that his work might benefit from an element of inspired improvisation, he finally decides that a short vacation might improve his productivity. Looking again for the red-haired man, Aschenbach finds that he has vanished as suddenly and mysteriously as he had appeared.

### Commentary

From its opening sentences, Death in Venice establishes an ominous tone. The descriptions of the dire political situation, the storm, and the menacing-looking stranger (his red hair suggesting the devil) foretell impending dangers. Specifically, the gravestones and mortuary introduce thoughts of death. The Byzantine architecture with its Greek lettering introduces the motif of the classical world, which will pervade the novella. Mann is famous for his economical writing: It is important to realize that there is hardly a wasted word in his text; details such as these are almost always deliberate and significant.

Also note that Mann's parallel presentation of his main character and the current political circumstances establishes what will become a symbolic link between the two: The declining Aschenbach will come to stand for a civilization blinded to its inner decay and on the brink of inevitable war.

The first chapter additionally introduces a polarity around which the novella is conceptually structured: the opposition of Northern European self-restraint and southern sensuality. Mann, following Plato, believed this conflict between conscious will and uncontrolled passion, between rational morality and passionate art, to be the crucial struggle in human existence. A descent to either extreme Mann saw as morally corrupting. While Aschenbach is characterized as the prototypical upstanding, stiff, and dignified Prussian intellectual, his vision of the tropical scene and his desire to travel south hint at the underlying passions that will lead him to the degradation and death promised in the books title.

## Chapter 2

 Summary

 Aschenbach is the son of a high-ranking legal official descended from a family with a long tradition of austere and disciplined service to the Prussian state. His mother was the daughter of a music director from Bohemia. The narrator explains that it was this marriage between disciplined conscientiousness and darker, more passionate inclinations that made Aschenbach the artist he is. We are told that Aschenbach achieved fame at an early age, and the pressure to produce, which he always felt, prevented him from ever knowing the carefree idleness of youth. Aschenbach's dutiful devotion to work, however, wreaks havoc on his naturally fragile health, and he is constantly battling illness. Thus, central to both his life and his writing is the notion that all great things can exist only in "defiant despite" of suffering, poverty, physical frailty, corruption, and passion. For him, art is the triumph over these torments. The heroes of Aschenbach's books are those who are able to enact this triumph. The narrator posits that such heroes are "the heroes of our age," and that the appeal of Aschenbach's writing is based on the fact that the members of his generation recognized in his works a celebration of themselves and their own hard work, pursued doggedly even on the verge of exhaustion. While Aschenbach was headstrong and intellectually radical as a youth, he now considers his greatest achievement to be his attainment of dignity.

### Commentary

This section develops Aschenbach's character as a man who has overcome passion and the physical, achieving his successes by sheer force of will. Yet the fact that he has lived his entire life without really acknowledging his more impulsive side indicates potential future problems: According to Freud, whose works Mann had read, repressed psychological drives soon rise to the surface; we can safely assume that it will not be long before Aschenbach must face the rearing head of his own reigned in nature.

In addition to Freud, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche also deeply influenced Mann. Nietzsche wrote about the genesis of Greek tragedy, arguing against the cliché of the ancient Greeks as statuesquely serene figures in an ideal Mediterranean landscape; rather, he believed that the classic tragedies had to be generated by a people that was not only highly civilized and cultured but also passionate; only in the balance of these forces could art arise. Nietzsche described the Greeks as maintaining a balance between two forces, the Dionysian, or those associated with the god Dionysus, and the Apollonian, those associated with the god Apollo. While Dionysus was the god of fecund nature, spring, regeneration, wine and intoxication, and orgiastic extravagance, Apollo was the god of light, of form, that which shapes drives and instincts into clarity and order. While Dionysus was often associated with music--a passionate, engrossing art form--Apollo was associated with sculpture--a rigid, detached art form. Nietzsche used this polarity to explain what he saw as being wrong with late 19th-century Germany: He believed that the Germans were too "Apollonian," too stiff, too restrained, too cerebral to create truly great art. He predicted that the Dionysian forces would soon erupt if held in check too long and that the result could be devastating. Thus, Nietzsche used mythological terms to explain what Freud described in psychological terms. Mann attempts in his novella to effect a blend between the mythological and the psychological.

Also in this chapter, Mann draws a link between Aschenbach and his historical era: Aschenbach's work addresses the bourgeois, middle-class establishment, and his readers see themselves in his work. Thus paralleled, Aschenbach's psychological repression stands as a symbol for bourgeois Europe's repression; his overly Apollonian characteristics correspond to an excessive privileging of control and cold formality in the European sensibility. The parallel also extends to the fates of both the writer and his culture: Aschenbach's death will serve as a prediction of the death of the old hierarchy in the coming war.

## Chapter 3a

 Summary

 Aschenbach embarks on his journey approximately two weeks after the events in Chapter 1. He first travels to an Adriatic island but finds that its rainy climate and provincial flavor do not satisfy his longing for a "fantastic mutation of normal reality"; ten days after his arrival, he leaves for Venice.

Boarding the boat that will take him to this city rising from the sea, Aschenbach is met by a shabby hunchbacked seaman. A man with a goatee and the mannerisms of a circus director takes his money and hands him his ticket. Both men are showily obsequious and distastefully ingratiating, as if fearing that their customer will change his mind about the voyage. Aschenbach watches a group of noisily laughing and joking young men also on board the ship. Upon closer examination of one of the more conspicuous of the group, Aschenbach realizes to his horror that this particular "young man" is in fact quite old and wrinkled: His rosy cheeks are painted on, his hair is a wig, his moustache dyed, his teeth false. He wonders whether the other merrymakers simply do not notice. Suddenly, Aschenbach feels that the world around him is becoming strange and dreamlike; as the steamer begins to withdraw from shore, he feels an "irrational alarm." However, the uniform grayness of sea and sky soon lull Aschenbach into a state of sleep.

Although in previous trips to the city he has always been greeted by sun, Aschenbach finds the sky over Venice to be heavy with clouds, making it appear to him a "different Venice" than before. Again he sights the gaudy old man, now disgustingly drunk and gesturing lewdly. Once more Aschenbach feels the world spinning out of control. As he disembarks, the man approaches him, drooling and repellant, smiling phonily and extending his compliments to Aschenbach's "sweetheart."

Aschenbach steps into the gondola that will take him on the next part of his journey: The black boat is likened to a coffin and linked with death, "the last journey." Seating himself, however, Aschenbach feels not a sense of dread, but rather one of lulling luxury; he yields to a drowsy languor. However, he notices with a start that the gondola is headed out to sea rather than to the vaporetto stop where he had intended to take the smaller boat that would bring him to his hotel. He quarrels with the argumentative gondolier, who has reddish eyebrows and often bares his white teeth as he struggles to guide the boat. The man refuses to turn the boat around or to inform his passenger of how much the ride will cost, saying simply, "You will pay." Aschenbach again feels himself sinking into a torpor. They reach the shore and Aschenbach goes to get change to pay the gondolier, but upon returning, he finds the man has vanished. An old man tells him that the gondolier owns no license, is a known criminal, and left to avoid the police.

### Commentary

The story's location in Venice is highly significant: Italy represents the sensuous south, in contrast to Aschenbach's austere native Germany; Aschenbach's physical journey from one culture to the other and from one climate to the other parallels his internal descent from cool control to fiery passion. In particular, the city of Venice can be seen as a symbol for Aschenbach himself: Venice is unique for its daring construction; it is a city built in the middle of a lagoon, built and maintained by sheer will over the forces of nature. Similarly, Aschenbach considers true art to be the victory of the will over physical needs and natural impulses (see summary of Chapter 2), and he considers himself to have accomplished such victories. Yet it is also well known that despite its mask of glory, Venice is gradually sinking, literally rotting from within; again, the same might be said of Aschenbach.

As in previous chapters, ominous portents abound. The employees on the steamer make such a show that we begin to question their intents; they seem to issue from a world of artifice and fraud. The unexpectedly gray sky creates a dismal atmosphere. The grotesque old man not only suggests deceit but also embodies Aschenbach's fears about himself: Might Aschenbach's pursuit of relaxation move him toward a similar degradation into lust and baseness, a similar loss of all dignity in old age? The gondola is a clear symbol of death, and the criminal gondolier evokes the ominous figure from Chapter 1 whose appearance first gave Aschenbach the idea to travel. His statement "You will pay" is exceedingly ominous. The journey in the gondola also suggests the voyage to the Underworld taken by many classical heroes, such as Odysseus, Theseus, and Hercules: These heroes entered the realm of the dead by crossing the River Styx at the hands of the skeletal boatman Charon. The episode is only one of a multitude of references to Greek myth, and, as with many of these references, it functions as parody: while the classical heroes' crossings were proof of their strength and determination, Aschenbach's crossing is marked by a weak surrender. Moreover, this is only the first in what will become a pattern for Aschenbach of apathy and surrender to mindlessness and physical comfort.

## Chapter 3

 Summary

 Once at the hotel, Aschenbach settles into his room and then goes down to wait in the parlor until dinner. The hotel guests are an international mix. At a nearby table, Aschenbach notices three adolescent girls and a boy, all speaking Polish and accompanied by a governess. The boy appears to be around fourteen, and Aschenbach finds him "entirely beautiful" with his golden ringlets, a divine serenity, a countenance suggestive of Greek sculpture, and dressed in a child's blue sailor-suit. The boy's rich, pampered aspect is in sharp contrast to his sisters' stiff, chaste dresses. The children's mother appears to lead them into the dining room; her aristocratic clothes and jewelry suggest that the family possesses great wealth; as the boy exits behind her, his eyes meet Aschenbach's.

The next morning, Aschenbach finds the weather still overcast and the air heavy; he recalls a previous visit to Venice during which similar weather had caused him to fall ill and forced him to return home. He wonders whether this trip will end the same way. At breakfast, Aschenbach sees the Polish boy arriving late to his family's table; he is again startled by the boy's "godlike" beauty. Aschenbach mentally compares the boy to Eros, the Greek god of love, and finds in his complexion the sheen of Parian marble. Aschenbach spends the morning on the hotel's beach, delighting in the spectacle of carefree and playful vacationers. He muses that he finds the sea seductive because it embodies the "unarticulated" and "immeasurable," a "nothingness" for which Aschenbach guiltily longs. He again sights the Polish boy, whose scowl of disdain for a somewhat coarse-mannered Russian family nearby seems to prove that he is, in fact, human, capable of feeling, and earns the boy Aschenbach's further respect. Aschenbach takes out his traveling writing-case and begins to work but soon tosses it aside, not wanting to miss the diversions of the scene before him; eating some ripe strawberries from a passing vendor, he watches the boy play with the other children, one of whom, "Jashu," seems his closest companion, his "vassal and friend." He feels his mind paralyzed by the languorous atmosphere: the still sea, the warm yet cloudy day. Listening for what the boy's name might be, Aschenbach makes out melodious but unclear syllables like "Adgio" or "Adgiu"; he finally decides the name must be "Tadzio" or "Tadziu," a nickname for the Polish "Tadeusz."

Aschenbach returns to his room at midday and gazes in the mirror at his aging features. He is joined in the elevator by a group of boys, including Tadzio. Up close, Aschenbach notices the boy looks pale and sickly. The thought that Tadzio might not live to grow old gives Aschenbach an inexplicable sense of relief.

On a walk through the streets Aschenbach finds a suffocating sultriness pervading the air, caused by the sirocco (a hot wind from the Libyan deserts that blows chiefly on Italy, Malta, and Sicily), he feels a feverish excitement blended with exhaustion and knows his own health is in danger; he decides to leave Venice for a resort near Trieste, and he notifies the hotel of his plans. The next morning at breakfast the porter comes to tell Aschenbach that the hotel's private transportation is leaving soon for the station; Aschenbach, having spotted Tadzio's sisters but not the boy himself, feels the porter is rushing him. Finally, he tells the porter that the coach may leave without him and take his trunk; he will take the public steamboat when he is ready. As he rises to leave, Tadzio enters, and Aschenbach feels acute regret as he crosses the lagoon to the station. He arrives still undecided whether to take the train or not, but he soon learns that his luggage was mistakenly checked for Como, forcing him to remain in Venice until he can regain the luggage; wild with joy, Aschenbach returns to the hotel. Relaxing in his room that afternoon, Aschenbach sights Tadzio through the window and realizes that the boy has been the reason for his reluctance to leave Venice. He sinks into his chair and rotates his limp arms in a "gesture of calm acceptance."

### Commentary

Aschenbach's initial interest in the boy Tadzio is something he himself does not understand. From the very beginning, Tadzio represents pure artistic beauty. At first, Aschenbach believes that he can admire this beauty dispassionately, from a purely intellectual, aesthetic standpoint. Later, he will try to convince himself that he desires the boy only as an inspiration for more of his principled, dignified writing. By the end of the novella, however, Aschenbach will admit to himself that beauty and art, as represented by Tadzio, are corrupting: Tadzio will lead Aschenbach to abandon all morals and dignity, to surrender himself to decadent passion, as the gesture of "calm acceptance" here foretells.

## Chapter 4

 Summary

 Although Aschenbach's luggage soon returns, he decides to stay in Venice. He continues to see Tadzio constantly, occasionally inside the hotel or around the city and always for hours each day on the beach. This routine brings meaning to Aschenbach's days. The narration follows Aschenbach's thoughts as he worshipfully studies the most intimate details of Tadzio's physique and movements; he feels he is gazing at Beauty incarnate. A vision comes to him of Socrates wooing Phaedrus beneath a tree in Athens, teaching him about desire and virtue. In the vision, the elderly, ugly Socrates tells the young and beautiful Phaedrus that Beauty is the only form of the spiritual that may be perceived by the senses, and is, thus, the lover's path to the spirit. Having this access to the spirit renders the lover even more divine than the beautiful beloved, Socrates slyly explains.

Suddenly, Aschenbach is inspired to write, to express his views on a particular "important cultural problem," a "question of taste," which has come to his attention during his travels. He decides he must write his treatise in Tadzio's presence, using the boy's body as a model and inspiration. As he works, he experiences a "joy of the word" more acute than he has ever felt, and when he finishes, he is exhausted and full of an ashamed sense of having indulged in some transgression. The next day, he pursues the boy down to the sea with the idea of making his acquaintance, but, about to lay his trembling hand upon his shoulder, Aschenbach hesitates and turns back embarrassed. The narrator is distanced from Aschenbach, reporting that it "seems" that the "aging lover" wishes to retain his illusions and not to know the reality of the boy's personality. The narrator poses ironic, or even mocking, rhetorical questions about the mystery of an artist's temperament. We are told that Aschenbach is no longer capable of self-criticism and that he is unable to analyze for himself whether conscience or weakness prevented him from speaking to the boy.

Aschenbach no longer keeps track of his idle hours, and whereas he would have previously taken advantage of leisure's refreshments by working more energetically between diversions, he now allows all of his energy to be consumed by his feverish emotion. He sleeps restlessly and wakes early to watch the sunrise, which he perceives in terms of Greek mythological figures: He imagines he sees Eos, goddess of the dawn, followed by her brother Helios, god of the sun. So, too, is the rest of the day mythically transfigured: Clouds are the "flocks of the gods," Poseidon rides the waves, Tadzio reminds him of the figure Hyacinthus.

To his joy, Aschenbach soon realizes that Tadzio has become aware of his admiration. Tadzio seems to walk past Aschenbach's bathing cabin purposefully, and the eyes of the two often meet; Aschenbach is able to veil his emotion, but in Tadzio's eyes there is a look of sweet curiosity. One night, after noticing the boy's family's absence at dinner, Aschenbach encounters them returning from the pier; caught unprepared, he is unable to mask his affection, and Tadzio bestows on him a smile described as that of Narcissus, inquisitive yet troubled. Aschenbach feels the smile to be a "fateful gift"; feeling delirious and overwhelmed, he hurries off to sit alone in the hotel garden and whispers a declaration of love for Tadzio.

### Commentary

Aschenbach paraphrases Plato's text Phaedrus; the characters of Plato's dialogue are paralleled with Aschenbach and Tadzio. With his vision, Aschenbach legitimizes the views he is coming to adopt by putting them in the mouth of the great philosopher. However, Socrates here is also portrayed as "sly," as taking advantage of the naive Phaedrus; thus, the comparison also points to the vice behind Aschenbach's intentions. Perhaps Aschenbach does initially believe that his interest in the boy is purely chaste, that Tadzio will serve simply as an inspiration for his elevated philosophizing; however, his shame indicates his ultimate understanding of the immorality of the interest.

In this section, the status of the narrator within the novella becomes more intricate and problematical; this problem will become more and more pronounced as the story proceeds. Up until now in Death in Venice, the narrator is quite intertwined with Aschenbach: Mann uses a narrative style known as "erlebte Rede," or "free indirect discourse." A more typical third-person narration makes a clear distinction between narrator and character, for example, "He thought, 'Where will I go now?'" However, in free indirect discourse, the distinction is much harder to pinpoint: the characters' thoughts are not denoted as such but are simply woven into the text, for example, "Where would he go now?" Does the character wonder this, or the narrator, or both? The beginning of the novella retains such ambiguities, but as Aschenbach declines, the gap between he and the narrator becomes progressively wider. Here, the ironic tone of the narration, and the statement that Aschenbach was no longer inclined toward self-criticism, signal to readers that we are hearing the voice of the narrator; however, throughout the rest of the novella we will also continue to hear Aschenbach's thoughts; the separation between character and narrator is never completely unambiguous.

The allusion to mythical figures here helps to evoke a general mythical atmosphere to imply the story's larger, mythical proportions, and it also communicates the characters' universality. In Greek myth, Hyacinthus is a handsome Spartan youth loved by Apollo, the god of the sun, and Zephyrus, the god of the west wind. According to differing versions, he was either killed accidentally by Apollo or deliberately by Zephyrus, who was jealous of the boy's love for Apollo. The comparison between Tadzio and Hyacinthus hints that Aschenbach's love for Tadzio may be ill-fated and harmful to the boy, especially since, according to Nietzche's philosophy, Aschenbach could be described as overly Apollonion. Aschenbach's likening of Tadzio to Narcissus has the same effect: Narcissus is a mythic character whose great beauty attracted the nymph Echo; when Narcissus cruelly rejected her, she died from grief, leaving behind only her voice. To punish Narcissus, the gods made him fall in love with his own reflection in a pool, and he pined away on the shore. Thus, the allusion to Narcissus again hints at an ill-fated love, this time more harmful to the lover than the beloved: will Aschenbach die of his love for Tadzio and, like Echo, leave behind only his writings, his voice?

## Chapter 5a

 Summary

 Aschenbach notices that even as the height of the season approaches, the number of guests at the hotel dwindles. The hotel barber lets slip in conversation a remark about "the sickness" but, upon interrogation, tries to change the subject. Aschenbach perceives in the air the "sweetish medicinal" smell of bactericide and sees what are clearly euphemistic notices posted warning residents not to eat shellfish or produce or use water from the canals. The only printed information about possible epidemics is in the form of contradictory rumors in the German newspapers; consequently, all speakers of Aschenbach's mother tongue have left and he is surrounded by foreign languages. While the thought of serious danger at first makes Aschenbach nervous, the feeling soon gives way to one of elation: Aschenbach realizes "with a kind of horror" that if Tadzio were to leave, Aschenbach would not be able to go on living, but an epidemic leading to a quarantine would guarantee that Tadzio and his family would have to stay on in Venice.

No longer content to leave sightings of the boy up to chance, Aschenbach begins to follow the Polish family in their daily itinerary. He becomes fully obsessed. The narrator tells us, "His head and his heart were drunk, and his steps followed the dictates of that dark god whose pleasure it is to trample man's reason and dignity underfoot." Venice is described as a labyrinth. Aschenbach passes a beggar and a shady-looking antique salesman; the narrator asserts, "This was Venice, the flattering and suspect beauty--this city, half fairy tale and half tourist trap, in whose insalubrious air the arts once rankly and voluptuously blossomed, where composers have been inspired to lulling tones of somniferous eroticism." It is this atmosphere into which Aschenbach languidly slips.

At times, however, Aschenbach questions what is happening to him: with shame he compares his artist's life with that of his dignified, manly ancestors; yet he also tries to protect his dignity by convincing himself that art, too, is a manly battle, a defiant self-conquest--that the enslavement to passion that would normally be demeaning is, in fact, valorous for a person in love, as Aschenbach is. Still he persists in researching the progress of the spreading disease. When he asks various Venetians why the city is being disinfected, they answer that the measure is merely precautionary.

One evening, a group of street musicians gives a performance in the hotel's front garden. Aschenbach sits on the terrace sipping pomegranate juice and soda water; he enjoys the squawky singing and clownish antics because, the narrator says, "passion paralyzes discrimination." Although he maintains a casual attitude, he is in a state of rapture: Tadzio leans elegantly against a stone parapet nearby. With a sense of both triumph and terror Aschenbach feels Tadzio occasionally looking back at him, but having noticed that Tadzio is increasingly being called away by his governess when near him, Aschenbach is careful to keep a check on all signs of his feelings. The guitarist has an air of impudent bravado and a shock of red hair; by his lewd movements and suggestive winks, he makes what is merely a foolish song strangely offensive. As he marches around, Aschenbach notices that he stinks of bactericide; when he comes near, Aschenbach asks him in an undertone why Venice is being disinfected, but the performer insists that it is merely a preventive measure against the sirocco, which is known to be bad for the health, and moves off. The man is immediately descended upon and interrogated by two hotel employees, but he assures them he has been discreet and is released.

### Commentary

The spreading sickness in Venice, while important to the story's plot, is also symbolic of the sickness of passion overtaking Aschenbach. The fact that the Italians deny the severity of the health hazard augments Mann's portrayal of Venice as a place of artifice, deceit, and corruption.

The pomegranate juice that Aschenbach sips during the performance is symbolic: its red color, the standard color of passion, links it to the strawberries Aschenbach eats upon first seeing Tadzio and to the possibly infected strawberries he will eat closer to his death; so, too, are the recurring devil-like figures characterized by red hair (the musician here is one of these), and when Aschenbach dresses up for Tadzio at the end of the novella, he will wear a red tie. Red comes to symbolize not only passion but also depravity. The pomegranate also has mythical significance: in Greek myth, Persephone is abducted by the god of the Underworld. While in the underworld she unthinkingly eats a seed of a pomegranate, which is known as the food of the dead, and which binds her to spend at least half the year in Hades. Aschenbach's journey to Venice could also be seen as a journey to the Underworld (see commentary for Chapter 3). In a simple scene, through the use of myth and recurring motifs, Mann builds up a symbolic moment of layered significance, a moment that captures the major themes of his novella.

## Chapter 5b

 Summary

 The next day, Aschenbach asks a clerk at a British travel agency about the bactericide and finally forces him to admit the truth: Asiatic cholera has migrated west from India; it is now at several Mediterranean ports. In Austria, a man recently returned from Venice had been one of the illness's first victims--hence the German papers' reports. The Italian authorities have hushed up the news for the sake of the tourist industry. The authorities' corruption, in addition to the predominant sense of insecurity and crisis, has led to an abandonment of morals by the lower classes, evident in increasing criminality and drunkenness; commercial vice is now assuming extravagant forms that until now were unknown to the area and were "indigenous only to southern Italy or oriental countries." The clerk urges Aschenbach to leave, as a quarantine will be instituted any day. Aschenbach considers warning Tadzio's mother and returning home. But he remembers the Byzantine mortuary and the strange figure who first incited him to travel, and the thought of his life before these experiences fills him with repugnance. He becomes inflamed thinking of the passionate adventures he and Tadzio could have if they were to stay on in a city full of chaos.

That night, Aschenbach has a dream in which the setting is his own soul. He hears an uproar of thundering noise, including a howl with an extended "u" at the end, and he is aware of only one word, like an announcement, "the stranger-god!" A crowd of dancing, howling, torch-bearing humans dressed in animal skins tumbles down a mountainside: All seem to comprise a primitive ritual to worship the god. As the worshippers fly into an orgiastic frenzy around a huge wooden phallic symbol, Aschenbach realizes that they symbolize himself, and he is savoring the lascivious derangement within his innermost being. Aschenbach awakens from the dream devastated and irrevocably enslaved to the "daemon-god."

### Commentary

It is significant that the cholera is Asian in origin: With the addition of this detail, the Indian jungle becomes a triply loaded motif. Psychologically, it is the locus of Aschenbach's repressed impulses; it was a jungle landscape that he envisioned when he first felt the whim to travel, to indulge in the joys of a warmer climate. Mythologically, India is said to be the birthplace of the cult of Dionysus. Now, at the scientific/empirical level, it is the place of origin for the disease that will kill Aschenbach.

Here the disease is also directly referred to as the cause of moral debauchery: The authorities' attempts to deal with it have been immoral, and that immorality has reaped further immorality. Immorality itself is here shown to be not only an isolated sin but also a self-propagating entity: Immorality breeds immorality. For a society, or a person, unused to dealing with passion, when that passion escapes it is here portrayed as escalating out of control. Aschenbach has entered a state out of which there is no escape; his initial unrestrained taste of passion has proven inescapable, his own personal pomegranate seed.

The dream sequence definitively links Aschenbach's descent into passion with the worship of Dionysus. And whereas Aschenbach originally worshipped Tadzio, as a sort of Apollonion statuesque symbol of intellectual beauty and art, he is now the "god" that Aschenbach worships. This does not mean that Tadzio himself, as a character, is equated with Dionysus; Tadzio is Dionysian in the way he is feverishly, wantonly, uncontrollably worshipped by Aschenbach. The shift from Apollonion to Dionysian is entirely the progression of Aschenbach. Tadzio himself remains a kid who likes playing on the beach.

## Chapter 5c

 Summary

 Word seems to have leaked out about the cholera, and hardly any tourists are left, but Tadzio's family remains; Aschenbach fantasizes about everyone else dying or fleeing, leaving him alone with the boy. The state of panic in Venice causes such preoccupation in everyone that Aschenbach no longer has to fear their suspicions of his infatuation; he becomes more extravagant than ever in his pursuit of Tadzio. He begins to wear jewelry, perfume, and elaborate clothing, including a suit with a red tie; his aging body becomes, for him, a source of deep shame. The barber convinces him that one is only as old as one feels and that gray hair can, therefore, be "further from the truth" than dyed hair. Aschenbach makes no protest, and the barber not only dyes his hair but applies cosmetics, including face powder, rouge, and lip-color.

One day, Aschenbach loses his way in the labyrinth of alleyways and canals; he is exhibiting the symptoms of fever. To quench his terrible thirst, he buys some overripe strawberries. Coming upon a little square, he recognizes it as the place where he had first made his (unavailing) decision to leave Venice. He sinks on the steps of a well; grass grows between the cobblestones and garbage is scattered about.

Here, the narrator distances himself from Aschenbach to a further extent than at any previous point in the novella. In a clearly ironic and mocking tone, the narrator juxtaposes Aschenbach's initial dignity, abstemiousness, and honor with his present debasement. A long passage follows, in quotation marks, in the voice of Socrates, addressed to Phaedrus. Socrates says that the artist cannot pursue Beauty without Eros as a companion and guide; the longing of the artist's soul must be that of the lover; thus, Socrates declares that "we writers" cannot be prudent, cannot be grandly somber, but must necessarily fall into the "abyss." The public's faith in its writers is absurd, and it should be forbidden to use art to educate the people. Both Knowledge and Beauty, Socrates claims, lead to the abyss.

Seeing baggage piled in the hotel foyer, Aschenbach makes inquiries and learns that the Polish family is leaving after lunch that day. He walks down to the deserted beach. Aschenbach watches Tadzio play with his few remaining playmates; their wrestling becomes violent, and Jashu, as if avenging himself for his long subservience to Tadzio, pushes Tadzio's face into the sand; Tadzio is on the point of suffocation by the time Jashu finally lets go. Tadzio walks away into the water, rebuffing Jashu's attempts at apology. Reaching a sandbar, he turns and looks back at the beach, and his eyes meet Aschenbach's for the first time. Aschenbach's head sinks down upon his breast, but in his mind Tadzio smiles and beckons, pointing out and ahead; Aschenbach sets out to follow him. The narrator states that it is several minutes after Aschenbach's collapse in his chair that anyone comes to his aid and he is taken to his room; later that day, the world, with respectful shock, receives the news of his death.

### Commentary

In dressing up and wearing makeup, Aschenbach becomes the very image of the grotesque old man he saw on the boat in Chapter 3. The barber's remark again evokes the question of truth vs. artifice; despite what the barber says, it is clearly the rouge, face powder, and lipstick that are artificial. They represent the vain and deceitful side of art, art intended to conceal truth and seduce others.

The scene in which Aschenbach loses his way in the city streets is representative of the state of his soul; the garbage and overgrown weeds symbolize decay. The strawberries are also symbolic; although Aschenbach has heard the warnings not to eat fruits or vegetables, as they may be infected, he gives into his overwhelming thirst and indulges anyway. Thus, the berries are the "forbidden fruit," like the taboo love for Tadzio in which Aschenbach indulges in order to satisfy a "thirst" but against his better judgment.

The speech by Socrates in this chapter voices a concern central to much of Mann's work, that art corrupts morality. Clearly, because Mann was a writer, an artist with words, he must also have felt that art had redeeming qualities. However, Mann uses his novella to show the dangers that art's sensual side poses, even while the artist must be awake to sensuality in order to achieve true art.

 The final passages are extremely mythically imbued. The tussle between Tadzio and Jashu symbolizes the struggle of opposites that takes place throughout the novella; Tadzio is blonde while Jashu is dark-haired (see Chapter 3), Tadzio is delicate while Jashu is sturdy. Jashu has long held a subservient position to Tadzio, just as Aschenbach's instincts had previously been repressed by his conscious will, just as the Dionysian had been repressed by the Apollonian forces. The novella traces how those forces that are always kept down eventually rise up and break free; this has been the source of Aschenbach's tragedy. Standing out on the sandbar, having been almost suffocated by the suddenly violent and powerful Jashu, Tadzio appears as the messenger of death, beckoning Aschenbach toward the afterlife.