

## “Death in Venice” by Thomas Mann

**Dr. Alan Haffa**

Biography (1875-1955)

- Father was a merchant and Senator in Germany; mother a Portuguese-Creole Brazilian
- Studied Journalism in school and started writing fiction
- *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man*, 1922
- *Death in Venice*, 1913
- Critic of Fascism; Moved to Switzerland, 1933
- America 1940
- Nobel Prize for Literature

### Biographical Influence

- Mann had been on an island near Venice in 1905 during a cholera outbreak, and he later traveled to the city in May 1911, because, like his character Gustav von Aschenbach, he was exhausted by a difficult stage in his writing and felt the need for escape.
- On May 18 of 1911, Mann read the obituary for composer Gustav Mahler, who had died at the age of fifty; Mann based Aschenbach's facial features on Mahler's.
- Like Aschenbach, Mann was also homosexual: Although he was married and had six children, his wife is reported to have said that she married simply to have a family, and the publication of Mann's diaries in recent years have illuminated his many homosexual relationships.
- In 1965, a Polish baron named Wladyslaw Moes identified himself as the boy whom Mann fictionalized as Tadzio. Upon reading the Polish translation of the book in 1923, Moes recognized himself in the portrayal of the boy

### Death in Venice: Contemporary Issues

- Writers in era were interested in the decline of traditional morals: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).
- Homoeroticism was a new theme: like *Death in Venice*, *Dorian Gray* uses a fictional character to serve as a mask for its own homosexual author
- Andre Gide's novel *The Immoralist* (1902) represents the extreme identity crisis experienced by many European homosexual artists of the time

### Main Theme: Apollonian and Dionysian

- Tension between Restraint and Desire: What happens when a man of sensitivity and passion, who has constrained his Desire throughout his life, suddenly allows it to tempt him?
- Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872): Apollonian is restrained like the God of Knowledge, Apollo; Dionysian is Unrestrained—Free—like the God of Wine, Dionysus
- Suffering and Pleasure

- Aeschylus and Sophocles vs Euripides and Socrates
- Great music (and art) is produced by this tension--Wagner

#### Realist Style and Plot

- **Realistic and Psychological Style**
- Also **Mythic**: Blends mythic ideas into the fabric of his story—almost as metaphors for some larger, higher level of meaning
- A writer, Gustav Aschenbach, needs a break from work; vacations in Venice
- He sees a noble Polish family at hotel and becomes fascinated with teenage boy, Tadzio
- He struggles to decide to stay or go: Smell of Sea is sickly
- He leaves but then returns—can't bear to think of not seeing Tadzio
- He never talks to Tadzio: he simply watches him
- The Plague arrives: like a detective, Aschenbach figures out what is going on
- He finally knows: Should he tell the Polish family? He doesn't. He stays and so do they.
- Finally, he dies of the plague

#### Impulse to Flight

- “This yearning for new and distant scenes, this craving for freedom, release, forgetfulness—they were, he admitted to himself, an impulse towards flight, flight from the spot which was the daily theatre of a **rigid, cold, and passionate service.**” (p. 7)
- He feels no joy in his art

#### Aschenbach is Restrained: Apollonian

- A friend 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.” (9)
- Driven by a desire for fame in his art

#### Aschenbach's Art Described

- “Aschenbach had once given direct expression—though in an unobtrusive place—to the idea that almost everything conspicuously great is great in despite: has come into being in defiance of affliction and pain; poverty, destitution, bodily weakness, vice, passion, and a thousand other obstructions. And that was more than observation—it was the fruit of experience, it was precisely the formula of his life and fame, it was the key to his work. What wonder, then, if it was also the fixed character, the outward gesture, of his most individual figures?” (11)

- Biographical Art
  - Genius is the expression of suffering
- Form and Morality
- “And has not form two aspects? Is it not moral and immoral at once: moral in so far as it is the expression and result of discipline, immoral—yes, actually hostile to morality—in that of its very essence it is indifferent to good and evil, and deliberately concerned to make the moral world stoop beneath its proud and undivided sceptre?” (13)

- Impressionism and Post-Impressionism?
  - What is the “form” of a novel? Plot?
- First Impression of Venice: Ugliness

- As the boat enters Venice, the sanitary inspector arrives...
- “He stuttered, he giggled, he leered, he fatuously shook his beringed old forefinger; his tongue kept seeking the corner of his mouth in a suggestive motion ugly to behold. Aschenbach’s brow darkened as he looked, and there came over him once more a dazed sense, as though things about him were just slightly losing their ordinary perspective, beginning to show a distortion that might merge into the grotesque.” (19)

- Charon and Death
- Death Symbolism and Gondola

- He travels to hotel in an unauthorized gondola
- The gondolier refuses to take him where he wants
- “The singular conveyance, come down unchanged from ballad times, black as nothing else on earth except a coffin—what pictures it calls up of lawless, silent adventures in the plashing night; or even more, what visions of death itself, the bier and solemn rites and last soundless voyage! And has anyone remarked that the seat in such a bark, the arm-chair lacquered in coffin-black and dully black-upholstered, is the softest, most luxurious, most relaxing seat in the world?” (21)

Tadzio as a Greek God

- “Aschenbach noticed with astonishment the lad’s perfect beauty. His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture—pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honey-coloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity. Yet with all this chaste perfection of form it was of such unique personal charm that the observer thought he had never seen in nature or art, anything so absolutely happy and consummate.” (25-6)
  - Compared to many different characters of Greek myth who inspire desire
- Pathetic Fallacy
- The sickness of Aschenbach’s desire infects the air and the place itself—or, he is infected by it.
  - His perception of the world expresses his mood—his physical sickness, the sickness of

desire (Euripides' *Phaedra and Hippolytus*)

- “suddenly he noticed a peculiar odour... a sweetish, medicinal smell, associated with wounds and disease and suspect cleanliness...”
- “Placards warned... not to eat oysters or other shell-fish...”
- “The air is sultry...” (53)

#### Socrates and Phaedrus

- “Here Socrates held forth to youthful Phaedrus upon the nature of virtue and desire, wooing him with insinuating wit and charming turns of phrase. He told him of the shuddering and unwonted heat that come upon him whose heart is open, when his eyes beholds an image of eternal beauty; spoke of the impious and corrupt, who cannot conceive beauty though they see its image, and are incapable of awe; and of the fear and reverence felt by the noble soul when he beholds a godlike face or a form which is a good image of beauty: how as he gazes he worships the beautiful one and scarcely dares to look upon him, but would offer sacrifice as to an idol or a god, did he not fear to be thought stark mad. ‘For beauty, my Phaedrus, beauty alone, is lovely and visible at once. For, mark you, it is the sole aspect of the spiritual which we can perceive through our senses, or bear to perceive.’” (45)

- Beauty speaks through our senses to our soul
- Ladder of Love: Love of Beauty elevates the soul so it can appreciate Virtue and Truth

#### Dream: Freud and Unconscious Desire

- After a theatrical musical performance, he sleeps and dreams.
- “That night he had a fearful dream—if dream be the right word for a mental and physical experience which did indeed befall him in deep sleep, as a thing quite apart and real to his senses, yet without his seeing himself as present in it. Rather its theatre seemed to be his own soul, and the events burst in from outside, violently overcoming the profound resistance of his spirit; passed him through and left him... ravaged and destroyed.” (67)

- Bacchanalian Dream

- Penthesileus and death at the hands of young god, Bacchus

#### Summary

- Novella is Realist: depiction of ordinary life
- Psychological: plot depicts a moment of psychological tension in the life of Aschenbach
- Theme is Art: what produces great art? Restraint? Release? Or, the tension between the two
- Aschenbach never gives into his desire completely; nor does he deny it completely
- Platonic Love
- Modern Novella—integration of psychology and myth into a commonplace experience
- Freud's Death Instinct: Desire and Death—surrender to Passion is like the surrender to Death.