



## ***Thomas Mann's Death in Venice***

### **I. LIFE (1875-1955)**

#### **1. *The making of an artist***

"When I ask myself the hereditary origin of my characteristics I am fain to recall Goethe's famous little verse and say that I too have from my father "des Lebens ernstes Führen [a serious lifestyle]," but from my mother the "Frohnatur [cheerful nature]" – the sensuous, artistic side, and, in the widest sense, the "Lust zu fabulieren [pleasure to invent stories]." (Thomas Mann, *A Sketch of My Life*, 1930)

#### **2. *Public persona in exile – fame and the politically engaged intellectual***

### **II. DEATH IN VENICE (1912)**

#### **1. *Literary term: novella***

#### **2. *Characters***

##### **2.1. Protagonist: Gustav von *Aschenbach*, a distinguished, hard working and self-disciplined German writer in his fifties.**

"A nice observer once said of him (...): "You see, Aschenbach has always lived like this" – here the speaker closed the fingers of his left hand to a fist – "never like this" – and he let his open hand hang relaxed from the back of his chair. It was apt. And this attitude was the more morally valiant in that Aschenbach was not by nature robust – he was only called to the constant tension of his career, not actually born to it." (p. 9)

Aschenbach pursues his career on the verge of exhaustion but his motto *Durchhalten* (hold fast, p. 9) keeps him going. In the course of the novella, he undergoes a radical change: He starts to let his hand hang relaxed from the chair.

##### **2.2. *Tadzio*, a fourteen year old Polish youth from aristocratic background.**

He is first admired/contemplated/idealized by Aschenbach as an aesthetic object (comparison to Greek sculpture: the Spinario), then longed for as an object of desire.

##### **2.3. Other characters**

***the stranger by the cemetery in Munich***

***the aged fop on the boat***

***the dubious gondolier***

***the street musicians***

***the stranger god***

Harbingers/omens of doom or repressed side of Aschenbach himself?

### 3. *Interpretations*

#### 3.1. *Freud, the Pleasure Principle and Happiness Unfulfilled*

→ The novella as an account of the protagonist's development.

As the narrative unfolds, we witness Aschenbach's self-destruction, the dissolution of his self-discipline and dignity which goes hand in hand with the spread of cholera in the city (the city as a mirror of Aschenbach's inner-self).

His development can be explained in psychoanalytical terms with Freud. From the way Aschenbach is introduced at the beginning of the novella – a distinguished, hard working and self-disciplined writer in Munich, Germany –, we can conclude that he is governed by a strong *super-ego* and *ego* and is in control over his *id*. Once he allows a "break" from his strenuous lifestyle and as the narrative goes on in Venice, Italy, the super-ego and ego break down until the *id* gains control. Living according to the pleasure-principle is not viable, happiness cannot be attained.

Last image of Tadzio, taking the pose of Greek sculpture:

"a remote and isolated figure, with floating locks, out there in sea and wind, against the misty inane. Once more he paused to look: with a sudden recollection, or by an impulse, he turned from the waist up, in an exquisite movement, one hand resting on his hip, and looked over his shoulder at the shore. (...) It seemed to him [Aschenbach] the pale and lovely Summoner out there smiled at him and beckoned; as though, with the hand he lifted from his hip, he pointed outward as he hovered on before into an immensity of richest expectations." (p. 73)

Aschenbach tries to reach out to him, the object of his formerly repressed homosexual desires, but fails. Death in Venice.

#### 3.2. *Nietzsche, Goethe and Neoclassicism*

→ The novella as a discussion of art.

*Death in Venice* does not only speak of Greek sculpture, the novella's very structure is reminiscent of Greek tragedy. Moreover, it incorporates many quotations from classical texts, namely from Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* and from Plutarch's *Erotikos* (other less important quotations are from Xenophon, Homer and Virgil).

As Aschenbach's infatuation with Tadzio increases, he tries to hold on to his idealized image of Tadzio by interpreting his feelings in accordance with Plato:

"Beauty alone [among Ideas] is lovely and visible at once. For, mark you [Socrates addressing Phaedrus], it is the sole aspect of the spiritual which we can perceive through our senses" (p. 45).

Aschenbach temporarily experiences the fruits of Platonic love. When looking at Tadzio he feels inspired to write (p. 45-46). However, what starts as Platonic love turns into worldly love, sexual desire that seeks fulfilment. Eventually Aschenbach is led not to spiritual wisdom but, as his dream reveals (p. 65-67), "to intoxication and desire", "to the bottomless pit" (p. 71) – a danger Plato is aware of in his dialogues.

With Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) in mind, *Death in Venice* can be read as the story of an artist who is driven by Apollonian elements (form, reason, self-control) but lacks the Dionysian ones (destruction/chaos, emotion and intoxication). His attempts to combine the two fail. His initial preoccupation with Apollonian elements is reversed in his dream in which he adheres to "the stranger god", Dionysus. Unable to combine Dionysian and Apollonian elements, his writing has become fruitless. This is the end for him as an artist. Death in Venice.

### 3.3. *Autobiography and Homosexuality*

→ The novella as an experiment – the textualization/fictionalization of Mann's autobiography and homosexuality.

"Originally I had not planned anything less than telling the story of Goethe's last love, the love of the seventy-year-old for that little girl [Ulrike von Levetzow], whom he still absolutely wanted to marry, but it was a marriage that she and also his relatives did not want." (Mann quoted in Koelb, p. 94)

Only thirty-six years of age when he wrote *Death in Venice*, Mann did not dare to write about the literary giant Goethe. Instead he turned Goethe's love for Ulrike into his own "forbidden love" by making Tadzio a boy. He suggests in his diary that the change from heterosexual to homosexual love would not have taken place "without a personal emotional adventure" (Mann quoted in Koelb, p. 214).

"Nothing in *Death in Venice* is invented: the traveller by the Northern Cemetery in Munich, the gloomy boat from Pola, the aged fop, the dubious gondolier, Tadzio and his family, the departure prevented by a mix-up over luggage, the cholera, the honest clerk in the travel agency, the malevolent street singer, or whatever else you might care to mention – everything was given, and really only needed to be fitted in, proving in the most astonishing manner how it could be interpreted within my composition." (Mann, *A Sketch of My Life*, 1930).

What if the author, Mann, would have let his hand hang relaxed from the chair, given in to the id (in Freud's words) or to Dionysian elements (in Nietzsche's words)? Mann transformed the real person, Wladislaw Moes, into a literary character, Tadzio. He textualized him as well as his own infatuation turned desire. Please, keep in mind that in the process of textualization the characters undergo changes.

### III. FOOD FOR CVSP THOUGHT

1. The twilight of the modern world.
2. The disenchantment of the world and its consequences.
3. A world of extremes, conceptions of self vs. other, north (Munich, Germany) vs. south (Venice, Italy).
4. The role of literature and art in our disenchanted modern world.

---

#### FURTHER READING

Clayton Koelb (ed.). *Death in Venice: A New Translation, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism/Thomas Mann*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1994.

Herman Kurzke. *Thomas Mann. Life as a Work of Art*. Princeton University Press, 2002.

Thomas Mann. *A Sketch of My Life*. Secker & Warburg, 1961.

Ritchie Robertson (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.