



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].” (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. **Place and time:** Munich, Germany (north) vs. Venice, Italy (south); decadence before WWI

“It was a spring afternoon in that year of grace 19-, when Europe sat upon the anxious seat beneath a menace that hung over its head for months” (p. 3).

3. **Characters**

3.1. Protagonist: Gustav von **Aschenbach**, a distinguished, hard working 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)

3.2. **Tadzio**, a fourteen year old Polish youth from aristocratic background compared to ancient Greek sculpture: the Spinario

3.3. Other characters: Harbingers of doom or repressed side of Aschenbach?

the stranger by the cemetery in Munich

the aged fop on the boat

the dubious gondolier Venice the “water city” (p. 20), the gondola as coffin and the “last soundless voyage” (p. 20) to “the kingdom of Hades” (p. 22)

the street musicians

the stranger god

4. **Interpretations**

4.1. **Freud, the Pleasure Principle and Happiness Unfulfilled**

→ **An account of the protagonist’s development**

A’s development can be explained in psychoanalytical terms with Freud. A is introduced at the beginning of the novella as a hard working writer in **Munich, Germany**, governed by a strong **super-ego** and **ego** and in control over his **id**. Once he allows a “break” from his strenuous lifestyle and as the narrative goes on in **Venice, Italy**, the id gains the upper hand. 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 (...) 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)

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

→ **An autobiographical reading**

“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).

Mann transformed the real person, Wladislaw Moes, into a literary character, Tadzio. He fictionalized him as well as his own infatuation turned desire.

“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).

4.2. **Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Neoclassicism**

→ **A discussion of art**

Interest in the classical world is part of a long tradition in German literature that dates back to Goethe, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. The novella’s very structure is reminiscent of Greek tragedy. Moreover, it incorporates quotations from classical texts (intertextuality). As A’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).

A temporarily experiences the fruits of Platonic love. When looking at Tadzio, he feels inspired to write (p. 45-46). However, what starts as **aesthetic contemplation** turns into sexual desire that seeks fulfilment. Eventually A is led not to spiritual wisdom but, as his dream reveals (p. 65-67), “to intoxication and desire” and “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 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.

III. FOOD FOR CVSP THOUGHT

1. A world of extremes, conceptions of self vs. other, north vs. south
2. The role of literature and art in our disenchanted modern world

FURTHER READING

- Koelb, Clayton (ed.), *Death in Venice: A New Translation, Backgrounds and Contexts*, Norton & Company, 1994.
Kurzke, Herman, *Thomas Mann. Life as a Work of Art*, Princeton University Press, 2002.
Mann, Thomas, *A Sketch of My Life*, Secker & Warburg, 1961.
Reed, T.J., *Thomas Mann. Making and unmaking a master*, Technical Publications, 1994.
Robertson, Ritchie (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.