



Eros, Existence, and Art in the Pandemic:

Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*

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Abstract

Death in Venice, hailed as one of Thomas Mann's best works, relates the plight and demise of a well-established aging writer, Aschenbach, similar to Dr Faust. The senile Aschenbach is dissatisfied with his life in seclusion, which formerly made him feel tranquil and peaceful. He now simply feels smothered by the bleak, chilly environment as well as his dwindling inspiration and vitality. He suddenly feels compelled to escape and seek something vivid, creative, and vibrant. The gorgeous tourist beach in Venice serves as a haven for the weary writer, providing a paradise-like retreat from his hard work. On the beach, he notices Tadzio, a Polish adolescent who embodies youth and beauty. Tadzio rekindles Aschenbach's passion, enthusiasm, and inventiveness. Unfortunately, the emergence of cholera in Venice necessitates large evacuations for public safety and disease control. Aschenbach's initial admiration and craving for Tadzio's youth and beauty gradually develop into obsession. Ignoring the rapid spread of the disease, his own poor condition, and the evacuation order, Aschenbach refuses to leave Venice. He continues to stalk and observe Tadzio. His love and obsession eventually lead to moral depravity and death. Plato's *Symposium* defines many varieties of love. This paper examines how Aschenbach's yearning for Tadzio descends from the love ladder in Plato's *Symposium*. How has Aschenbach's feelings for Tadzio changed? What does Tadzio represent for the aging author? Is Aschenbach lamenting the loss of his youth? Is it his desire to be young and beautiful? Does Tadzio's youth and beauty symbolize a creative state of being or a lifetime pursuit of art for Aschenbach? The paper contends that Aschenbach deviates from the pursuit of artistic Ideals to the desires of corporeal youth, eventually losing his dignity and succumbing to the pandemic's rampage.

Keywords: *The Symposium*, the Dionysian to the Apollonian, bourgeois art, modernism, *the Birth of Tragedy*

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Solitude produces originality, bold and astonishing beauty, poetry. But solitude also produces perverseness, the disproportionate, the absurd, and the forbidden.

(Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*)

Death in Venice (1912), regarded as one of Nobel laureate Thomas Mann's best works, shows the predicament of a well-established and aged writer, similar to Goethe's or Mann's Dr Faust. In one of Mann's later novels, *Doctor Faustus* (1947), the protagonist trades his soul and an early death with the devil for artistic possibilities and achievement. Heinz Kohut demonstrates that Aschenbach's ultimate demise is inevitable. "Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* and Adrian Leverkiihn in *Doctor Faustus* allowed Mann to spare himself, to live and to work, because they suffer in his stead" (Kohut, 1957, p. 227). At the novella's outset, a sense of malaise, immobility, and alienation pervades the life and surroundings of turn-of-the-century German writer Gustav von Aschenbach. Aschenbach laments the transformation of his once serene and isolated life into a gloomy, cold, oppressive world. He is anxious about his dwindling inspiration and life. Overwhelmed by a desire for anything innovative, creative, and lively, Aschenbach plans to flee his suffocating town and takes a holiday to the south. Struggling to continue his work, he takes a walk; on his way home, he spots a storm gathering and decides to wait for the tram near the Northern Cemetery (Mann, 2005, 2). Then, he notices a figure appear:

[...] a man in the portico above the two apocalyptic beasts guarding the staircase [...] Whether the man had emerged from the chapel's inner sanctum through the bronze gate or mounted the steps unobtrusively from outside was uncertain. Without giving the matter much thought, Aschenbach inclined towards the

CHEN

first hypothesis. The man—of medium height, thin, beardless, and strikingly snub-nosed—was the red-haired type and had its milky, freckled pigmentation. He was clearly not of Bavarian stock and, if nothing else, the broad, straight-brimmed bast hat covering his head lent him a distinctly foreign, exotic air.

(Mann, 2005, p. 4)

The apparition, accompanied by two apocalyptic monsters, is revealed to be a red-haired, pale-skinned man at the mortuary's entry stairs. The foreboding mood, the death visions, and the man's hostile look make Aschenbach uneasy. Aschenbach flees swiftly. Following this encounter, he develops an overwhelming desire to travel. In an almost trance-like state, he sees a "landscape, a tropical quagmire beneath a steamy sky—sultry, luxuriant, and monstrous—a kind of primordial wilderness of islands, marshes, and alluvial channels [...] the eyes of a crouching tiger" (Mann, 2005, p. 6). The encounter with the devil-like man at the mortuary's entrance serves as a reminder to readers of the devil in *Dr Faust* while symbolizing the start of his downfall. In Aschenbach's hallucination dream, a tiger foresees an approaching lurking danger, not from the outside world but from the unleashing of his own animalistic needs. Despite these foreboding signs, Aschenbach's desire for freedom grows stronger.

He initially travels to and stays on a small Adriatic island but inclement weather forces him to modify his plan and visit Venice. On his trip to Venice, he passes an elderly gentleman wearing make-up and an elaborate costume in an attempt to conceal his age (Mann, 2005, p. 29). In Venice, the dark gondolas resemble coffins. Despite the ominous surroundings, he encounters a Polish adolescent boy named Tadzio on Venice's lovely tourist beach. Tadzio, who embodies youth, beauty, nature, and art, immediately strikes Aschenbach as breathtaking. Aschenbach's initial awe and desire for Tadzio's youth and beauty rapidly transform into love and obsession. Mann juxtaposes the cholera epidemic with Aschenbach's moral degradation. Despite the disease's rapid spread and the mass evacuation order for safety and disease control, Aschenbach refuses to leave Venice and pursues Tadzio. Aschenbach's physical con-

I N T E R F A C E

dition deteriorates as the disease spreads throughout Venice.

The novella shows not just the dread associated with aging and mortality but also the frustration linked with unsatisfied desire. The writer's initial search for aesthetic beauty develops into an erotic longing that violates morals and jeopardizes his dignity. This paper compares Aschenbach's struggle between intellect and passion. Additionally, this paper uses Plato's *Symposium* on love to analyze Aschenbach's gradual transformation from love to perverse obsession for Tadzio. How does Aschenbach's love for Tadzio differ from other types of love? What does Tadzio represent for the senile writer? Is it a lament for lost youth? Is it a desire for youth and beauty? Is it a vibrant and creative state of existence, or a lifelong pursuit of art?

Albert Braverman argues that Gustave von Aschenbach embodies pure reason and is an entirely fulfilled individual. His achievement is not the result of natural ability; rather, it is the culmination of his meticulous, self-disciplined labor, which, like the "neurotic heroes of the earlier period, the Hannos and the Detlev Spinnels, was free to realize itself, and was finally consummated in his work" (Braverman, 1972, p. 289). According to Richard White (1990), Aschenbach exemplifies supreme self-discipline and self-denial, which contribute to his artistic accomplishments. He controls his work, as well as his life and existence, with tremendous discipline and reason. "The mature writer is the champion of bourgeois decency who deliberately turns his back on the realm of knowledge lest it paralyze his action. He is preoccupied with form. His refined style is regarded as exemplary, and his work is excerpted in school textbooks" (White, 1990, p. 56). White also notes that *Death in Venice* is about how Aschenbach, as he ages, loses all reason and succumbs to desire, which ultimately results in his moral degradation (White, 1990, p. 56). White continues by stating that Aschenbach is the "consummate 'bourgeois' artist, who valorizes the bourgeois ideas of hard work and accomplishment, and who rejects any kind of moral ambivalence as decadent and corrupt" (Mann, 2005, p. 56). Hayes & Quinby (1989, p. 159) write in their commentary on the significance of *Death in Venice* that:

Death in Venice is undoubtedly a central text in Thomas Mann's oeuvre and in contemporary literary criticism. It is also, and this is not exactly the same thing, an extremely text of 'high' modernism, one that questions the moral and aesthetic 'certainties' of bourgeois culture [...] the novella has been read as a cautionary tale, an apologue showing that even the most Apollonian artist may give way to Dionysian excess and sink into a slough of despond.

Along with tracing Aschenbach's physical decline as his Freudian id swallows his reason and intellect, *Death in Venice* portrays aging as a universal plague of the human condition. Because aging cannot be halted, it is more harmful than the spread of cholera. People grow from birth, and, as time passes, their physical condition deteriorates and leads to death. Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* sparks a debate about the fixation with the pursuit of beauty, creativity, and art. This debate contributes to one's aesthetic immortality and raises existential problems. Thomas Mann examines cholera and aging as an epidemic disease. Additionally, Mann delves into the writer's anxiety about the exhaustion of artistic inspiration, self-identity, and the meaning of existence as well as his ambition to achieve immortality via art. Even though the pandemic is spreading, Aschenbach ignores it and decides to stay, even if it means risking his own life. Like Dr Faust, Aschenbach's quest for youth and beauty spirals out of control into a deranged fixation that ultimately leads him to his doom. *Death in Venice*, symbolically, represents anxiety about finding a new form of artistic expression at the turn of the century.

1 Background and Autobiographical References in *Death in Venice*

Death in Venice was written by Thomas Mann in 1911, when he was 36 years old. He had been married for 6 years at the time, and his sister had committed suicide the previous year (p. 217). It had such a profound effect on him that, years later, Mann expressed his tempestuous feelings in *Doctor Faustus*, his 1947 novel. Mann's other sister Julia

I N T E R F A C E

committed suicide 5 years after his mother's death in 1927. Thomas Mann mentioned the similar depression that he and his sister Carla had experienced. Mann, according to his biographers, had a tendency to resign, a kind of mental laziness, whenever he was under stress. Mann concluded his autobiography with a bleak outlook: "I assume that I shall die in 1945, when I shall have reached the age of my mother" (p. 9). Kohut claims that Mann wrote *Death in Venice* during a stressful phase of his life to "trace in part how the emerging profound conflicts of the author were sublimated in the creation of an artistic masterpiece" (Kohut, 1957, p. 207).

Death in Venice, while not an autobiography in the same way as *The Magic Mountain*, contains certain autobiographical references. Written between 1911 and 1912, *Death in Venice* was inspired by a few incidents in Thomas Mann's personal life. Graham Good translated Mann's 1940 Princeton speech "On Myself," suggesting that the novella was inspired by Mann's 1911 trip to Venice: "not a single feature was invention: the suspicious gondolier, the boy Tadzio and his family—everything was real, needed only to be put in the story [...]." Tadzio was "an extremely attractive boy of about thirteen ... whose appearance captivated my husband," commented Mann's wife Katia (p. 148, trans. Good; de Mendelssohn, p. 871, trans. Good). The voyage to Venice, the outbreak of the cholera epidemic, and the cover-up of the disease by government officials were all real events. In 1911, Thomas Mann's wife contracted tuberculosis and was treated at a sanatorium while Mann and his children remained in Tolz (Kohut, 1957, p. 217).

Thomas Mann based his novel *The Magic Mountain* on some of his life events. He wrote *Death in Venice*, the year after Gustav Mahler's death in 1911. Mann mentioned that his protagonist Aschenbach was modeled after Gustav Mahler in his talk, and incorporates a sub-theme of artistic regeneration. Aschenbach's infatuation with Tadzio was also inspired by Goethe's tragic attachment to a 17-year-old girl. Venice's nighttime atmosphere echoes Goethe's *Italian Journey*: "I have often sighed longingly for solitude, and now I can really enjoy it ... Perhaps there is only one person in Venice that knows me, and we shall not soon

CHEN

meet. ... Toward evening, again without a guide, I lost my way ... I tried to find my way out of this labyrinth without asking anyone. ... Finally, one does disentangle oneself, but it is an incredible maze ...” (Good, 1972, pp. 56–60). Although there are several biographical references, *Death in Venice* is primarily concerned with the anxiety associated with the disintegration of an individual as well as a culture and civilization.

As the novella begins, Gustav Aschenbach is alone at his home in Munich on his 50th birthday.

Especially now that his life was on the decline and his fear of failing to achieve his artistic goals—the concern that his time might run out before he had accomplished what he needed to accomplish and given fully of himself—could no longer be dismissed as a caprice, he had confined his external existence almost exclusively to the beautiful city that had become his home and the rustic cottage he had built for himself in the mountains and where he spent the rainy summers.

(Mann, 2005, p. 7)

Throughout his life, Aschenbach has been meticulous and systematic in his work, despite his prominence and renown. Losing the enthusiasm that he once had, he is now dissatisfied with his own work. He becomes keenly conscious of aging and fears not accomplishing his artistic goal within his limited time. Aschenbach lives in seclusion, confined to his cottage. While he is immersed in nature, the humid summer, the rustic cottage, and his anxieties about losing inspiration all point to his world coming to a halt. He has spent the majority of his life in solitude and isolation, exercising severe self-discipline. Thomas Mann attributes Aschenbach’s eventual moral degeneration to his prior extreme state of austerity and solitude.

Images and perceptions that might easily be dismissed with a glance, a laugh, an exchange of opinions occupy him unduly; they are heightened in the silence, gain in significance, turn into experience, adventure, emotion. Solitude begets originality, bold

I N T E R F A C E

and disconcerting beauty, poetry. But solitude can also beget perversity, disparity, the absurd and the forbidden.

(Mann, 2005, p. 43)

The dismal and foreboding winter in Munich, Germany suffocates Aschenbach and compels him to flee.

It was an urge to flee—he fully admitted it, this yearning for freedom, release, oblivion—an urge to flee his work, the humdrum routine of a rigid, cold, passionate duty. Granted, he loved that duty and even almost loved the enervating daily struggle between his proud, tenacious, much-tested will and the growing fatigue, which no one must suspect or the finished product betray by the slightest sign of foundering or neglect.

(Mann, 2005, p. 8)

Venice offers a different type of scenery in contrast to dreary and depressing Munich. Graham Good asserts that Mann's choice of Venice as a backdrop appears to be influenced by Goethe's depiction of his journey in Venice:

I have often sighed longingly for solitude, and now I can really enjoy it. ... Perhaps there is only one person in Venice that knows me, and we shall not soon meet. ... Toward evening, again without a guide, I lost my way. ... I tried to find my way out of this labyrinth without asking anyone. ... Finally, one does disentangle oneself, but it is an incredible maze.

(Good, 1972, pp. 56–60)

Venice is portrayed as a fascinating labyrinth and mesmerizing city, where one can quickly become disoriented. Munich symbolizes absolute rationality and shackled emotions that contributes to the ennobled Aschenbach's self-discipline to attain perfection at any cost. In contrast, Venice is entirely beguiling, changing Aschenbach's mood from self-restraint to unrestrained desire. To illustrate how Venice is seducing Aschenbach into self-abandonment, Richard White (1990, p. 56) of-

CHEN

fers the example of the enigmatic gondolier in Venice and Aschenbach experiencing “reckless joy” about the alluring misdirection. The city has fully enchanted Aschenbach, causing him to lose his self-discipline, control, and restraint. A passionate amour-like death drive replaces his rationality. Aschenbach is overwhelmed by toxic emotions. He gradually grows more reckless with each passing day in pursuit of the enervated, handsome, teenage Tadzio. This reckless pursuit eventually leads to his demise and loss of dignity. The apparent pedophilia or gay love story plots frequently conceal the actual topic of the story. *Death in Venice* exemplifies the anxiety about depleted inspiration, a deep dread of not achieving artistic immortality, and the creation of new art forms at the turn of the century. What then does Tadzio symbolize for Aschenbach or a larger audience?

2 The Embodiment of Nature, Youth, Beauty, and Art

The Italian director Luchino Visconti’s adaptation of *Death in Venice* recasts Thomas Mann’s elderly writer as an aging musician. Visconti’s aged musician, like Mann’s elderly writer, suffers from a lack of inspiration and a lonely existence. Both the novel and the film depict modernity’s concerns and anxieties. Literature and the arts require new expression for the new century. Apart from his youth, vitality, and attractiveness, Tadzio serves as Aschenbach’s mythological inspiration.

Back he came, running through the waves, his legs beating the resistant water into foam, his head flung back, and to see vibrant a figure, with the grace and austerity of early manhood, locks dripping fair as a gentle god, emerging from the depths of sea and sky, escaping the watery element – it was enough to inspire mythical associations, like the lay of a bard about times primeval, about the origin of form and the birth of gods.

(Mann, 2005, p. 60)

Throughout the novel, the narrative maintains a conflict between reason and emotion, mortality and eternity, and life and art. Gary Chase John-

I N T E R F A C E

son draws parallels between Tadzio and Greek mythology, classical tradition, birth, and the Olympic gods, all of which are considered to be the roots of artistic form. Aschenbach worships and idolizes the youngster for his embodiment of beauty. These analogies have cultural precedents as well as some philosophical credibility, as recognized by 18th-century aesthetic critics (Johnson, 2004, p. 89). Tadzio embodies an Ideal. The youthful and gorgeous youngster is tempting to the writer. The portrayed image of the youngster is chaste and almost godlike. The image enlightens Aschenbach's lonesome and drab world. Fascinated by what he sees, Aschenbach begins a daily routine of waiting for and following the young boy on the beach. Physical attractiveness arouses eros, which prompts cravings not only for youth and beauty but also for life, inspiration, creativity, and the pursuit of artistic immortality.

Today the boy was wearing a lightweight, washable outfit with a blue-and-white-striped middie blouse that had a red silk bow at the chest and a plain white stand-up collar. The collar, though none too elegant a match for the rest of the outfit, showed off the boy's fair blossoming head in its consummate charm, the head of an Eros with the creamy glaze of Parian marble, eyebrows serious and finely traced, temples and ear covered darkly and softly at right angles by encroaching ringlets.

(Mann, 2005, p. 52)

Tadzio is compared to a Greek statue and is described as the Greek god Eros. Aschenbach portrays the boy's mortal beauty with literary and artistic narrative, Aschenbach's attempt to immortalize the boy's beauty is unattainable.

What discipline, what precision of thought was conveyed by that tall, youthfully perfect physique! Yet the austere and pure will laboring in obscurity to bring the godlike statue to light—was it not known to him, familiar to him as an artist? Was it not at work in him when, chiseling with sober passion at the marble block of language, he released the slender form he had beheld in his mind and would present to the world as an effigy and mirror

of spiritual beauty?

(Mann, 2005, p. 81)

His desires are entwined with those of love, obsession, and the pursuit of the Ideal. It is noteworthy that Aschenbach only observes and follows the youngster, never approaching him.

Aschenbach is driven by youth and beauty to pursue fresh innovation with the aim of achieving immortality for his work. According to Braverman & Nachmann (1972, p. 292), in Tadzio, Aschenbach initially discovers “a stimulus to his emotions which satisfied that refined appreciation of the beautiful [...], and he is surprised to find the embodiment of the ideal.” Braverman and Nachmann further demystify this Ideal, arguing that, while this sensuous and handsome youngster embodies “Nietzsche’s Apollonian mode” and stimulates Aschenbach’s creativity, Aschenbach’s work was not about Tadzio but rather about the structure modeled by his perfect physicality (Braverman & Nachmann, 1972, p. 292).

Along with Nietzsche’s Apollonian–Dionysian dichotomy in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Thomas Mann makes numerous allusions to Plato’s *Symposium*. Socrates employs Diotima’s ladder of love to illustrate the various sorts of love in Plato’s *Symposium* (c. 385–370 bc). The ladder represents the ascent or descent of love, from sheer physical desire to youth and beauty and finally to the attainment of good, virtues, morals, and self-sacrifice. Socrates explains the nature of longing and virtue to Phaedrus, implying that, when various men see a depiction of timeless beauty, each reacts differently. When an impious and base man sees it, he does not acknowledge or honor it; nevertheless, when a noble man sees it, he respects it and is willing to make sacrifices. Because beauty “alone is at once desirable and visible: it is, mark my words, the only form of the spiritual we can receive through our senses and tolerate thereby. [...] Should we not perish in the flames of love, as did Semele beholding Zeus? Hence beauty is the path the man of feeling takes to the spiritual, though merely the path, dear young Phaedrus, a means and no more” (Mann, 2005, p. 84). Aschenbach recognizes the Ideal

I N T E R F A C E

personified by beauty, and he respects it, despite his original longing for it. Tadzio restores his exhausted creativity. Aschenbach writes frantically in Luchino Visconti's film while watching Tadzio at the beach. In Thomas Mann's novella, Aschenbach's joyful sentiments for Tadzio also inspire him to write:

He suddenly desired to write. Eros, we are told, loves indolence, and for indolence was he created. But at this point in his crisis the stricken man was aroused to production. The stimulus scarcely mattered. [...] What is more, he longed to work in Tadzio's presence, to model his writing on the boy's physique, to let his style follow the lines of that body, which he saw as godlike, and bear its beauty to the realm of the intellect, as the eagle had once borne the Trojan shepherd to the ether.

(Mann, 2005, pp. 85–86)

He develops an obsession with writing in front of Tadzio as well as joy. During those perilous and delightful hours of writing, eros manifests itself. The debate between Apollonian and Dionysian reason emerges at this pinnacle of creative activity. Aschenbach transforms from a laborious and rational writer into one who is entirely subjected to unrestrained emotions. He sees Tadzio as his idol, muse, and deity to write “that little essay—a page and a half of sublime prose based on Tadzio's beauty—the purity, nobility, and quivering emotional tension of which would soon win the admiration of many” (Mann, 2005, pp. 85–86).

3 Descending the Ladder of Love in Plato's *Symposium*

Based on the ladder of love in Plato's *Symposium*, Aschenbach's love for Tadzio or the Ideal has never reached the bottom until the following moment. His desire for the Ideal grows to the point at which it transgresses the barrier of rationality. Aschenbach becomes reckless. His pursuit of the Ideal is progressively replaced by excitement about rejuvenating the aging physical body and a desperate longing to become the Ideal itself. Aschenbach's love becomes so intense that he loses track of time and

CHEN

becomes disoriented. “He had ceased keeping track of the time he allotted” (Mann, 2005, p. 89). He continues by describing Tadzio as godlike, adding “It was the goddess approaching, the seductress of youths, who had carried off Cleitus and Cephalus and, defying the envy of all Olympus, enjoyed the love of the beautiful Orion” (Mann, 2005, p. 90). He allows himself to be consumed by overwhelming emotions.

[...] Illuminated by the god’s splendor, Eschenbach, alone and awake, would shut his eyes and let his eyelids be kissed by the aura. Emotions from the past, early, delightful colors of the heart swallowed up by the strict discipline of his life were now reappearing in the strangest of permutations—he recognized them with a perplexed and puzzled smile. He mused, he dreamed, his lips slowly shaping a name, and still smiling, his face uplifted, his hands folded in his lap, he would doze off again in his armchair.

(Mann, 2005, p. 91)

Aschenbach’s mind is profoundly intoxicated with passion during the fourth week, to the point at which he abandons reason and dignity and succumbs to the devil.

What Aschenbach objects to and disagrees with is the limitation of one’s time and life. Aschenbach, like Dr Faust, desires ultimate power, magic, and knowledge. His degradation starts when he intends to revert time and return to youth. Apparently, appreciating the object of desire and taking pleasure in the inspiration that it provides no longer satisfies the aged writer. The pivotal point that leads to his demise occurs when he rejects nature and God’s rules to obtain immortality and desire to become the Ideal. According to Gary Johnson (2004, p. 92), Aschenbach loses control, forgets who he is, and has an irrational need to exert control over existence. He proceeds to extol Tadzio’s beauty, imagining Tadzio returning his compliments with “an effusive, intimate, charming, unabashed smile” (Johnson, 2004, p. 85). Aschenbach compares Tadzio’s smile to the smile of Narcissus, implying:

I N T E R F A C E

It was the smile of Narcissus bending over the water mirror, the deep, enchanted, protracted smile with which he stretched out his arms to the reflection of his own beauty, an ever so slightly contorted smile—contorted by the hopelessness of his endeavor to kiss the lovely lips of his shadow—and coquettish, inquisitive and mildly pained, beguiled and beguiling.

(Mann, 2005, p. 95)

He continues, “you mustn’t smile like that! [...] I love you!” (Mann, 2005, p. 96). Aschenbach’s narrative elevates the young boy to mythological status while also indicating a vital turning moment. Aschenbach’s hopeless yearning to kiss the lovely image demonstrates how the original desire for beauty and youth starts to go astray. This devotion to physical beauty descends from the ladder of love in Plato’s *Symposium*. Additionally, the mirror symbol serves a dual meaning. Aschenbach’s actual desire is to be transformed into the object of his desire, as evidenced by his lust for Tadzio. The yearning to seek inspiration has given way to the desire to restore physical youth. Braverman & Nachman (1972) begin their analysis of Aschenbach’s degeneration by focusing on his own physical beauty. They argue that Aschenbach’s deteriorating physical condition is no longer capable of equating and representing his spirit, explaining that “The body is the vessel of the soul, not its mirror” (Braverman & Nachman, 1972, p. 259). When a person’s personality is distinct and fully developed, does it make a difference how old they are to be loved? According to Braverman & Nachman (1972, p. 259), “the highly developed individual is extremely susceptible to narcissistic love” because “When one man sees another man, he looks at a body. But when he considers himself, he sees only that which is within.” Aschenbach hopes that his physical appearance resembles his object of desire, Tadzio. Despite the fact that aging is a natural process, Aschenbach’s wish to reverse time and reclaim youth becomes a perverse obsession and a mental illness.

Aschenbach’s obsession is set against the backdrop of Venice’s cholera outbreak. The spread of the disease and the government’s attempt to conceal it expose the disparity between the actual substance and

CHEN

its disguised appearance. Aschenbach's quest for spiritual fulfillment through beauty and art spirals out of control into sensual addiction. His excessive focus on physical beauty becomes degenerate when he refuses to accept aging and neglects the search for inner beauty. Both the cholera outbreak in Venice and the writer's pathological obsession are concealed to preserve the writer's dignity. Aschenbach's views on his new transformation are ambiguous. On the one hand, he is concerned about concealing his innermost yearning to keep his dignity; on the other hand, he is ecstatic about initiating his journey into the outside world. "For passion, like crime, is antithetical to the smooth operation and prosperity of day-to-day existence and can only welcome every loosening of the fabric of society, every upheaval and disaster in the world, since it can vaguely hope to profit thereby" (Mann, 2005, p. 100). The novella once again demonstrates the disjunction between reason (Apollonian) and emotion (Dionysian). Aschenbach exemplifies the dialectical battle between reason and emotion. He evolves from an austere, logical, scholarly writer into a passionate admirer and finally into an obsessive stalker fixated with physical beauty. He forgets his own identity in the process. When Aschenbach unleashes his unbridled passion and excessive wanderlust in Venice, he sets the stage for his ultimate downfall. His intellect has been absorbed by his infatuation; his passion has taken precedence over logic. Aschenbach saunters around the rotting Venice, oblivious to the abhorrent events taking place, which mirrors his exploration of the darkest side of his mind. By pursuing Tadzio, he feeds his addiction, providing "his passion with vague, illicit hopes" (Mann, 2005, p. 107).

Aschenbach proceeds to make a dubious parallel between Tadzio and himself and to Socrates and Phaedrus. The dubiousness is as follows: first, Socrates and Phaedrus have a long-standing mentor-mentee relationship, characterized by platonic love and affection, despite their age difference. Second, while Aschenbach initially admires Tadzio's beauty and wishes to elevate it to a higher level of art, he ultimately degrades himself by transgressing moral codes. According to Albert Braverman and Larry Nachman, the case of Socrates and Phaedros and that of Aschenbach and Tadzio share only one similarity: both relationships

I N T E R F A C E

involve an elderly man desiring a young man. Nonetheless, while Socrates finds his young students endearing, he instructs his male students for their own benefit. He acts as a teacher, and the sensual urge is “partially transmuted into the energy for a highly civilized activity which perpetuates and improves life. ([...] The Greeks, with their characteristic shrewdness, understood that a good dose of eros was an excellent way of preventing pedagogy from turning into an attack on the young by their jealous elders.)” (Braverman & Nachman, 1972, p. 297).

In contrast to Socrates, Aschenbach’s goal is more personal for he desires rejuvenation of his own physical body and resurgence of creativity. Near the end of the novel, Aschenbach consumes toxic strawberries while suffering from fever and being in a trance. Aschenbach, hallucinatory and poisoned, re-imagines Socrates’ statements to Phaedrus in Plato’s *Symposium*:

For beauty, Phaedrus, mark thou well, beauty and beauty alone is at once divine and visible; it is hence the path of the man of the senses, little Phaedrus, the path of the artist to the intellect. But dost thou believe, dear boy, that the man for whom the path to the intellect leads through the senses can ever find wisdom and the true dignity of man? Or dost thou rather believe (I leave it to thee to decide) that it is a perilously alluring path, indeed, a path of sin and delusion that must needs lead one astray? For surly though knowest that we poets cannot follow the path of beauty lest Eros should join forces with us and take the lead; yes, though heroes we may be after our fashion and chaste warriors, we are as women, for passion in our exultation and our longing must ever be love—such is our bliss and our shame. Now dost thou see that we poets can be neither wise nor dignified? That we must needs go astray, ever be wanton and adventurers of the emotions? [...] But form and innocence, Phaedrus, lead to intoxication and desire; they may even lead a noble man to horrifying crimes of passion that his own beautiful rigor reprehends as infamous; they lead to the abyss; they too lead to the

abyss.

(Mann, 2005, p. 137)

Albert Braverman and Larry Nachman refer to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (2003) when analyzing the relationship between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, stating that "the synthesis of the Apollonian and the Dionysian is possible and has a positive value" and "the union of the two produces tragedy, the highest art form. Nietzsche, towards the end of the book, describes the historical death, or more precisely the deliberate destruction, of tragedy" (Braverman & Nachman, 1972, p. 297). However, according to Socrates, human beings possess intellect and are not tragic. In a trance, Aschenbach misinterprets Socrates' beliefs, hearing Socrates' voice inform him that intellect is attainable only through the senses and that beauty can be experienced through eros. Having intellect does not lead to dignity; rather, it leads to depravity. Thus, poets select beauty to conceal their fundamental desire for love, but it is illusory. The binary conflict between intelligence and beauty is evident here, with each extreme leading to downfall.

Several days following his imaginative reworking of Socrates' statements, Aschenbach sits down by the beach as an observer once more. Aschenbach sees Tadzio smiling back at him in his half-hallucinated state. Aschenbach tries to get up and continue to follow him. He is unable to rise again from his chair due to exhaustion, and later collapses and dies. "Minutes passed before people rushed to the aid of the man, who had slumped sideways in his chair. He was carried to his room. And that very day a respectfully stunned world received word of his death (Mann, 2005, p. 142).

Richard White (1990) thinks that *Death in Venice* provides an argument against Plato's belief in the redeeming power of art. According to Plato, artistic beauty, such as an ancient statue, leads us to the Absolute. The *Symposium* aspires to the ultimate love through the use of beauty to persuade others to do good. The love of a beautiful individual, and all physical beauty, is inextricably linked to the adoration of moral and intellectual beauty as well as the adoration of the Good itself. One's

I N T E R F A C E

intense passion is guarded and controlled, allowing the individual to acquire a higher level of knowledge and being. Beauty and the pursuit of the Good are closely intertwined from this perspective (White, 1990, pp. 58–59). White contends that, in *Death in Venice*, Mann parallels Aschenbach's infatuation with the disease in the city and demonstrates how Aschenbach's obsession with beauty only leads to moral degradation and death, rejecting Plato's idea (White, 1990, pp. 54; 61).

4 Decadence and the Aesthetic Crisis at the Turn of the Century

Aschenbach suffers from a physical as well as a spiritual illness. Additionally, his deteriorating physical condition, coupled with a lifetime of intense self-restraint, drains his creativity. His life's stagnation and ennui make him feel imprisoned, and ignites his yearning to escape. Graham Good observes that, from the start, there is "an unrelenting tension between the expectation of physical and spiritual renewal and a present which is obliquely threatening. Venice is itself an agent of Aschenbach's impending metamorphosis, both as context for and accomplice to his hopeless infatuation with the Polish youth Tadzio" (Good, 1972, p. 38). Venice, for him, is "the labyrinth ... this fair frailty that fawned and betrayed, half fairy tale, half snare ..." (Good, 1972, pp. 55–56). His relentless pursuit of Tadzio around the city's "labyrinthine little streets, squares, canals, and bridges, each one so like the next, at length made him quite lose his bearings. ... All his care was not to lose sight of the figure after which he thirsted" (Good, 1972, p. 70). Soon afterwards, Aschenbach succumbs to his co-conspirators, the adolescent Tadzio, and the deadly maze known as Venice (Good, 1972, p. 40). In *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann portrays dialectical debates, progressing from the Apollonian extreme of pure reason and logic to the Dionysian extreme of emotion and unbridled desire. The chasm between the decaying body and the nurtured individual spirit widens over time. Aschenbach's physical state no longer corresponds to his desire for eternity, either physically or artistically. The general tone of the novel is depressing. The ending is tragic not only because time is irreversible but also because Aschenbach exploits his limited time for perverse purposes.

CHEN

According to Heinz Kohut (1957), Aschenbach is “influenced by the progress-negating philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and subscribes to the creed of the German romanticists that there is a close affinity between beauty and death” (Kohut, 1957, p. 8). Kohut contends that, in the Romantic tradition, the hero must die, either physically or metaphorically, for the work of art to be completed (Kohut, 1957, p. 219). The novel *Death in Venice* is characterized by anxiety over aging, death, disease in the city, and the senile artist’s insanity in stalking the adolescent boy despite the spread of the pandemic. The novella is reminiscent of other 19th-century romances in which the artist’s search for beauty results in tragedy. The literary phenomenon is a reflection of apprehension about cultural depletion and decline. Nietzsche’s death most likely contributed to Mann’s novella’s aesthetic meditation on the purpose of existence. Aschenbach ponders the legacy left to him by his forefathers and the potential for preserving, transcending, or degenerating it.

Like any man whose natural gifts aroused an aristocratic interest in his ancestry, he habitually called to mind his forebears during his periods of achievement and success, assuring himself of their approval, gratification, and ineluctable esteem. [...] What would they say? But what for that matter would they have said about his life as a whole, a life diverging from theirs to the point of degeneracy, lived under the spell of art, a life about which he himself, in line with the bourgeois disposition of those forefathers, had made mocking pronouncements as a young man, yet which basically so resembled their own! He too had served; he too, like so many of them, had been soldier and warrior, for art was war, a grueling struggle that people these days were not up to for long.

(Kohut, 1957, pp. 105–106)

In Luchino Visconti’s *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann’s novella’s aged writer is substituted by a dejected musician. Luchino Visconti’s selection of Gustav Mahler’s symphony no. 5 as the film’s background music is unmistakably suggestive. Gustav Mahler was a prominent composer who aided in the transition of 19th-century Austro-German music tra-

I N T E R F A C E

dition to early 20th-century modernism (Hayes & Quinby, 1989, pp. 159–177). Hayes further explicates the transition in literature and arts, applying Nietzschean terms of the “Dionysian to the Apollonian, impulse to repression, transgression to conventionality” (Hayes & Quinby, 1989, p. 159). He contends that “Classical art privileges the Apollonian; Romantic art privileges the Dionysian. Post-Romantic, ‘high’-modernist art reaches an impasse in which the Apollonian and the Dionysian are both privileged and denigrated—hence its overwhelming sense of irony” (Hayes & Quinby, 1989, p. 159). Aschenbach’s dilemma is that he does not adhere to “bourgeois standards” and yet follows his emotions, which are outside of mainstream values. “The artist figure is thus caught in a situation where immediacy, which is always transgressive, must be sacrificed in order to create art, the monumentalization of self. This art always yearns for its other, always longs to recapture Dionysian exuberance. Yet to do this is to forsake classical Apollonian form, to accept death in dissolution” (Hayes & Quinby, 1989, p. 159). Aschenbach is perplexed by his lack of time to create a new milestone for his art, which is embodied entirely by Tadzio at this moment. Gary Chase Johnson examines *Death in Venice* from an aesthetic standpoint, claiming that Aschenbach’s obsession with Tadzio is “predominately aesthetic” in the sense that Tadzio is viewed as an object of beauty capable of eliciting a sensual response from the subject who sees him. However, the subject and the object are inseparable (Hayes & Quinby, 1989, pp. 84–85). Initially, Aschenbach attempts to create something out of the beloved object. He endeavors to transform a desired love object into an allegory that will finally give inspiration and meaning on a spiritual, aesthetic, and everlasting level. In other words, Aschenbach’s ultimate goal is to create an “allegory, one that will therefore acquire a meaning that transcends the literal, the immediate, and the mundane” (Hayes & Quinby, 1989, p. 85). The novella exemplifies the dispute and dialectic reasoning between the dying bourgeois cultures and the serious desire to establish a new form of artistic expression. In other words, immortality must be attained by the revitalization of a new form of literature and arts within the confines of the human finite life span. The ending retains the sentiments of the 19th-century novelistic tradition of persistent tragedy. The hero must die at the end of his quest for an Ideal or beauty.

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I N T E R F A C E

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