Death in Venice

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS MANN

Thomas Mann was born in Lübeck, Germany in 1875. His father was a senator and merchant, and his mother was a Brazilian of German ancestry who had emigrated to Germany at a young age. Mann's father died when he was only 16, and shortly after he moved with his mother to Munich, where lived for much of his life. He disliked formal education and school, but attended university and studied to become a journalist. He wrote a collection of short stories, but achieved significant notoriety for his celebrated novel *Buddenbrooks*, published in 1901. In 1905, he married Katia Pringsheim and eventually had six children with her, though since his death it has become apparent that he may have been homosexual. Mann continued to write stories and published *Death in Venice* in 1912. He began writing *The Magic Mountain* (probably his best known novel after *Buddenbrooks*) shortly after, but was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I. After the war, Mann's fame spread internationally, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929. He continued to live in Germany until the Nazis came to power, and left in 1933 for Switzerland. He became an American citizen and lived in the U.S. for some time before returning to Europe after the war. He died in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1955, widely recognized as one of the premier writers of the 20th century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1911, Thomas Mann himself went on a vacation to Venice with his wife, where he became fascinated by a sickly young Polish boy. *Death in Venice* was partially inspired by this experience, and the famous writer Aschenbach can be seen as a version of Mann himself, who had achieved notoriety in his literary career by the time he wrote *Death in Venice*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Mann often alludes to classical Greek mythology, as Aschenbach compares Tadzio to various attractive male mythical figures like Narcissus and Hyacinthus. Additionally, *Death in Venice* is heavily influenced by Plato's *Phaedrus*, a philosophical dialogue in which Socrates teaches Phaedrus about beauty and desire. Not only does the novella take up the same themes as this work, but Aschenbach also deliriously imagines himself as Socrates and Tadzio as Phaedrus.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Death in Venice* (*Der Tod in Venedig*, in German)
- **When Written:** 1911
- **Where Written:** Munich, Germany
- **When Published:** 1912
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Novella
- **Setting:** Munich, Germany and Venice, Italy.
- **Climax:** Dressed in new clothes and wearing makeup in an attempt to appear younger, Aschenbach follows Tadzio through Venice and then becomes delirious in the heat in a city square. He talks as if he is Socrates talking to the young Phaedrus, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, and asks whether beauty is the path to virtue or sin.
- **Antagonist:** Aschenbach can be seen as his own antagonist. He struggles against his own repressed desires and, as he chooses to stay in Venice and keep pursuing Tadzio, he leads himself to his own downfall.

EXTRA CREDIT

Deaths in Venice. Mann's novella has been proven popular both with readers and with other writers eager to create their own versions of the story. It has been adapted into both a film and a ballet, and Benjamin Britten created a celebrated opera version of the story in 1973.

PLOT SUMMARY

Gustav von Aschenbach, a famous, well-respected German author, went for a walk one afternoon in Munich, tired from writing all morning. He noticed a strange-looking man standing on the portico of a church with red hair and an "unusual appearance." Aschenbach stared at him, and the foreign-seeming man looked back at him. Embarrassed, Aschenbach walked away, but he found he had a sudden urge to travel faraway. He had always been extremely disciplined and worked hard at his writing, but now craved an escape from his work with some vacation. He decided he needed "an exotic atmosphere," and planned to go somewhere in the south of Europe.

Aschenbach had achieved notoriety as a novelist, short story writer, and critic. His father's side of the family had all lived "disciplined, respectable, frugal lives," but his mother was the daughter of an orchestra conductor, so his personality was a "marriage of sober official conscientiousness with darker, more ardent impulses." He lived an austere, hardworking life, and dedicated himself to his writing. The narrator writes that Aschenbach's writing became so popular because his own life experience contributed to his portrayal of a certain kind of

"elegant self-control that conceals the sapping of strength and biological decay," and this kind of "heroism of weakness," struck a chord with people of the time. In his old age, Aschenbach had attained a "dignity and severity" in his work and his life.

About two weeks after his afternoon walk in Munich, Aschenbach traveled to an island in the Adriatic. It was too crowded with Austrian tourists, though, so he decided to go to Venice, somewhere "different as a fairy tale." On the boat bound for Venice, Aschenbach saw what looked like a young man in stylish clothing. He saw however that it was actually a pathetic old man wearing makeup, a wig, and dentures. At **sea**, Aschenbach began to feel dreamlike and lost track of time. He arrived in Venice and got on a black gondola that reminded him of a coffin. The gondolier would not tell him how much the ride would cost, and simply told him, "You will pay." When he got to the hotel, the gondolier left before Aschenbach could try to pay him any money. While waiting for dinner at the hotel that night, Aschenbach saw a Polish family with a young boy, about fourteen years old, who was "perfectly beautiful." He couldn't help but stare at the boy, who briefly returned his gaze. Over dinner, Aschenbach thought about the nature of beauty, art, and form.

The weather was poor in Venice, and Aschenbach worried it might affect his health. He continued to watch the Polish boy around the hotel, and thought he had "godlike beauty." The narrator says that Aschenbach looked at the boy as an artist looks at a masterpiece. Aschenbach tried to read and do work on the beach, but could not concentrate and kept looking at the boy, who was playing with friends near the water. He overhead some of the boy's friends call him something that sounded like Tadzio. Aschenbach happened to find himself in an elevator with Tadzio, and saw him up close. He thought the boy looked sickly and concluded (with some delight) that the boy would probably die before he grew old.

Aschenbach walked around Venice, and noticed that the air was thick and unpleasant. He began to feel ill and decided to leave Venice. He made arrangements to leave the next day, but then regretted his decision the next morning. He stayed at breakfast as long as he could, trying to get a glimpse of Tadzio, and just before his train left, he learned that his luggage had been sent ahead to the wrong destination. So, to his relief, he had to stay in Venice. He saw Tadzio back at the hotel and realized that the boy was the reason he hadn't wanted to leave Venice. He sat in his room with "a gesture that bespoke an open welcome, a calm acceptance."

Aschenbach began to notice that the number of guests at the hotel seemed to be dwindling. The barber at the hotel mentioned something about a **disease**, but refused to elaborate. In town, Aschenbach noticed the smell of a kind of medicinal germicide in the air. He looked in newspapers and found some rumors about a possible **disease** spreading, and worried that Tadzio's family might leave. One Sunday, he followed Tadzio to church and then pursued Tadzio and his family in a gondola through Venice, feeling that his "head and heart were drunk." Aschenbach wondered what his austere ancestors might think of him now. He had long lived a disciplined life, but now felt completely in thrall to his desire for Tadzio. He tried to find out more about the possible **disease** in Venice, but no one at the hotel would tell him anything.

One night, a group of street performers came to the hotel. Aschenbach watched them, but was mostly focused on Tadzio, who was also in the audience. One performer, a clownish guitarist, performed in a salacious, vulgar way. During a pause between performances, Aschenbach asked him why Venice was being disinfected, and the performer said it was simply a preventative measure, because the bad weather could be bad for people's health. The guitarist gave one more performance in which the whole troupe of entertainers laughed hysterically, and the audience began to laugh uncontrollably too, as if the emotion was contagious. The next day, Aschenbach went to a British travel agency in Venice, and an Englishman told him that there was a dangerous outbreak of Indian cholera spreading through the city. He advised Aschenbach to leave Venice because of the **disease**, but Aschenbach's only concern was that Tadzio might leave. That night, Aschenbach had an extremely intense dream, where he was part of a wild, raucous, orgiastic crowd reveling in a mountain landscape, including men with horns and women holding snakes. Aschenbach's "soul tasted the lewdness and frenzy," and he awoke completely devoted to his desire for Tadzio, with no restraint.

Aschenbach began stalking Tadzio more openly. Looking at Tadzio's young body, he began to despise his own aged appearance. He went to the hotel barber and dyed his grey hair. He put on makeup and new clothes in an attempt to appear younger. He followed Tadzio through the city one day, but lost sight of him and sat down in a city square. Feeling "hot gusts of wind" around him, he became delirious and imagined that he was Socrates from Plato's *Phaedrus*. He asked Phaedrus whether he thought beauty was the path to wisdom, or led to "error and sin," and didn't provide an answer. A few days later, Aschenbach was feeling very ill. He learned that Tadzio's family was planning to leave Venice, and he went to the beach to see Tadzio one more time. Tadzio was playing with his friends, and his rowdy friend Jaschu tackled him and pinned him to the ground. Tadzio was upset and walked off by himself into the **sea**. Delirious, Aschenbach watched Tadzio wade into the water and thought he looked like a "pale, charming psychagogue." Aschenbach thought Tadzio was beckoning to him, so he followed the boy into the **ocean**. However, the narrator explains that Aschenbach had actually simply slumped over in his chair. He was brought to his hotel room, where he died within the day.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Gustav von Aschenbach – The main character of the novella, Aschenbach is a successful, celebrated German writer who lives in Munich. An old man, he has lived an austere, disciplined life dedicated to his writing. He rarely indulges in any leisure or pleasure, and is a highly repressed individual, denying most desires in order to dedicate himself fully to his work. The sight of the red-haired man, however, awakens a latent desire in him to travel, and he ends up taking a vacation in Venice. There, he undergoes a rapid transformation, as he confronts the repressed side of his personality and his inner desires. He becomes obsessed with the young boy Tadzio, first as a kind of work of art—a perfect example of youthful beauty—and then as an object of his erotic affections. Aschenbach becomes increasingly intoxicated with the licentious atmosphere of Venice and dies a very different man from who he was in Munich, ignoring his work in order to pursue his desire for Tadzio, whose youth and beauty he idolizes at the expense of everything else.

The Red-Haired Man – While out for a walk in Munich, Aschenbach sees a mysterious red-haired, foreign-looking man. The man looks directly at Aschenbach, and inexplicably awakens in him a desire to travel to faraway, exotic places. It is unclear whether the man really exists, or is a delirious vision of Aschenbach's. In either case, he can be seen as standing in for some of the repressed part of Aschenbach's personality, an embodiment of Aschenbach's inner desires for travel, foreignness, and exoticness.

The Old Man – While traveling by boat to Venice, Aschenbach sees a pathetic-looking old man who is wearing makeup, a wig, and dentures in a desperate attempt to appear young. The old man is drunk and offends Aschenbach's sensibilities. However, by the end of the novella, Aschenbach declines to the point where he comes to resemble the old man, as he alters his own appearance in his pursuit of youth and beauty.

The Gondolier – A mysterious character who transports Aschenbach to his hotel but refuses any monetary payment, saying simply, "You will pay." He is reminiscent of the Greek mythological character Charon, who ferried souls across the river Styx into the underworld. The strange gondolier heightens the sense of Venice as an otherworldly, partly dreamlike place.

Tadzio – Aschenbach actually knows little about Tadzio, a fourteen year-old Polish boy vacationing with his family in Venice, but idealizes and fantasizes about him endlessly. Aschenbach is taken by Tadzio's youthful, "godlike" beauty and continually compares the young boy to Greek statues and mythological figures. Aschenbach thinks that Tadzio looks sickly, and guesses that he will die young. He thinks that Tadzio recognizes his interest in him (and perhaps doesn't mind), but it is unclear whether this is only Aschenbach's fantasy or reality. At the end of the novella, Aschenbach sees Tadzio as a "psychagogue," a role of the Greek god Hermes, who transported souls to the underworld.

The Hotel Barber – The barber encourages Aschenbach to dye his hair, wear makeup, and alter his appearance late in the novella, as Aschenbach becomes more and more obsessed with youth and begins to despise his aged appearance. By going through with the barber's cosmetic recommendations, Aschenbach comes to resemble the old man he found so grotesque on the boat to Venice.

The Guitarist – The guitarist performs at Aschenbach's hotel one night. He seems to have no self-restraint and entertains the audience by behaving ridiculously and vulgarly. In one performance, he and his fellow performers laugh hysterically until the audience also begins to laugh. He thus exemplifies the contagiousness of extreme emotions and a lack of self-restraint, something Aschenbach despises early in the novella, but later approaches himself. Aschenbach also asks the guitarist about the **disease** in Venice, but the guitarist tells him nothing.

The Englishman – Aschenbach speaks to this Englishman at a British travel agency in Venice. The Englishman is the only person who tells him the truth about the mysterious **disease** spreading throughout Venice, and explains that city officials are trying to cover up the fact that a dangerous outbreak of Indian cholera has reached the city. He advises Aschenbach to leave Venice for his own safety, but Aschenbach neglects the advice.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jaschu – One of Tadzio's friends, who Aschenbach sees him playing with. Jaschu is larger and rowdier than Tadzio, and at the end of the novella he tackles him and pins him to the ground, causing Tadzio to go off angrily by himself into the **ocean**.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ART AND THE ARTIST

One often thinks of a writer's life and work as two very different, separate things. *Death in Venice*, however, shows that there is a close connection between an artist's lived experience and work. As the narrator

explains, for example, the heroism of many of Aschenbach's characters has a close connection to his own disciplined self-restraint. His writing takes a real toll on his own body, as his wearied face shows. Aschenbach's readers only see his finished products, and don't realize the links between his writing and his life, as with Aschenbach's well-received essay that he writes while in Venice. The beauty of its writing is owed to his fascination with Tadzio's physical beauty and form. The public's ignorance of the circumstances of Aschenbach's writing, the narrator suggests, is a good thing: the inspiration of Aschenbach's writing in his desire for Tadzio would mar the final product. Unlike his readers, though, Aschenbach cannot separate his writing from his life. He often blurs the distinctions between life and art, as when he imagines himself into the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus* as Socrates, or when he sees Tadzio as a work of art. Mann's novella thus explores how the categories of life and art, truth and fiction, cannot be kept separate for the artist. The autobiographical resonances of the story (Mann actually vacationed in Venice with his wife once, where he became fascinated by a young Polish boy) further blur these distinctions between art and the artist.

In addition, Mann examines more generally the artistic temperament through his representation of Aschenbach. In this, he was heavily influenced by the ideas of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche about the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Inspired by the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus, Nietzsche saw these categories as the two essential tendencies of art. The Apollonian is associated with rationality, order, and harmony, whereas the Dionysian is associated with intoxication, ecstasy, and revelry. Aschenbach begins the story as an extremely Apollonian character, who practices writing with discipline and self-restraint, and never indulges much in pleasure. By the end of the story, however, he becomes excessively Dionysian and is consumed by passion, emphasized in his intense dream of a wild, orgiastic crowd (which is reminiscent of scenes of ancient worshippers of Dionysus). Rather than attaining a healthy balance between the Apollonian and Dionysian, Aschenbach tries too hard to suppress his Dionysian side, with the result that it eventually overcomes him entirely, leading to his death. In exploring these contradictory sides of Aschenbach's personality, Mann presents Nietzsche's duality as governing not only art, but the artist, as well.

REPRESSION, THE MIND, AND THE SELF

At the time Thomas Mann was writing *Death in Venice*, Sigmund Freud had recently published some of his seminal writings on the unconscious. Mann was a reader of Freud, and was highly influenced by some of his ideas. While his story is not simply a disguised demonstration of Freud's theories, Freudian ideas play a significant role in the novella: in particular, the idea of the unconscious, and the concept of repression. Aschenbach is a highly repressed individual, ignoring and denying many of his inner desires. These desires do not simply go away, however. They linger in his unconscious, the part of his mind or psyche of which he is unaware. According to Freud, repressed desires "return" at later times, causing psychological problems for repressive individuals. This seems to happen for Aschenbach. He represses his emotions and desire for pleasure for so long, that when they come back to haunt him, he is utterly overwhelmed by them. And his vision of the strange red-haired foreigner in Munich, for example, awakens a latent, long-repressed desire to travel, which he is absolutely powerless to resist.

Aschenbach's trip to Venice can even be seen as a kind of psychological journey to his unconscious. The city is often described as dream-like (and it is in dreams that the unconscious comes to the surface), and Aschenbach exists in a delirious, only half-awake state there. Moreover, the sea—in its immensity and incomprehensibility, its unknown depths—is often an image for the psyche, with the unknown depths of the unconscious. Half-submerged in the sea, Venice is, symbolically, a city bathed in the unconscious. There, Aschenbach must confront the intense desires that he has repressed for so long, mostly through the figure of the beautiful Tadzio.

Mann's novella shows the danger of extreme repression. However, it is also interested more generally in issues of the self. Aschenbach thinks that he knows himself at the beginning of the story, but quickly changes and finds new (terrifying) dimensions of himself in Venice. The story demonstrates through Aschenbach that the self is often inconsistent and contradictory. We may think we are one kind of person, only to find that we have other sides to ourselves, or only behave a certain way because we are ignorant of or repress the bundle of contradictory impulses, desires, and instincts at war deep within our psyche. Considering Aschenbach's austere, disciplined behavior for most of his life, one could say that Aschenbach is not himself while in Venice. However, Mann encourages the reader to understand this deviation from his normal behavior more as the revelation of other sides of Aschenbach's personality. Beyond its illustration of particular Freudian ideas about repression, then, the largest psychoanalytical lesson to be learned from *Death in Venice* might simply be that we do not always know ourselves as well as we would like to think—and perhaps we never can.

BEAUTY

Mann's novella is entitled *Death in Venice* for obvious reasons, but it is as much about love and desire as about death. Aschenbach wastes away while becoming increasingly obsessed with his desire for Tadzio, whom he sees as the very personification of beauty itself, and most of the work follows Aschenbach's obsession with his beauty. The importance of beauty in the novella is often shown through its focus on Aschenbach's voyeuristic

gaze. It is of course through sight that Aschenbach apprehends Tadzio's beauty, and he spends much of the novel staring surreptitiously at the boy. At first, Aschenbach tries to appreciate Tadzio's beauty in a detached, aesthetic way, appreciating him like a work of art. However, he is unable to maintain this distance for long, and soon his artistic infatuation with Tadzio's physical appearance turns into an intense erotic desire for the boy.

As Aschenbach is completely overcome by Tadzio's beauty, the novella asks whether beauty (and, by extension, desire) is a good or bad thing. This question is primarily raised through allusions to the *Phaedrus*, a work by the Greek philosopher Plato in which Socrates and Phaedrus debate whether love is good or bad. In this work, Socrates argues that beauty inspires the lover because it reminds his soul of heaven. Beauty is, for Socrates, a path to virtue. This may all work very well in theory, but in practice this does not seem to be the case for Aschenbach. When Aschenbach has a vision of the *Phaedrus*, he re-imagines Socrates as using his elaborate theory simply to try to woo the young, attractive Phaedrus. Far from bettering Aschenbach, his experience of beauty in Tadzio seems to harm him. It makes him into a ridiculous, pathetic character—an old man wearing makeup who stalks a young boy—and even contributes to his own death. Aschenbach's obsession with Tadzio's beauty even leads him to wish for harm to Tadzio: he is happy when he thinks that Tadzio might die young, because this means his beauty will not fade with age.

Mann's novella illustrates the crucial difference between writing about beauty and desire, and experiencing it. For much of his life, Aschenbach wrote beautifully and thought about beauty and form in an abstract way. Similarly, Plato is able to justify desire for beauty philosophically in the *Phaedrus*. However, when Aschenbach actually experiences beauty in the flesh, he is overwhelmed and consumed by passion. Mann does not completely condemn beauty, though. It is possible that Aschenbach is simply too obsessed with Tadzio's beauty, and that it is still possible to appreciate beauty and submit to desire in a more moderated, healthy way. When Aschenbach deliriously speaks near the end of the novella as if he were Socrates, he tells Phaedrus that he leaves it up to him to decide whether beauty leads to wisdom or whether it is "truly a path of error and sin." Similarly, Mann leaves this question open-ended for his readers: does beauty always lead to one's downfall, or can we fall in love with beautiful people or things without succumbing to Aschenbach's fate?

YOUTH, AGE, AND TIME

Aschenbach is an old man, and part of why he decides to go to Venice when he does is because he feels his time is running out. He misses his youth, and this is part of why he becomes so obsessed with Tadzio. Youth is associated with beauty in Mann's novella, and as an artist, Aschenbach adores the beauty of youth, which inevitability fades with age. As this may suggest, Aschenbach's obsession with youth becomes a bit perverse and extreme. He originally views the old man with dentures and makeup on the boat to Venice as a pathetic, grotesque character. However, he himself essentially becomes this man by the end of the novel, as he tries to appear younger, disgusted with his aged appearance.

Time is also important on a larger scale in *Death in Venice*. When Aschenbach boards the boat to Venice, he feels that he loses track of time. Several times in Venice, Aschenbach becomes temporally disoriented and envisions himself in ancient times. He imagines that he is Socrates, talking to Phaedrus outside of classical Athens, and also has an intense dream of an ancient Dionysian orgy. Classical antiquity is an important site of fantasy for Aschenbach. He often compares Tadzio to mythological characters or classical sculptures, idealizing the ancient past as a world full of beauty. And indeed, much ancient Greek writing puts great importance on beauty and love (for example, Plato's *Phaedrus*). In 5th-century Athens, there was also a widespread practice of pederasty, sexual relationships between younger and older men. So, Aschenbach's visions of the ancient past can also be seen as a desire for the supposedly more licentious sexual practices of antiquity. The degree to which Aschenbach's desire for Tadzio is explicitly sexual is slightly ambiguous. He longs both for his own youth and for the "younger" historical period of ancient times, and projects both of these ideals onto Tadzio. Through the character of Tadzio, then, Aschenbach lusts after the idea of youth itself. However, this cannot be completely disassociated from Aschenbach's love for the particular young character of Tadzio.

Through Aschenbach, Mann shows the destructive, often perverse consequences of an excessive idealization of youth. Aschenbach not only becomes a grotesque figure and perishes from his intense passion, but even wishes harm for Tadzio (hoping that he will die young). Youth is always fleeting, and time is always flying. Perhaps then we cannot help but have some nostalgia for earlier times. Aschenbach demonstrates, though, what can happen when someone indulges in extreme versions of this desire for youth and for the past.

TRAVEL, GEOGRAPHY, AND CLIMATE

In terms of plot, *Death in Venice* is primarily a story of travel. Aschenbach's journey to Venice can be seen as operating on multiple levels. Not only does he physically, literally travel to Italy, but he also travels symbolically to the realm of his unconscious and temporally to ancient Greece through his visions and dreams. Venice is continually described as a hazy, dreamlike city, part fantasy and part reality, heightening the sense of Aschenbach's travel as highly symbolic. It is particularly important that Aschenbach travels south. Mann's novella takes advantage of some stereotypical associations of particular regions of Europe.

Aschenbach is from Germany, in northern Europe, which is associated with a cold, austere, disciplined lifestyle. His trip to Italy is a journey to a more relaxed, warm, indulgent place. The climate of Venice often symbolically reflects Aschenbach's inner state, with its oppressive heat and haze mirroring the heat of Aschenbach's desire and his intoxication with Tadzio's beauty.

The idea of travel is thus full of symbolic weight in Mann's story. By leaving his home, Aschenbach seeks not only a foreign locale, but also a change of lifestyle. Importantly, Aschenbach hopes to travel only temporarily. He only wants a vacation in Venice, a temporary respite from his normal life, his normal climate, and his normal self. However, the novella shows that taking a short trip to one's unconscious, the realm of one's fantasies and inner desires, can be dangerous. Aschenbach is overwhelmed by the climate of his destination and the inner state it seems to encourage in him. As his downfall shows, the journey to one's inner desires and unconscious fantasies can be dangerous, and is often a one-way trip.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE SEA

The sea is omnipresent as a kind of background in Venice (and Venice is, famously, partly submerged in it). Aschenbach spends much of his time on the beach near his hotel gazing out at the sea, and when he dies he sees himself as going out into its waters. The sea can be seen as symbolizing the psyche, and in particular the unconscious. It is immense, unknowable, and has dark, uncharted depths, much like the unknowable parts of the self. Aschenbach's decision to take a trip to a seaside town, and in particular to a town itself in the sea, can thus be seen as symbolic of a decision to "travel to" and confront his own unconscious. Aschenbach is drawn in by the beauty of the sea, much as he is enticed by the pleasures of indulging in his inner repressed desires. However, just like the sea with its strong waves, the unconscious is powerful, and overwhelms Aschenbach, leading to his death.

THE DISEASE

As Aschenbach stays in Venice, he begins to notice that more and more guests are leaving his hotel. The hotel barber mentions something about a disease to him, but no one is willing to explain anything more to him. In the city, he smells the medicinal scent of a germicide in the air, and becomes increasingly curious about the possible disease. All the Venetians he talks to, however, insist that the germicide is simply a preventative measure, because the excessively warm weather can be bad for people's health. However, Aschenbach finally learns the truth from an Englishman at a British travel agency. The Englishman explains that Indian cholera, which originated in "the hot swamps of the Ganges delta," has spread throughout the Mediterranean and is now in Venice, having already killed some people. Originating in an exotic location, the disease is treated mysteriously for most of the novella and, while it is never specified, it is perhaps the cause of Aschenbach's own illness and death.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *Death in Venice* published in 1995.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Overstrained by the difficult and dangerous labor of the morning hours, which precisely at this moment called for extreme circumspection, discretion, forcefulness and exactitude of the will, even after the noon meal the writer had been unable to restrain the continued operation of the productive machinery within him—that *motus animi continuus* in which, according to Cicero, the nature of eloquence consists—and had not found the relieving slumber that, with the increasing tendency of his strength to wear out, was so necessary to him once in the course of the day. And so, soon after tea, he had sought the outdoors, in hopes that the fresh air and activity would restore him and help him have a profitable evening.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

As we're introduced to Gustav von Aschenbach, we get the sense that his mind is slowly breaking down, no matter how hard he tries to control it. Aschenbach is a talented, famous writer, whose eloquence and ingenuity have been widely praised. But here, Mann creates the strange impression that Aschenbach's mind and eloquence are *too* powerful and *too* productive. It's as if Aschenbach's mind is a machine in perpetual motion--even when Aschenbach is exhausted, he can't quite "turn off" his brain.

Critics have interpreted the scene as a metaphor for the Nietzschean division between the Dionysian (the realm of the libido, chaos, and the aggressive instinct) and the

Apollonian (the realm of order, structure, and tradition). Aschenbach is a hyper-cultivated artist, but at what cost? He's given up half of his humanity: he represses all passion, sexuality, or aggression.

> He was most surprisingly conscious of an odd expansion within himself, a kind of roving unrest, a youthfully ardent desire for faraway places, a feeling so intense, so new or at least unaccustomed and forgotten for so long, that he stopped short as if rooted to the spot, his hands clasped behind him and his eyes fixed on the ground, in order to examine the nature and purpose of this sensation. It was an urge to travel, nothing more; but it presented itself in the form of a real seizure, intensified to the point of passionateness; in fact, it was like a delusion of the senses.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Gustav meets a man with red hair, and the man provokes a strange reaction in Gustav: he makes Gustav feel a strong and sudden desire to travel and see the world.

Some have interpreted the red-haired man as a symbol of death and destruction (red hair has been associated with the devil for centuries), suggesting that Gustav is motivated by a sense of his own mortality. Gustav knows that he's aging, and not long for this world, so he feels a deep, desperate desire to "cheat death" by cramming in as much travel as possible before he cashes in his chips. Mann suggests the psychological dimensions of Gustav's experience by characterizing Gustav's desire to travel as a "delusion of the senses"--i.e., a subconscious desire that has no rational explanation. It's suggested that this is the first breakthrough of the "Dionysian" into the usually restrained, well-ordered "Apollonian" facade of Aschenbach's life.

> Too occupied with the tasks set for him by his own ego and by the European spirit he represented, too burdened with the obligation to create and too undisposed to diversions to be a proper admirer of the colorful outside world, he had been perfectly satisfied with the view of the earth's surface that anyone can acquire without venturing far away from his own circle of interests, and he had never even been tempted to leave Europe.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Here Mann makes a clear link between Gustav the European and Europe itself. Gustav is Europe as its best (and worse): "civilized," educated, disciplined, etc. Gustav has had the best education his country can provide, and he's studied the work of all the best European writers and thinkers.

And yet Europe has also made Gustav complacent--he's never had any desire to leave, or any curiosity about the wider world, until now. Since his encounter with the red-haired stranger, however, Gustav feels strangely "crushed" by the weight of his own education; Mann even characterizes Gustav's artistic practice as an onerous "burden" that Gustav tries to escape. Gustav has been *too* educated and *too* cultured--now he has an urge to escape.

But where can Gustav go? As Mann makes clear, Gustav has never left Europe; his world is so firmly defined by European art and culture that he literally can't conceive of another place to travel. Mann's novel is about Europe and the European culture, so Gustav's struggle for freedom plays out in a totally European setting--Venice--but also one that is defined by its "Southern-ness" and dream-like qualities, as opposed to the colder and more austere Germany and North.

> To be sure, ever since he was a young man this kind of dissatisfaction had meant to him the essence and inmost nature of talent; and it was for its sake that he had curbed and chilled his emotions, because he knew that emotions tend to be satisfied with a happy approximation and with less than perfection. Were his enslaved emotions now taking their toll by abandoning him, by refusing to further his art and lend it wings, by taking away with them all his delight in form and expression?

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mann draws a key distinction between the two sides of Gustav's personality--his emotions and his thoughts. On one hand, Gustav is a creature of thought: he's

a talented writer who uses his immense intellect to study the great writers of the past and translate their ideas into new literature. And yet Gustav isn't just a creature of intellect--he has emotions and drives too. Up until now, Gustav's emotions have been strictly "curbed," existing only to *support* and enhance thequality of his literary creations. Now, however, Gustav's emotions are "rebelling" against his own mind, forcing him to travel and search for new stimulation.

In short, the passage reiterates the divide within Gustav's own character (a divide that has been analyzed in Freudian and Nietzschean ways--see Background Info). Gustav's emotions are about to launch a full-scale war with Gustav's more reasonable, controlled side.

Chapter 2 Quotes

His forebears had been officers, judges, bureaucrats, men who had led their disciplined, respectable and frugal lives in the service of king and state. Deeper intellectuality had embodied itself among them on one occasion, in the person of a preacher; more swiftly flowing and sensual blood had entered the family in the previous generation through the writer's mother, daughter of a Bohemian orchestra conductor. It was from her that he derived the signs of foreign ancestry in his appearance. The marriage of sober official conscientiousness with darker, more ardent impulses produced an artist, this particular artist.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter 2, Mann tells us more about Aschenbach's childhood and his family history. We're informed that Gustav comes from a long lineage of orderly, proper people: his ancestors were judges, officers, and other people trained to obey orders at all times. And yet there's something slightly "off" about Gustav's own character. He is equally a product of his musical mother, and thus seemingly a gentler, softer figure than his father or grandfathers--but also one more at war with himself. And yet this divide between father and mother, between reason and passion, has produced all of his success as an artist.

The "marriage" of order and "ardent impulse" in Gustav's character again suggests a Freudian influence on Mann's novella. Like Freud, Mann believes that a man can only be understood fully by analyzing his relationship with his mother and father. Thus, we get a lot of explicit information about how Gustav got along with his parents.

When, at about the age of thirty-five, he fell ill in Vienna, a shrewd observer said of him at a social gathering: You see, for years now Aschenbach has only lived like this"—and the speaker closed the fingers of his left hand into a tight fist—"never like this"—and he let his open hand dangle at ease from the armrest of the chair.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Mann reiterates Gustav's devotion to order and discipline. For decades, Gustav has worked hard as a writer and a man of letters--doing so runs in his family (which is comprised of various bureaucrats and judges accustomed to hard work).

The question is: will Gustav be able to keep up his lifestyle forever? One gets the strong sense that Gustav is finally beginning to crack under the pressure of so much hard work and orderliness. He's written plenty of great books, but now it's time for him to go on vacation, and also to take a more psychological vacation from his mental discipline and repression. Mann offers a suggestive image: Gustav has been living like a tense, curled-up fist. Now, Gustav is about to release all this tension and disclose his true, hidden self.

And fortunately discipline was his inborn inheritance from his father's side. At forty, at fifty—just as he had in years past, at an age when others are spendthrift daydreamers, blithely postponing the execution of great plans—he began his day early with jets of cold water over his chest and back, and then, a pair of tall wax candles in silver sticks shining over his manuscript, for two or three fervently conscientious morning hours he would sacrifice upon the altar of art the strength he had garnered during his sleep.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Here Mann uses some Freudian imagery to suggest the strength of Gustav's devotion to order and law. Even as a man of 50, Gustav remains incredibly orderly in his life. He wakes up every day at the same time and works for many hours, never stopping for rest. Mann notes that Gustav works under the light of tall wax candles--a Freudian image of the phallus, which Freud associated with law and order. The implication is that Gustav has been trained by his father and grandparents to obey the "laws" of personal responsibility and hard work--laws that are intimately tied to a heteronormative model of sexuality. (There's a lot of this kind of psychoanalytic symbolism in the novella--and much of it is hard to take seriously by 21st century standards, considering how far from favor Freud has fallen.) Mann also notes the religious element of Gustav's existence--he's like a cloistered monk, religiously studying his "holy books" every day.

❝ What was here prepared, in fact already accomplished, was that “miracle of reborn naïveté” that the author mentioned expressly somewhat later in one of his dialogues, not without a mysterious emphasis. Strange connections! Was it an intellectual consequence of this “rebirth,” of this new dignity and severity, when at about the same time one could observe an almost immoderate strengthening of his feeling for beauty, that noble purity, simplicity and evenness of form that henceforth lent his productions such a striking, indeed conscious, stamp of mastery and classicism?

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9-10

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we get a sense for what Gustav's contemporaries like about his writing. Gustav writes novels and poems in which his heroes embody a strong classical ideal--i..e, an ideal rooted in Roman and Greek antiquity. Critics and readers celebrate Gustav for reviving what they see as Europe's vanished cultural tradition with so much "mastery."

The passage suggests Gustav as a late Romantic, or possibly neoclassical figure. During the late 19th and early 20th century, Europe turned to the study of Greek and Roman culture. In art and literature, Greek mythology became an important influence--even the word "Romantic" is a clear sign of the influence of antiquity on writers of the era. Figures like Rousseau, Shelley, Millais, and others saw themselves as reviving classical ideals with a newfound sense of nostalgia. By the same token, Gustav seems to be popular among his peers for appealing to a sense of greatness and beauty that is deeply rooted in European tradition and history.

❝ Significant destinies seemed to have left their mark on his head, which usually leaned sideways as if in pain; and yet it was art that had here undertaken that task of forming the features which is usually the work of a difficult, agitated life. . . Yes, even on a personal basis art is an enhancement of life. It makes you more deeply happy, it wears you out faster. It engraves on the face of its servant the traces of imaginary, intellectual adventures, and with time, even when his external existence is one of cloisterlike calm, it makes him spoiled and fastidious, producing a weariness and nervous curiosity that could hardly be generated by a lifetime full of extravagant passions and pleasures.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Here Mann focuses on Gustav's face. Gustav has lived a long, hard life--he hasn't been a soldier or a traveler, but he *has* spent most of his time sitting in a quiet room, writing. Strangely, Mann suggests, Gustav's sedentary lifestyle has worn him out far quicker and more completely than a life of travel and adventure would have. Writing has sapped Gustav of his energy and strength--he's put all this strength into his books.

Mann subtly portrays writing as the most personal of activities--an act in which the artist must sacrifice his entire soul to his craft. A life of passion, by contrast, requires no great sacrifice. Only the life of the artist can truly sap a man of his strength and his spirit--as evidenced by Gustav's constantly furrowed brow and leaning head.

Chapter 3 Quotes

If you wanted to reach someplace overnight that was incomparable, different as a fairy tale, where would you go? But that was obvious! . . . A week and a half after his arrival on the island, in the early morning haze, a swift motor launch carried him and his luggage back across the waters to the naval base, where he went on land only long enough to ascend a plank gangway onto the damp deck of a ship that lay under steam and was heading for Venice.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter 3, Gustav comes to the conclusion that he should travel to Venice. Gustav thinks that he needs a place where life is like a fairy tale--where everything is exotic, exciting, and unfamiliar. Venice, Gustav thinks, is the place for him.

Why Venice? Venice, Mann is well aware, is a city of art and culture--a place where the greatest Renaissance artists went to study and practice their craft. Strangely, then, Venice seems to symbolize everything that Gustav is trying to escape. And yet Venice is *also* a longstanding symbol of sexual and creative freedom--a place in which one's natural instincts can run wild, rather than being controlled by laws and rules. Furthermore, Venice is surrounded and interlaced by water, making it like an island, somehow separate from the rest of the world, and partly submerged in the symbolically restless, dynamic sea.

It's a little unusual that Gustav chooses to travel to another European city in his search for total freedom (one wonders why he doesn't go to Africa, or South America, or America instead). Perhaps the reason is that Gustav--the very embodiment of European ideals--wants a place where he can better understand *himself*, not just meet some new people. A European city, then, is the ideal place for him to practice this elaborate self-exploration (while also flirting with his own repressed desires).

One of these passengers, in a light yellow summer suit of an extravagantly stylish cut, red tie and jauntily uptilted Panama hat, outdid all the rest in jollity with his squawky voice. But scarcely had Aschenbach taken a closer look at him, when with a sort of terror he realized that the youthful impression was spurious. This was an old man, there could be no doubt. Wrinkles surrounded his eyes and mouth. The faint crimson of his cheeks was rouge; the brown hair beneath the straw hat with its colorful band was a wig; his neck was scraggy and sinewy; his little stuck-on mustache and the tiny beard on his chin were dyed; the complete set of yellow teeth, which he displayed as he laughed, was a cheap denture; and his hands, with signet rings on both index fingers, were those of an old, old man. With a feeling of horror Aschenbach watched him and his intercourse with his friends.

Related Characters: The Old Man, Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this famous passage, Gustav has a nightmarish experience. He sees someone who appears to be young and cheerful--someone who's wearing brightly-colored clothing and a flamboyant hat. With horror, Gustav realizes that the man is actually extremely old--he's just covered his entire face in grotesque makeup designed to fool people into *thinking* that he's young.

What does this surreal episode symbolize? Some have argued that the young-old man is Europe itself--vainly trying to revitalize itself in spite of its gradual decay. Others have pointed to the Freudian dimensions of the scene: Gustav seemingly has (as we'll later see) repressed desires for men, and yet for now, he recoils in fear and disgust. Perhaps most importantly, the man foreshadows what Gustav himself will become later in the story, as he becomes disgusted by his own age and tries to cover it with make-up, hair-dye, and fashionable clothing. His repulsed reaction to the man at this point shows just how much his experience in Venice will change Gustav.

> Who could avoid experiencing a fleeting shudder, a secret timidity and anxiety upon boarding a Venetian gondola for the first time or after a long absence? The strange conveyance, handed down without any change from ages of yore, and so peculiarly black—the only other thing that black is a coffin—recalls hushed criminal adventures in the night, accompanied only by the quiet splashing of water; even more, it recalls death itself, the bier and the dismal funeral and the final taciturn passage. And have you observed that the seat in such a boat, that armchair painted black like a coffin and upholstered in a dull black, is the softest, most luxurious and enervating seat in the world? Aschenbach noticed this when he sat down at the gondolier's feet opposite his luggage, which was arranged neatly at the prow.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach, The Gondolier

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Gustav here prepares to arrive in Venice by gondola--the famed style of boat that's used to paddle between buildings in the city. As Gustav enters a gondola, he feels a strange twinge of anxiety and reflection. As Mann suggests, Gustav's anxiety is rooted in his own fear of death. The gondola is clearly depicted as a symbol of death--it's black like a coffin, and about the same size, too. The irony, then, is that even as Gustav enters Venice with hopes of reclaiming his youth and his life-force, he's surrounded by symbols that suggest death and destruction. The struggle for life, as Mann (a disciple of Freud) believed, is inseparably bound up with a repressed desire for death.

> "What do you charge for the ride?"
> And, looking past him, the gondolier answered: "You will pay."

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach, The Gondolier (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Mann here further reinforces the link between the gondola and death. Gustav has rented a gondola to travel to the place where he's staying. The gondolier rows Gustav into the depths of Venice, but refuses to accept any payment from Gustav--instead, he cryptically insists that Gustav will pay later.

The gondolier's words seem laced with symbolic meanings. In Greek mythology, the shadowy boatman Charon paddled dead spirits across the river Styx into Hell (in exchange for a coin). Here, the gondolier takes on the attributes of Charon, rowing Gustav into a city of death, and suggesting that Gustav will "pay" not with a coin but with his life itself. In short, the gondolier prophesies Gustav's death (a death that we're meant to see coming--it's even in the title--and that thus hangs over all the opening actions of the tale).

> With astonishment Aschenbach observed that the boy was perfectly beautiful. His face, pale and charmingly secretive, with the honey-colored hair curling around it, with its straight-sloping nose, its lovely mouth and its expression of sweet and divine earnestness, recalled Greek statues of the noblest period, and, along with its extremely pure perfection of form, it was of such unique personal charm that the onlooker thought he had never come across anything so felicitous either in nature or in art.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach, Tadzio

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Here we're introduced to one of the key characters of the novella, Tadzio. Gustav has just arrived in Venice, and he sees Tadzio, a stunningly beautiful child, running along. Gustav is immediately taken with Tadzio--but it's important to understand the nature of his attraction.

It's tempting to state that Gustav's initial attraction to Tadzio is rooted in Gustav's own repressed homosexual desires. This is left ambiguous at this point, however, and for now Gustav mostly seems drawn to Tadzio on a purely aesthetic level. Mann describes Tadzio as embodying the beauty of a Greek statue--in other words, Tadzio seems not only beautiful and pure, but also like the perfect symbol of the European tradition Gustav has spent his life studying. For most of his life, Gustav has embraced the European tradition and yet held it at arms' length: in other words, he's felt passion for Greek culture, and yet he's tempered his own passion with rationality and discipline. In short, Gustav

has always balanced his attraction to figures like Tadzio with order and self-control. Here in Venice, with no order to hold him back, Gustav seems to be on the verge of giving in to his attraction.

He loved the sea for deep-seated reasons: because of the hard-working artist's yearning for repose, his desire to take shelter in the bosom of undifferentiated immensity from the demanding complexity of the world's phenomena; because of his own proclivity—forbidden, directly counter to his life's work, and seductive for that very reason—for the unorganized, immoderate, eternal: for nothingness.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mann examines Gustav's complicated relationship with the sea.For Gustav, the sea seems to represent the usually-repressed "Dionysian" aspect of his self--the "undifferentiated immensity" of life and reality. Gustav knows that his "life's work" involves holding this immensity at bay and giving it shape, but he also enjoys taking a "vacation" in that immensity. Thus this trip to Venice is presented in physical terms--the rigidly disciplined artist seeking out the chaotic, unfathomable sea--and in psychological terms--the repressed mind trying to take a "vacation" by letting some of its darker desires run free. (In Freudian psychoanalysis, a major influence on Mann's career, the sea is also often associated with freedom and disorder.)

"He is very delicate, he is sickly," thought Aschenbach. "He probably won't live to a ripe old age." And he avoided accounting to himself for the feeling of satisfaction or consolation which accompanied that thought.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach (speaker), Tadzio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Gustav thinks more about Tadzio, the beautiful boy he's discovered shortly after arriving in Venice. Tadzio is handsome, but his teeth are somewhat odd--they look pale and translucent, as if Tadzio is sickly or frail. When Gustav notices Tadzio's teeth, he's secretly pleased, though he doesn't want to admit this to himself.

Why is Gustav consoled by the thought of Tadzio's sickness? In part, Tadzio symbolizes beauty as its purest--beauty that can't last forever. Gustav has already experienced the horrors of old age--remember the disgusting old man he glimpsed on his boat, a reminder of how quickly beauty decays into ugliness. So Tadzio's early death (assuming that it's a reality) is a kind of blessing for someone (like Gustav) who appreciates Tadzio only as a symbol and aesthetic object--by dying early, Tadzio's beauty will never fade. And yet from a moral perspective, this seems monstrous and dehumanizing. In all, the passage reiterates the proximity of sex and death, desire and repulsion, art and reality. Gustav is attracted to Tadzio, a symbol of both youth and death.

But at that moment he felt this casual greeting die away and grow silent in the face of the truth that was in his heart; he felt the enthusiasm in his blood, the joy and pain in his soul, and realized it was for Tadzio's sake that the departure had been so hard on him. . . Then he raised his head and with his two hands, which were hanging down limply over the armrests of the chair, he made a slow turning and lifting motion, bringing the palms upward, as if he were opening his arms and holding them out. It was a gesture that bespoke an open welcome, a calm acceptance.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach, Tadzio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter 3, Gustav reaches a strange truce with his own desires. He's been trying to leave Venice *and* stay in Venice at the same time. But here, he comes face-to-face with his own desires: he admits that he chose to stay in Venice because he wanted to see more of Tadzio, the beautiful boy for whom Gustav can barely repress his fascination. Gustav admits his attraction to Tadzio--as symbolized by his gesture of calm acceptance. (Opening his

hands in "welcome" also calls back to the earlier image of Gustav's old life as a clenched fist.)

Furthermore, Gustav's gesture seems to suggest that he's coming to terms with his own mortality. Tadzio is a symbol of life and vitality, but he is *also* a symbol of death and finality (you can't have one without the other, Mann suggests). Thus the end of the chapter foreshadows the end of the novella, in which Gustav's desire for youth and life merges with his own inevitable death.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Day after day now the god with the glowing cheeks, nude, steered his fiery team of four through the regions of the sky, his yellow tresses floating behind him in the east wind that was also vigorously blowing. A whitish silky sheen covered the expanse of the indolently rolling *pontos*. The sand burned. Beneath the silvery, glittering blue of the aether, rust-colored canvases were spread in front of the cabanas, and in the sharply outlined patch of shade that they afforded people spent the morning hours. But the evening was also delicious, when the plants in the park emitted a balmy fragrance, the heavenly bodies up above went through the paces of their round dance, and the murmuring of the benighted sea, quietly rising, cast a spell over the soul.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

As we greet Gustav at the beginning of Chapter 4, he's living the dream in Venice. Life is easy for him, and he seemingly has free reign to give in to his long-repressed desires of passion and homoeroticism. As he sits on the water or walks through the city, Gustav feels a constant sense of exhilaration, and the passage overflows with sensual language ("vigorously," "burned," "delicious," "heavenly," the sun described as a naked god, etc.).

And yet this sense of exhilaration simply cannot last, or cannot last and remain *controlled*. Every act of joy and freedom that Gustav experiences is like an aspect of the Dionysian, the life force he has long repressed--but the other side of the Dionysian is chaos and death. Once primeval passions and desires are unleashed, they inevitably end in destruction. In short, the passage represents Gustav's "last hurrah" of joy before he starts his downward spiral into mortality.

❝ Soon the observer knew every line and pose of that body which was so elegant, which offered itself so freely; with joy he greeted anew each already familiar detail of his beauty; there was no end to his admiration, his delicate sensual pleasure. . . His honey-colored hair curled close to his temples and down his neck; the sun illuminated the down at the top of his spine; his finely delineated ribs, his well-formed chest were readily visible through the scanty covering of his torso; his armpits were still as smooth as a statue's; his knee hollows shone, and their bluish veins made his body look as if it were formed of some more pellucid material. What breeding, what precision of thought were expressed in this outstretched body, perfect in its youthfulness! But the severe and pure will, which, operating obscurely, had managed to bring this godlike image into the light of day—was it not well known and familiar to him, the artist? Was it not operative in him as well when, full of sober passion, he liberated from the marble block of language the slender form which he had seen in his mind and which he presented to the world as an icon and mirror of intellectual beauty?

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach, Tadzio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35-36

Explanation and Analysis

Here, we begin to see the problem (philosophically and aesthetically) with Gustav's desire for Tadzio. Gustav came to Venice to escape the suffocating influence of his own professionalism--he wanted to escape the "weight" of European tradition and his artistic discipline in a place where he could be free and relaxed.And yet Gustav hasn't really escaped discipline. On the contrary, right now he sees Tadzio as the very embodiment of the "intellectual beauty" of Classical tradition--the incarnation of everything that he's been studying and writing about for the last couple decades. To bring in some more Nietzsche, Gustav is still too Apollonian--he thinks that he can live in a world of order and structure, even as he's already unleashed his Dionysian desires.

Furthermore, it's now clear that Gustav's fascination with Tadzio has become very unhealthy. He still thinks of the boy as an art object, but has also become essentially addicted to watching him, and is more and more focused on the physical, sensual details of his body. Thus Gustav's desires again transition from being repressed and aesthetic to being uncontrollable and sexual.

> Often, when the sun went down behind Venice, he sat on a bench in the park to watch Tadzio, who, dressed in white with a sash of some bright color, was enjoying himself playing ball on the rolled gravel court; and it was Hyacinth whom he thought he saw, Hyacinth, who was fated to die because two gods loved him. Yes, he felt Zephyr's painful jealousy of his rival, who forgot his oracle, his bow and his cithara so that he could constantly sport with the beautiful boy; he saw the discus, directed by cruel jealousy, striking the lovely head; turning pale himself, he caught the limp body, and the flower that blossomed from the sweet blood bore the inscription of his unending lament.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach, Tadzio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40-41

Explanation and Analysis

Over the course of this chapter, Gustav's intellectual appreciation for Tadzio's beauty transforms into a barely-restrained erotic desire for the boy. Gustav thinks of Tadzio in Grecian terms--he sees Tadzio as an ancient Greek athlete, embodying the best that the human body is capable of. He also associates Tadzio with the Greek mythological figure of Hyacinth.

Hyacinth's story adds an important dimension to Gustav's relationship with Tadzio. Hyacinth was a beautiful youth who was a lover of the powerful sun-God Apollo (the same one Nietzche's "Apollonian" is a reference to). But Zephyr, the god of the west wind, also fell in love with Hyacinth's beauty. One day Apollo was playing sports with Hyacinth, throwing the discus. Hyacinth ran to catch the discus, but the jealous Zephyr stirred up a wind to blow the discus so that it struck and killed Hyacinth. Where Hyacinth's red blood stained the ground, the gods made "hyacinth" flowers spring up. (A different kind of flower than that known by the name hyacinth today.) Gustav thinks about different aspects of the myth as he ruminates on Tadzio, and so it's important to recognize all the elements Hyacinth's story adds to the novella--the fact that Gustav's desire for Tadzio is inherently linked to jealousy (he doesn't state who Tadzio's "true lover" is, but it could be youth, life itself, or death), and also that Gustav's sexual desire for Tadzio is connected to his (Freudian) "death-drive," as we saw in the satisfaction Gustav derived from thinking of Tadzio's early death. Once again, sex and death are closely intertwined, as in Mann's two important influences--both the darker Dionysian desires of Nietzschean philosophy, and the subconscious of Freud's theories.

> It was the smile of Narcissus bending over his reflection in the water, that profound, enchanted, long smile with which he holds out his arms to the mirror image of his own beauty—a very slightly twisted smile, twisted by the hopelessness of his endeavor to kiss the lovely lips of his reflection, coquettish, curious and quietly tormented, deluded and deluding. He who had received this smile dashed away with it as with some fatal gift. . . . He threw himself onto a bench; beside himself, he inhaled the nighttime fragrance of the plants. And, leaning back, with arms dangling, overcome and repeatedly shuddering, he whispered the standard formula of longing—impossible in this case, absurd, perverse, ludicrous and yet even here still sacred and respectable: "I love you!"

Related Characters: Tadzio, Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Here at the end of the chapter, Gustav finally says what we'd already guessed: he loves Tadzio. But what is the nature of Gustav's love for this boy, with whom he hasn't even spoken? This is one of the primary questions occupying the novella. Gustav's love seems to contain intellectual elements (he sees Tadzio as the embodiment of a Greek ideal, appealing to the writer and scholar in Gustav) as well as some undeniable erotic edge (he thinks Tadzio is really beautiful, and wants him physically).

And yet there's still something impotent and pathetic in Gustav's love for Tadzio. We can imagine that Tadzio, in real life, is a loutish, arrogant kid--definitely not worthy of Gustav's idealized affection. But Gustav has no idea what kind of person Tadzio is, because they're never talked. Gustav is more interested in Tadzio as an idea--whether the idea of artistic perfection, Greek tradition, or simply a beautiful, sensual boy--than as a reality.

> That was Venice, the obsequious and untrustworthy beauty—this city, half fairy tale, half tourist trap, in whose reeking atmosphere art had once extravagantly luxuriated, and which had inspired composers with music that gently rock you and meretriciously lulls you to rest. The adventurer felt as if his eyes were drinking in this luxuriance, as if his ears were being wooed by these melodies; he also recollected that the city was sick and was disguising the fact so it could go on making money; and he was more unbridled as he watched for the gondola that glided ahead of him.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Gustav again rides through Venice via gondola, and as he rides, he considers some things about the city where he's been staying. Venice, Gustav realizes, is a deeply divided city: it's half fantasy and half vulgar reality. Furthermore, the fantastic party can only exist *because* of the vulgar, touristy part. This duality is further enhanced by the presence of the mysterious disease--Venise is "sick," but pretends it isn't.

Gustav's insight is very important, because the division he notices in Venice corresponds to the division in his own personality. Gustav is divided between his desire for order and abstract beauty and his desire for "vulgar" erotic pleasure. And yet these two sides of his personality are forever linked--there can't be one without the other. Gustav seems to be coming close to accepting his imperfect nature--and by the same token, his inevitable death. (Notice the return of the coffin-like gondola, an important symbol of mortality.)

For several years, Indian cholera had shown an increasing tendency to spread abroad and travel. Engendered in the hot swamps of the Ganges delta, arising from the mephitic exhalations of that wilderness of primordial world and islands, luxuriant but uninhabitable and shunned by man, in whose bamboo thickets the tiger crouches, the epidemic had raged throughout Hindustan unremittingly and with unusual violence, had spread eastward to China, westward to Afghanistan and Persia, and, following the main caravan routes, had brought its horrors as far as Astrakhan and even Moscow. But while Europe trembled in fear lest the phantom might enter its territory from that point, and by land, it had been carried across the sea by Syrian merchants, had appeared in several Mediterranean ports simultaneously, had raised its head in Toulon and Malaga, had shown its mask repeatedly in Palermo and Naples, and seemed to be a permanent fixture throughout Calabria and Apulia. The north of the peninsula had been spared. But in the middle of May of this year the fearful vibrios had been discovered in Venice twice in the same day, in the emaciated, blackened corpses of a cargo-ship crewman and a female greengrocer. . . . In fact, it seemed as if the epidemic had experienced a revivification of its strength, as if the tenacity and fertility of the germs that caused it had redoubled.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52-53

Explanation and Analysis

This is an important passages, because it captures and poeticizes the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world. When Gustav thinks of a place to go on vacation, he can only think of European capital cities--the idea of leaving Europe is as foreign to him as the idea of leaving the planet Earth. But here, Mann gives us some insight into the relationship between Europe and "the outside," symbolized by India. As Mann sees it, Europe has been too sheltered for too long. Now, the diseases of the "exotic East" are coming back to wreak havoc on Europe (as if in revenge for Europe's exploitation and oppression of the East). Mann further implies that Europe's recent tradition of health and good sanitation has made Europeans *more* susceptible to disease from India.

You could write a thesis about this passage alone. Mann's suggestion (which some critics, including Edward Said, have attacked for its racism or Orientalism) is that Europe is the land of the Apollonian, while India (and, by extension, the "uncivilized" parts of the world) symbolize the disorderly Dionysian--the passionate, chaotic, and deadly. Just as Gustav's lifelong repression from the Dionysian makes him particularly susceptible to it in Venice, Europe's centuries of repression from disease make disease particularly deadly now.

For beauty, Phaedrus, take note! beauty alone is godlike and visible at the same time, and thus it is the path of the sensual man, young Phaedrus, the artist's path toward intellectuality. . . . Or do you believe instead (I leave the decision to you) that this is a path of dangerous charm, truly a path of error and sin, which necessarily leads one astray?

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59-60

Explanation and Analysis

At the tail end of the novella, Gustav begins to contemplate the relationship between beauty and morality, citing the

Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*,in which the philosopher Socrates argues with a handsome young man named Phaedrus.Gustav wonders if physical beauty is good or bad for the philosopher. Socrates, the protagonist of the Platonic dialogue, believed that beauty can lead a man along the path to wisdom and enlightenment. And yet Gustav doesn't necessarily agree. For him, (at least based on recent personal experience) physical beauty is a deterrent from intellectual enlightenment, and instead leads to "error and sin." Tadzio's (or Phaedrus's) beauty distracts him from his writing and his work, leaving him feverish and frantic. In short, the passage sums up Gustav's great conflicts in the novella--the conflicts between erotic desire and the life of the mind, between aesthetic purity and vulgar immorality.

> His head, leaning on the back of the chair, had slowly followed the movements of the boy who was walking far out there; now it rose, as if to meet that gaze, and fell onto his chest, so that his eyes looked up from below, while his face took on the limp, intensely absorbed expression of deep slumber. But it seemed to him as if the pale, charming psychagogue out there were smiling to him, beckoning to him; as if he were raising his hand from his hip and pointing outward, floating before him into a realm of promise and immensity. And, as he had done so often, he set out to follow him. Minutes went by before people hastened to the aid of the man who had slumped sideways in his chair. He was carried to his room. And, before that day was over, a respectfully shocked world received the news of his death.

Related Characters: Gustav von Aschenbach, Tadzio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novella, Gustav joins Tadzio in the sea--a symbol of Gustav's new liberation and freedom. And yet we learn that Gustav's liberation is purely imagined. He's actually died in his chair, having never spoken to Tadzio or interacted with him in any way, except receiving a smile from him. (Whether Tadzio is even real or not is a fair question.)

So in the end, Gustav never truly gives into his repressed erotic desires. Yet Mann suggests that there's a close link between forbidden desire and death--it's as if Gustav has *caused* his own death by avoiding his writerly responsibilities and falling for Tadzio, allowing his "Dionysian" side to run wild and destroy him. (We can see also this in Mann's description of Gustav's journey into the sea, a symbol of both life and death.)

Mann makes the final, poignant point that the people who knew Gustav's work well have no idea what was going through his head when he died. His Apollonian achievements (his novels) will survive him, and yet his inner conflict and struggle will be forgotten--but only in the world of the novella, of course, for in our world we're still reading about Gustav's inner conflict even almost a century later.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

On an afternoon in May, in an unspecified year early in the 1900s, Gustav von Aschenbach, a well-regarded writer in Germany, went for a walk in Munich. He had spent the morning hard at work writing with "extreme circumspection, discretion, forcefulness and exactitude of the will. Tired, he hoped some fresh air would "restore him and help him have a profitable evening."

Aschenbach is an extremely disciplined character, who suppresses and represses any unproductive desires for pleasure or leisure. Even his afternoon walk is deliberately calculated to increase his efficiency later in the day. As an artist, his entire life is devoted to his work.

It was unseasonably warm outside and after Aschenbach had walked for a while, he saw that a storm was approaching. He waited for a streetcar to bring him back home, and looked at a nearby Byzantine-style church. He was reading the various inscriptions on the church, when he suddenly noticed a man on the church's porch with red hair and a "somewhat unusual appearance."

The unseasonably warm weather perhaps foreshadows the uncharacteristic passion (an intense, latent desire for exotic travel) that will soon come over Aschenbach.

The strange man appeared to be foreign and "peered sharply and searchingly into the distance with colorless, red-lashed eyes." Aschenbach couldn't help but stare and soon found that the stranger was looking right back at him. He became embarrassed and walked away, but now felt stirring within himself "a youthfully ardent desire for faraway places. . . an urge to travel."

The foreign-looking man awakens in Aschenbach a repressed desire for travel, which can also be seen as a desire to break out of the usual habits of his disciplined lifestyle. It's never clear if the strange man is real or an embodiment of Aschenbach's subconscious desires.

This was no ordinary desire, though. It was like "a real seizure," or "a delusion of the senses." In his mind, Aschenbach imagined a lush tropical landscape with "lusty fern clusters," and exotic plants and animals. Finally, he saw the eyes of a crouching tiger in some bamboo. His sudden vision completed, Aschenbach continued walking.

Aschenbach's vision of a beautiful, sensuously described destination can be seen as symbolic of his desire to get in touch with his inner desires and urges. The tiger suggests that such a "visit" to the more primal parts of his self may be dangerous.

Up until this point, Aschenbach had never "been tempted to leave Europe," because of his desire to work at writing and his "European spirit." Now, somewhat late in his life, as he worried that he might die before he had a chance to finish his work, he had confined himself mostly to Munich. Thus, he quickly restrained his urge to travel with "the self-discipline he had practiced from his youth."

Aschenbach's disciplined, Apollonian (stoic, rational) character is associated with a "European spirit," and the northern climate where he lives, in contrast to the Dionysian (pleasure-seeking) intoxication and pleasure of warmer, exotic destinations.

Aschenbach did not want to waste time vacationing when he was working on "the book he was now living for." However, he also craved some kind of escape from his work. He had been feeling dissatisfied with his writing. He had always "curbed and chilled his emotions," and now feared that they were "taking their toll by abandoning him, by refusing to further his art and lend it wings."

Aschenbach's mind is divided. His self is clearly a mix of contradictory, conflicting desires and impulses. Much of this inner conflict centers around Aschenbach's devotion to his art, and what behavior he thinks will best contribute to his work.

After much internal debate, Aschenbach finally concluded that he needed some travel, "an exotic atmosphere." He decided to spend "a siesta of three or four weeks at some well-known holiday resort in the charming south of Europe." He resolved to look at "maps and timetables" that night to plan his trip. As he finally got on the streetcar to take him back home, he looked around for the red-headed stranger but could find him nowhere.

Aschenbach's repressed desire now overcomes him. His decision to travel south can be seen symbolically as a plan to "travel" also to his unconscious and to other parts of his own psyche. At this point in the story, though, Aschenbach is still rational and disciplined, as shown when he meticulously examines timetables to plan his trip.

CHAPTER 2

Aschenbach had achieved fame and notoriety as a novelist, short story writer, and critic. His father's side of the family had been "officers, judges, bureaucrats," with "disciplined, respectable, frugal lives." His mother had been the daughter of an orchestra conductor, so that he was the result of "the marriage of sober official conscientiousness with darker, more ardent impulses."

Aschenbach is the result of a marriage between contradictory personalities (which can be seen as Apollonian and Dionysian). This peculiar combination affects both his life and his writing.

Aschenbach had always been "bent on fame," and established a successful literary career early in his life. He had always worked hard and "had never known idleness, never known the carefree recklessness of the young." Once someone at a social gathering said of him that he only lived his life like this (as the person clenched his fist), never like this (as he let his hand open at ease).

Aschenbach has lived a very rigid, disciplined life devoted to his writing career. As the person at the social gathering suggests with the hand gestures, this is only achieved by great exertion and by not allowing himself to behave freely or naturally.

Aschenbach grew up without any real friends, and always hoped to live a productive life. He possessed both talent and discipline, and still kept a rigid daily working schedule at the age of fifty. He had accomplished his great works through "short daily stints," during which he dedicated his "greatest strength and dignity" to his writing.

In contrast to more sporadically inspired artists, Aschenbach writes through regular, productive stints of work. Aschenbach epitomizes the Apollonian artist—but how long can he continue to make art completely through rational discipline?

The narrator reflects that there needs to be a "congruence" between an artist and his generation in order for a great work of art to be made. This "natural bond of shared feelings" is the real reason why people "confer fame on a work of art." In one of his works, Aschenbach had written that everything is "brought to completion despite distress and torment, poverty, abandonment, physical weakness, vice, passion, and a thousand obstructions." This was indeed true of Aschenbach's own life experience.

The narrator emphasizes the links between an artist's life and work, and between art and the lives of those who view, read, or experience it. The peculiar quality of Aschenbach's writing is intertwined with his own life experience. His seemingly out-of-character vacation will affect not only him, then, but also his writing.

An analyst wrote of Aschenbach that he often wrote of a hero that stood in for "an intellectual and youthful masculinity that grits its teeth. . . while its body is pierced by swords and spears." Throughout his work one could find "the elegant self-control that conceals the sapping of strength and biological decay." This kind of "heroism of weakness" resonated with the people of the time.

Again, Aschenbach's writing is dependent on his actual life experiences. The kind of "elegant self-control" of Aschenbach can be seen as a form of repression, ignoring and denying the "swords and spears" of strong desires.

Aschenbach had captured "passionate, absolutistic" youth in his early works, which questioned the nature of art and the role of the artist. His later works had moved toward a "new dignity and severity." As he grew older and outgrew "the chrysalis of libertinism," he became more of a conservative and traditional writer. He had settled down in Munich, married, and started a family.

Aschenbach's writings have changed as he has changed over the course of his life. He has established a conservative, traditional life that has tempered his formerly "passionate" work. But under the surface, does he want something more than "dignity and severity"?

Aschenbach was short and dark-haired. His furrowed brow and face showed signs of wear not from a difficult life but from writing. The narrator describes art as "an enhancement of life," and says that it "wears you out faster."

The aged Aschenbach shows signs of wear from writing, as if he had lived through the very things he had written about. For the narrator, art and life are not separate, but closely related. Art is "an enhancement of life."

CHAPTER 3

About two weeks after his walk in Munich, Aschenbach took a trip to an island in the Adriatic. It had "beautifully eroded cliff scenery," but too much rain and too many Austrian tourists. He wanted to go somewhere else, somewhere "different as a fairy tale," and suddenly realized that he should go to Venice.

Aschenbach's desire to travel is more than a need for mere vacation. He wants to go somewhere "different as a fairy tale," suggesting that he wants a kind of mysterious, symbolic vacation from his normal life.

Aschenbach boarded an old Italian ship bound for Venice. An old sailor welcomed him aboard and told him that Venice was an attractive destination for both its history and its "present-day charms." Aschenbach examined some of the boat's other passengers and saw what looked like a young man in a stylish suit and hat. but then he suddenly realized that it was actually an old man with wrinkles trying to affect a "youthful impression."

Venice continues to gain strange associations as a destination, with its "charms." The old man shows an extreme perversion of an obsession with youth. Aschenbach looks down on this man who has given up all self-control and dignity, but the man can be seen as a version of Aschenbach's own repressed desire for youth, which will overtake him later.

The old man was wearing makeup, a wig, and dentures. Aschenbach regarded this old man with horror, and felt slightly like he was in a dream. Out at **sea**, Aschenbach lost track of time and daydreamed. After eating a meal, he looked out to see if he could see Venice yet but he couldn't see through the gray rain and mist. On previous visits he had always seen Venice in the sun, and now accepted that he would arrive "at a different Venice by sea route," than by land, as he had previously traveled.

Aschenbach's travel comes to resemble a dream, the state in which one is most in touch with one's unconscious. The sea can be seen as a symbol of the vast, incomprehensible depths of the unconscious. Aschenbach's dream-like travel allows him to lose track of time. Arriving in Venice by sea, instead of by land as before, heightens the sense of this trip as something more than physical travel.

Aschenbach gazed into the distance and at last the coastline of Venice began to emerge. All the boat's passengers were excited to arrive, and Aschenbach saw with disgust that the old man dressed up as a youth was "pitifully drunk." Aschenbach delighted in all the buildings and architecture of Venice and realized that coming by **sea** was the only proper way to arrive in "that most improbable of cities."

Aschenbach continues to view the old man with disgust, but he will later come to resemble him, as he becomes more and more controlled by his own long-repressed desires. Seemingly submerged in the sea, Venice is an almost mystical location for Aschenbach.

While preparing to board a gondola, Aschenbach was forced to stand around next to the strange old man, who was blabbering on drunkenly—until his upper denture fell out of his mouth. Aschenbach felt a little trepidation on getting onto his gondola, whose black color reminded him of a coffin and of death itself. The gondola's seat was "the softest, most luxurious and enervating seat in the world."

The old man continues to represent a pathetic version of old age. The gondola, reminiscent of death, emphasizes the strangeness of Venice and the intoxicating, but perhaps dangerous luxury of Aschenbach's vacation.

Aschenbach felt calm and at ease in the gondola. He was troubled, though, when he noticed they were going out to **sea**, not to the *vaporetto* stop from where he wanted to go to his hotel. His gondolier informed him that he could not take the *vaporetto* with luggage and so the gondola would go all the way to the hotel. Aschenbach sank into a dreamy calm. He asked how much the gondola ride would cost, but all the gondolier would say was, "You will pay."

As Aschenbach arrives in Venice, he almost immediately finds himself not in control, just as he will later not be able to control his own unconscious desires. The strange gondolier recalls Charon, who ferried souls into the underworld in Greek mythology. Venice is thus already associated with a strange timelessness and otherworldly quality, as well as with death.

Aschenbach arrived at his hotel and went to the front desk to get some change in order to pay his gondolier. When he returned, though, the gondolier had gone. An old man told him that his gondolier was "a bad man, a man without a license." Aschenbach went into his hotel and looked out at the beach.

The mysterious gondolier heightens the strangeness of Aschenbach's destination, suggesting that there is something more than a literal vacation going on.

The narrator reflects on solitude, which can produce both originality and perverseness. The solitary Aschenbach walked along the seaside promenade and then came back to the hotel. In the lounge, while waiting for dinner, he looked at some of the hotel guests and saw a variety of nationalities. He saw a group of three adolescent Polish girls and a boy of about fourteen with a governess. The boy was "perfectly beautiful," with "honey-colored hair," and a form reminiscent of Greek statuary.

Aschenbach's solitude means that he will get in touch with the various sides of his personality and the various parts of his self. As an artist, he is immediately struck by the boy's beauty as a kind of ideal. Continuing with his temporal confusion, Aschenbach idealizes the boy as reminiscent of an ancient Greek statue.

The Polish girls had "austere and chaste" attire in contrast to the boy's "rich and pampered appearance." A waiter announced that dinner was ready, and most of the hotel guests went to eat, but the Polish family kept waiting, and Aschenbach waited as well, sitting in a chair and watching them. The Polish children's mother arrived, a stylish and elegant woman who Aschenbach imagined might be the wife of a high-ranking German government official.

Aschenbach is entirely fascinated by the beautiful appearance of the boy. At this point, it is unclear whether he is admiring the young boy's beauty as an appreciative artist or as a desirous voyeur.

The family went off to dinner, and as the young boy was leaving, he stopped and turned around, briefly meeting Aschenbach's gaze. Aschenbach went to go eat dinner, slightly disappointed not to be sitting near the Polish family. While eating, he thought of very abstract things, including the nature of beauty and the "general problems of form and art." He went to bed early that night and when he woke the next day, the weather was still overcast.

Aschenbach's interest in the Polish boy leads to abstract thoughts on beauty and art. But to what degree can his fascination with the boy's beauty remain abstract and separate from an actual desire for him? The overcast weather could reflect the hazy, dreamlike quality of Aschenbach's stay in Venice.

Aschenbach remembered when he had experienced similar weather in Venice once before and had to leave because the weather affected his health. He worried that a similar sickness was setting in now. He went down to breakfast and saw the Polish boy's family without him. He smiled at the thought of the young boy sleeping in, and as Aschenbach was finishing breakfast the boy arrived.

Aschenbach continues his fascination with the boy's youth and beauty. The link between weather and his health suggests that the climate and weather of Venice (often oppressively warm) can be seen as reflective of Aschenbach's inner state.

Aschenbach was stunned by the boy's "godlike beauty," evident in his appearance and graceful walk. He thought the boy had the head of Eros and skin like marble. He regarded the boy with "that professionally cool approval in which artists sometimes cloak their rapture and ecstasy when face to face with a masterpiece."

Aschenbach regards the boy as an artist who appreciates beauty. But the comparison of the boy to Eros (the Greek god of love) hints that there may be a growing element of desire to his obsession with the boy, as well. Aschenbach continually compares the boy to figures of classical antiquity.

After breakfast, Aschenbach went to the beach and enjoyed watching people having fun in the water. He started daydreaming and looked out at the "unorganized, immoderate, eternal" **sea**, which he was fond of for "deep-seated reasons." He saw the Polish boy in the water and saw as the boy looked disapprovingly at a family of Russians on the beach.

Aschenbach drifts off into a dreamlike state, gazing at the sea, which is described in terms that recall the unconscious.

Aschenbach was delighted to see this, as for him it made the godlike boy more human. He listened as the boy played with some friends and thought he heard the friends call the boy Adgio or Adgiu. He kept listening to them as he worked on writing some letters. He couldn't focus on the letters for long, though, and soon went back to looking at the **sea** and keeping an eye on the young Polish boy.

Aschenbach's disciplined devotion to his work is beginning to slip as he becomes more and more in thrall to his interest in the boy and spends more and more of his time in leisure.

Aschenbach watched the boy play with some other children, especially another Polish boy who appeared to be called Jaschu. It was very hot outside. Remembering some Polish, Aschenbach thought the boy's name must be Tadzio. He saw Tadzio go swimming and then come back out of the water and was taken by the sight of the boy climbing out of the waves, which "inspired mythic ideas," about "the birth of the gods."

The beauty of Tadzio transports Aschenbach's mind to ancient times and makes him think of classical mythology. At this point, Aschenbach's interest in Tadzio is still very abstract, mixed up with his artistic "mythic ideas" of beauty.

Aschenbach read on the beach, but was constantly thinking of Tadzio, who was lying on the beach nearby. He felt a "paternal kindness" toward Tadzio, like "a man who through self-sacrifice creates the beautiful in his mind feels toward one who possesses beauty itself."

Aschenbach becomes gradually less disciplined, losing focus on his work, in order to pursue Tadzio's beauty. He idealizes Tadzio as beauty itself and, currently, doesn't seem to desire the boy erotically.

Around noon, Aschenbach went back to his room and looked at his gray hair and wrinkled face in the mirror. He went to lunch and afterwards found himself in the same elevator as some young children, including Tadzio. He was standing so close to Tadzio that he began to see him as a human being, rather than as a beautiful work of art. He saw that Tadzio's teeth looked brittle and translucent, as if he were sick, and concluded, with some delight, that Tadzio would not live to a very old age.

Aschenbach's experience of Tadzio's beauty causes him to be newly aware of his own aged appearance. In the elevator, he confronts Tadzio as a real person, rather than an ideal of beauty. Aschenbach idealizes youth so much that he is actually happy to think that Tadzio will die before his youthful beauty can fade with time.

In the afternoon, Aschenbach went for a walk around the city of Venice. The air was thick and unpleasant, Aschenbach began to feel feverish, and he decided to leave Venice. He was sure the weather was affecting his health, and planned to go to Trieste, rather than back home. He returned to the hotel, packed, and arranged to leave the next day.

The warm, unpleasant weather reflects the growing feverish desire in Aschenbach. He decides that he has had enough of this vacation from his normal climate and his normal self.

The next morning, the air was a little better, and Aschenbach wondered if he had decided to leave Venice too quickly. He had breakfast, and a man from the hotel told him that a car was ready to take him away. He told the man that he wanted to wait and eat breakfast slowly, though, and waited for Tadzio to come down to breakfast. The car was waiting for Aschenbach, so he sent his luggage ahead in it, and stayed at the hotel for a little longer.

Aschenbach regards his trip to Venice as a temporary vacation that he is free to end at any time. However, he is finding it much more difficult to put an end to his trip than he thought, due especially to his infatuation with the beautiful Tadzio. He, who has always been so disciplined, can't re-assert discipline over himself.

Just as he was leaving, Aschenbach saw Tadzio, and he left the hotel full of regret. As Aschenbach went through Venice, he began to realize he would miss the city's "odor of sea and swamp." He felt that he would never see Venice again and was greatly conflicted over whether to leave or stay. At the train station, a man from the hotel informed him that his luggage had been sent ahead to Como, by mistake, and Aschenbach gladly took this as an opportunity to stay in Venice, feeling that it was fate for him to remain.

Aschenbach is glad to have an excuse to extend his stay in Venice. The city's "odor of sea and swamp" emphasizes its exotic, sensuous quality, as well as its symbolic link to the unconscious (via the sea).

Aschenbach happily returned to his hotel and was given a new room there. He spent most of the day in his room and thought the air outside seemed fresher and less oppressive. He saw Tadzio coming back from the beach and, with a combination of "joy and pain," realized that it was because of Tadzio that he had been so reluctant to leave Venice. He sat in his room and lifted up his arms in "a gesture that bespoke an open welcome, a calm acceptance."

Aschenbach's gesture of "calm acceptance" is a kind of surrender: to the repressed parts of his personality now coming to the surface; to the intoxicating, seductive atmosphere of Venice; and to his desire for Tadzio, which is becoming more concrete and related to the boy himself, less abstract and related to art.

CHAPTER 4

The narrator describes the weather at Venice in lyrical language, describing the rising of the sun in mythological terms as a god driving his blazing chariot across the sky and noting how plants in the park at evening "emitted a balmy fragrance." Aschenbach decided to stay in Venice even after his luggage was returned to him. He had been "bewitched" by the leisurely lifestyle of this vacation.

As the narration suggests, Aschenbach is now largely caught up in a fantasy of ancient, mythological times, inspired by Tadzio and the sensuous atmosphere of Venice. His "vacation" has now turned into an indefinite, perhaps permanent journey, as he is overwhelmed by his latent desires.

Aschenbach had never been able to stay away from work for very long and never indulged in much pleasure, but now he found himself relaxing all day. He felt like he had gone to "the ends of the earth, where the easiest possible life is the lot of mankind." He often saw Tadzio around the hotel and watched him with "adoration and study."

Aschenbach used to be a very disciplined person, and a very Apollonian artist. Now, however, devoted to Tadzio's beauty, he has become a leisurely, Dionysian character.

Every morning, Aschenbach got up early and was the first person on the beach, where he sat as the sun rose and the day got hotter and hotter, and from where he could watch Tadzio most days. He watched Tadzio play and overheard him talking with his family. Since Aschenbach did not understand Tadzio's language, the boy's speech was like music to him.

The heat of the sun matches the growing heat of Aschenbach's desire for Tadzio, which continues to grow. Aschenbach finds beauty in everything Tadzio does, including his speech, which Aschenbach can't even understand (and perhaps he likes it more for not being able to understand it, as that makes it more exotic).

Aschenbach admired everything about Tadzio's behavior and appearance, including his "honey-colored hair." He thought of the boy, "What breeding, what precision of thought were expressed in this outstretched body, perfect in its youthfulness!" Tadzio's beauty reminded Aschenbach of what it was like for him to produce beauty through writing, like a sculpture from the "marble block of language."

Aschenbach admires both Tadzio's beauty and his youth. Tadzio's beauty makes Aschenbach think of the beauty of art and writing. However, Aschenbach's artistic admiration of Tadzio's beauty is becoming excessive.

Aschenbach felt that gazing at Tadzio was like looking at beauty itself. Thinking of Plato's *Phaedrus* (a work that discusses the nature of desire), Aschenbach remembered Plato's idea that beauty directs the soul toward heaven, thus justifying his obsession with Tadzio.

Tadzio again makes Aschenbach think of ancient times. He uses Plato's abstract ideas about beauty to justify his very real, concrete obsession with the young boy.

Aschenbach felt intoxicated by the sun and **ocean** and had a delirious vision. In the vision, he was in an idyllic scene under a tree outside of Athens (the setting of Plato's *Phaedrus*). Aschenbach's vision recreated Plato's dialogue, with the old, ugly Socrates teaching the young, attractive Phaedrus. Aschenbach imagined Socrates, lusting after Phaedrus, saying, "beauty is the path taken by the man of feeling to attain the intellectual—only the path, only a means, young Phaedrus."

Aschenbach's intoxication from the climate mirrors how he is getting carried away by the intoxicating, Dionysian and repressed parts of his psyche. He becomes increasingly temporally disoriented, as he has a vision that transports him to ancient Greece. Like Aschenbach with Tadzio, Socrates uses abstract philosophy about beauty to justify his love for Phaedrus.

Aschenbach felt a sudden urge to write, and felt compelled to write about "a certain important, burning issue of culture and taste." He wrote in the presence of Tadzio, so that he could model his own writing on the beautiful form of Tadzio's body. The narrator reflects on how good it is that people only see finished works of art, as the sources of their inspiration and the circumstances of their making are often less admirable than the artworks themselves.

Tadzio's beauty is at least in one way good for Aschenbach, as it inspires him to create beauty in his writing. Aschenbach's writing is once again importantly linked to his life experience, but in a way that his readers will never know.

Aschenbach saw Tadzio the next morning and decided to say hello and introduce himself in a friendly manner. But just as he was about to say something, he felt his heart pounding and walked past Tadzio. The narrator says that talking to Tadzio may have sobered Aschenbach, but that he was now attached to his own intoxication. He joked with himself about how he had lost his courage in approaching Tadzio.

Aschenbach now enjoys his new intoxicated state of mind and does not wish to "sober up" by speaking to Tadzio and confronting him as a real person, rather than an ideal of beauty and youth. Aschenbach is increasingly powerless to resist his inner desires, which he thought he could simply experience temporarily during his vacation.

Aschenbach planned to stay in Venice indefinitely, and put all the energy and focus he used to devote to writing into watching Tadzio. He got up every morning to watch the sunrise, which he saw in mythological terms as the arrival of Eos, the Greek goddess of the dawn. "Emotions from the past," that Aschenbach had neglected in his discipline began to resurface as he watched the "lovely shining and blossoming" of the sun in the sky.

Aschenbach's decision to stay in Venice indefinitely reflects his resolution not to return to his prior, disciplined self. He now neglects his work and lives partially in a fantasy-world of ancient, mythological visions that arouse his desire for beauty. His short vacation has now become a permanent transformation of his life.

The days were "mythically transformed" for Aschenbach, who saw the waves crashing on the beach as Poseidon's "steeds dash[ing] forward." He compared Tadzio to Hyacinthus, a young man in Greek mythology who was loved by both Zephyrus (a wind god) and Apollo (the sun god), and who tragically died.

Aschenbach's physical travel to Venice is complemented by a kind of temporal travel, as he increasingly sees the world in ancient, mythical terms. His comparison of Tadzio to Hyacinthus suggests a premature death for the boy, which would prevent his beauty from fading with age.

Tadzio would occasionally walk to his family by a route that meant he passed right by Aschenbach, and Aschenbach took this as a sign that "his friendly feelings and attention were not altogether unreciprocated." Their gazes met occasionally, and Aschenbach thought he saw "an inquiry, a pensive question" in the boy's eyes.

Aschenbach's interest in Tadzio has reached the point where he is not simply fascinated by the boy's beauty, but really desires him. He hopes that Tadzio returns his affections to some degree.

One evening, Aschenbach saw Tadzio and his family returning from dinner in the city, and marveled at how Tadzio was more beautiful than words could describe. Aschenbach could not contain his joy at seeing the boy, and Tadzio smiled back at him, looking like Narcissus. Aschenbach was shocked and ran to the garden. He scolded himself for smiling in such a way, but then inhaled the fragrance of the plants and said out loud, "I love you."

Aschenbach continues to be infatuated with Tadzio's beauty, and continues to compare him to beautiful male characters from classical mythology. Yet as he admits to himself when he says, "I love you," his artistic admiration of Tadzio has turned into actual erotic desire for the boy.

CHAPTER 5

In the fourth week of his stay in Venice, Aschenbach noticed that the number of guests at the hotel seemed to be decreasing. His barber one day mentioned something about a **disease**, but when Aschenbach asked him more about it, he wouldn't say anything. That afternoon, having tea in the city, Aschenbach noticed the medicinal smell of a germicide in the air. He asked a shop owner about it, who said that it was a preemptive measure against illness that the bad weather might lead to.

The disease provides a possible metaphor for Aschenbach's own affliction, whether one regards this as his perverse desire for Tadzio or his over-indulgence in his unconscious and repressed desires.

Aschenbach looked in some newspapers and found rumors of a possible illness spreading in Venice, but nothing substantiated. His only worry was that Tadzio might leave. He followed Tadzio's family to church one Sunday and saw Tadzio, who also caught sight of him. He hid from Tadzio's sight, though, and followed the boy and his family as they left church. Aschenbach felt that his "head and heart were drunk."

Aschenbach is so obsessed with the beautiful Tadzio that he cares more about him leaving than his own health. As Aschenbach becomes more and more controlled by his repressed Dionysian side, he becomes "drunk" and intoxicated by his desires and by Tadzio's beauty.

Tadzio and his family got into a gondola, and Aschenbach followed them at a distance in another one. He rode through the city, "half fairy tale, half tourist trap," caring only about his "pursuit of the object that set him aflame." Aschenbach's intoxication got him carried away, and once he stood by the door to Tadzio's hotel room and leaned his head against the door.

Venice is again described as a fantastical location, which heightens the sense of Aschenbach's vacation as a highly symbolic "trip" away from his normal self and world. Aschenbach is completely controlled by his desire for Tadzio's beauty.

There were some moments when Aschenbach came to his senses. He wondered what his ancestors, with their "dignified severity" would think of his "exotic extravagances of emotion." He had devoted his life to art in "an exhausting struggle," and now after such an abstemious life he felt under the control of desire. But he justified this to himself by thinking that many brave ancient heroes had been in thrall to love.

Aschenbach still has some of the rigid, disciplined side of his personality and is conscious of how excessive his indulgence in his emotions and desires has become. However, he is not willing to change his behavior; the power of Tadzio's beauty and the attraction of Venice are too great.

Aschenbach thus defended his behavior to himself. He was very interested in the news of a possible **disease** spreading around Venice and read about it in newspapers, though no one seemed to be certain about the **disease**. He asked the hotel manager about it, but could find out nothing more.

Aschenbach is increasingly concerned about the disease, which is ironic, as he should perhaps be more concerned with the "disease" of excessive desire that is beginning to overwhelm his mind.

One night, a group of street performers came to the hotel. Aschenbach watched the vulgar performance, "because passion deadens one's taste," but was mostly focused on Tadzio, who was standing near him, watching the show. Tadzio occasionally looked over his shoulder toward Aschenbach. Aschenbach thought he had noticed on several occasions Tadzio's family calling him away when he seemed to get too near to him, so he tried to disguise his interest in the boy.

Consumed by passion and desire, Aschenbach has lost some of his artistic taste, enjoying the vulgar performance. Aschenbach is so obsessed with Tadzio's beauty that he becomes slightly paranoid, thinking that Tadzio's family is trying to keep the boy from him. His interest in Tadzio has become much more than simple admiration of the boy's beauty.

One of the performers, a kind of comedian, started an entertaining, popular guitar solo. Through the guitarist's winks, suggestive gestures, and "licking the corners of his mouth licentiously," the song became "salacious" and vulgar. Aschenbach watched the guitarist curiously, whom he noticed smelled like the germicide in the city air. After the performance, the guitarist made his way through the audience, asking for money.

The guitarist's performance is an example of someone unable or unwilling to restrain emotions, something Aschenbach would have previously hated but is now increasingly coming to exemplify himself.

When the guitarist got to Aschenbach, Aschenbach asked him why Venice was being disinfected. The guitarist said it was merely a preventative measure because the sirocco (a warm wind) could be bad for people's health. He said there was no **disease** in Venice. But immediately after this conversation, he was accosted by two hotel employees who asked him questions about what he'd revealed. He assured them he had been discreet about the **disease**.

The guitarist appears to be lying about the mysterious disease, but his answer suggests a link between Venice's weather and people's health, emphasizing the link between external climate and people's inner states. For Aschenbach, for example, the warm weather seems to have contributed to his excessive desire for Tadzio.

The guitarist gave one last performance with a refrain in which the whole performing troupe laughed hysterically. The laughter was contagious and soon the entire audience was laughing, as well. Aschenbach got up, as if to run away from the contagious laughter, but found he was under a "dreamy spell" from the nearness of Tadzio. He looked at Tadzio, who returned his gaze, and he again thought that the boy looked sickly, and wouldn't live into old age.

Aschenbach is troubled by the apparently contagious laughter, which is an example of unrestrained emotion. However, he is increasingly under the "spell" of Tadzio's intoxicating beauty, and seemingly unable to control his own behavior. The "contagion" of emotion has caught him, too. Aschenbach again thinks of Tadzio dying young, before his beautiful body becomes old and wearied.

Aschenbach stayed and sat where he was for a while after the performance was over. He thought of an hourglass that used to be at his parents' home, and thought of the sand slipping through the middle of the glass. The next day, Aschenbach went to a British travel agency in Venice and asked an Englishman about the possible **disease** in Venice. The man said the germicide was simply a preventative measure, but then said that this was only the official explanation.

Aschenbach's vision of his parents' hourglass suggests that his own time is running out—he has already lost his youth, and can never recapture the past. In order to compensate for this, he has become obsessed with Tadzio, who, to Aschenbach, epitomizes youth.

The Englishman then explained that Indian cholera had spread throughout the Mediterranean. Having begun in "the hot swamps of the Ganges delta," it had now reached Venice, and an Austrian tourist had died from it. It seemed as though food had been infected, and an epidemic was likely. However, fearing the loss of tourism, the city was maintaining silence about the **disease**.

The disease is symbolically linked to the hot climate of India, possibly suggesting that it represents Aschenbach's affliction of excessive desire, hot in another sense. Exotic, southern locales like India are associated in the novella with sensual decadence, heat, and primal desires.

The crisis in Venice had led to an increase in crime on the streets. The Englishman told Aschenbach that he should leave Venice immediately for his own safety. Aschenbach thought of perhaps warning Tadzio's family about the **disease** (and using that opportunity to "lay his hand in farewell" on Tadzio's head. He suddenly thought of the strange red-haired man he had seen in Munich, though, and then was disgusted by the thought of leaving Venice.

Aschenbach is so obsessed with the beautiful Tadzio that he is again less concerned with his own safety than with the young boy, His thought of the red-haired man could represent his unconscious impetus for desiring exotic travel. He now has no interest in resisting this desire, and wants to stay in Venice at all costs.

That night, Aschenbach had an intense dream, which he felt "totally destroyed and annihilated" his existence and "lifetime's accumulation of culture." "Night reigned" in the dream, as a loud, chanting, orgiastic crowd "came rolling and plunging down in a whirlwind," in a mountainous landscape. There were women holding snakes and men with horns, all dancing to flute music. Aschenbach's "soul tasted the lewdness and frenzy."

In his dream, Aschenbach confronts, and is overwhelmed by, his unconscious. The scene is highly reminiscent of ancient Greek scenes of Dionysian revelry and worship, representing the Dionysian side of Aschenbach's artistic personality.

When Aschenbach awoke, he was fully devoted to his desire for Tadzio and had no more shame. As more and more guests left the hotel in fear of the cholera, Aschenbach pursued and followed Tadzio more openly. Aschenbach fantasized that everyone would gradually flee Venice, leaving only Tadzio and him. Looking at Tadzio's young body, he began to hate his own aged body.

Aschenbach is now completely controlled by the desires and parts of his personality he had repressed for so long. His obsession with Tadzio now consumes him (not unlike the disease spreading through the city), and his admiration for Tadzio's youth has led him to hate his own old age.

Aschenbach went to the hotel barber and dyed his gray hair. He put on all sorts of cosmetics and makeup, and dressed in bright clothes. One afternoon, Aschenbach was following Tadzio through the streets of Venice. Tadzio looked behind him periodically, to see if Aschenbach were still following him. Aschenbach was "intoxicated by this knowledge" that Tadzio knew he was following and did not try to stop him. He lost sight of Tadzio, though, and went to a grocer, where he bought some strawberries.

Intoxicated by Tadzio and his beauty, Aschenbach despises his aged appearance so much that he is reduced to a pathetic figure, wearing makeup to try to seem younger. He has turned into the very old man he hated so much on the boat ride to Venice, who can now be seen as representing a repressed part of Aschenbach himself.

Aschenbach sat in a city square and looked at the buildings around him, as "hot gusts of wind carried the smell of carbolic acid to him." Aschenbach, "the master, the artist who had attained dignity. . . the man who had ascended the heights," now sat looking pathetic. He had a "half-slumbering brain," and began to talk to himself as if he were Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*. He asked Phaedrus whether he thought beauty was the path to wisdom, or whether it was "a dangerous charm, truly a path of error and sin." Continuing to speak as Socrates, Aschenbach said that knowledge only leads to desire, which leads to "the abyss."

The hot gusts of wind mirror the feverish heat of Aschenbach's desire. His Dionysian intoxication with Tadzio's beauty makes him delirious, and he again travels mentally through time, thinking that he is Socrates in ancient Athens. It is left ambiguous as to whether beauty is a good or bad thing. It can inspire an artist to intellectual wisdom, as it did for Aschenbach, but it seems also to have utterly destroyed Aschenbach's own life, leading him near to the "abyss" of death.

A few days later, Aschenbach was feeling ill. He learned from a hotel employee that Tadzio's family was leaving after lunch. He went to the beach and sat down, watching Tadzio play with some of his young friends. Jaschu tackled him playfully and pinned him down in the sand. Aschenbach almost got up to help Tadzio, but Jaschu let him go. Tadzio walked off angrily and went into the water.

Aschenbach's psychological affliction is now manifesting itself as well as a physical disease. He is especially desperate as this may be his last chance to gaze upon Tadzio's beauty.

Aschenbach watched Tadzio wade into the **sea**. Tadzio looked back, and Aschenbach thought he saw Tadzio beckoning him to come, as a "pale, charming psychagogue," and Aschenbach followed him. The narrator says that Aschenbach had actually slumped over in his chair, delirious. He was carried to his room where he died before the day was over, and "a respectfully shocked world received the news of his death."

Tadzio beckons Aschenbach to go out into the sea; in symbolic terms, he encourages Aschenbach to submerge himself entirely in his unconscious. Aschenbach compares the boy to a "psychagogue," which is the Greek god Hermes' role in transporting souls to the underworld. And in fact Aschenbach has descended, or crossed over, completely into his subconscious, as the image of Tadzio beckoning to him and of him joining Tadzio occurs entirely in Aschenbach's fantasy, even as Aschenbach himself dies. The literary world that admires Aschenbach's writing is completely ignorant of the repression that his life involved. The world saw what he presented to it, through his art. But it did not see or understand him, and would not even in his death.

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