

Man's search for human autonomy in death in venice



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In Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Mann explores the struggle between impulse and logic through the symbolism of luggage presented throughout. The luggage Aschenbach clings to represents the dominance of logic over his impulses, and the effects societal restrictions exert upon his natural instincts. The evolution of Aschenbach's relationship to his luggage illustrates his natural progression away from the influences of social restrictions and his gradual embrace of innate impulses. Mann demonstrates Aschenbach's gradual change of lifestyle by initially asserting the values luggage represents through associations, comparisons, and contrasts. The first instance of luggage is introduced when Aschenbach arrives at his original vacation destination, a remote island, by a motorboat that carried "him and his luggage in the misty dawning back across the water" (Mann, 15). Mann groups Aschenbach and his luggage as linked entities on the motorboat through imagery of Aschenbach located in proximity to his luggage, but also through the form of the text by placing the two subjects in close proximity on the page, in order to demonstrate his attachment to luggage. Luggage also acts as interference brought from civilization into the seclusion and remoteness of the vacation island. The misty surroundings and the uncertainty in direction and destination demonstrate Aschenbach's short-sightedness regarding his future and desires, and his inability to make the best decision. Mann then reinforces the fact that luggage is an extension of societal values by depicting "those of the second class" that sat upon their "bundles of luggage" and associates luggage with the standards of modern society (Mann, 16). As Aschenbach rides in the gondola on his way to Hotel des Bains, he not only admires the "coffin-black" seats of the vessel but also praises the gondola seat as "the softest... most relaxing seat in the

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world" (Mann, 20). The connection between the coffin black color and relaxing qualities establish death as a luxurious escape from the overwhelming stresses of daily life and the ultimate relaxation. Aschenbach's seat on the gondola is "opposite his luggage, which lay neatly composed" in order to emphasize the contrast between the relief death presents, and the order, obligations and responsibilities represented by his luggage on the polar opposite side of the spectrum (Mann, 20). After the bellhop brings the luggage into Aschenbach's hotel room, Aschenbach approaches a window and stands looking out at the sea, hearing only the "rhythmic beat upon the sand" (Mann, 24). The separation between the interior of the hotel room, where luggage is situated, from the outside world of nature is a parallel to Aschenbach's struggle between confinements from societal standards and his natural instincts. Through comparing and contrasting luggage with imagery of society, the ultimate relief of death, as well as the relaxation and freedom of nature, Aschenbach's luggage is the ultimate symbolism for the constraints established by societal values, and his overwhelming use of logic in his decision-making. As Aschenbach's journey in Venice progresses, the physical distance between Aschenbach and his luggage increases and Aschenbach gradually confronts the values luggage represents such as societal restrictions placed upon his life. Aschenbach's progression is foreshadowed when the gondolier informs him that he cannot bring luggage to the vaporetto and Aschenbach retorts: "I may want to give my luggage in deposit. You will turn around" (Mann, 22). The use of an exotic language for the name of the destination represents the cultural difference of a foreign land, and its effect on distancing Aschenbach from his luggage, old customs, and burdens of responsibility. Aschenbach's indecision towards the

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placement of his luggage and the repeated change in direction emphasizes his confusion regarding whether he should consult his logic or instinct in terms of decision-making. En route to the Venetian hotel, Aschenbach ordered his "luggage [to] be taken to the Hotel des Bains" in a separate handcar as the first physical separation from his luggage in Venice (Mann, 23). Hotel des Bains also translates to Hotel Bath, introducing imagery of Aschenbach using his time in Venice to cleanse himself of old inadequate lifestyles and leave anew. However, Aschenbach doesn't comfortably embrace a lack of luggage until his decision to leave Venice and the bellhop warns him that the car is leaving soon, to which he passionately responds "good, then it might go, and take this trunk with it" (Mann, 36). Aschenbach's irritation with the heavy time constraints prevailed and revealed his preference for a leisurely lifestyle, and his lack of luggage only reinforces the newfound relaxation and frustration towards obligation and restraints. As Aschenbach leaves Hotel des Bains with only his light hand-luggage, Aschenbach laments on the brevity of the trip and his encounters with Tadzio, and "quite unusually for him, he shaped a farewell with his lips, he actually uttered it" upon seeing Tadzio (Mann, 36). The repeated mention of time emphasizes Aschenbach's gravitation away from filling his time with responsibility and obligation, and his pursuit for leisure time, where Aschenbach gains the freedom to become sole influence of his actions. The more time Aschenbach spends in Venice, the more physical distance is established between Aschenbach and his luggage. His attitude towards his luggage also shifts from an initial dependence to enjoying a newfound, unburdened freedom. The transformation of Aschenbach after the departure of his luggage is emphasized by his embrace of his spontaneity in voicing a

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farewell to his unrequited obsession, Tadzio. The transformation endowed Aschenbach with aggression, the ability to take action, and act upon his inner desires without the restraints of logic and a society that condemns his obsession for Tadzio. Aschenbach demonstrates the completion of his transformation by revealing his homosexuality and love for Tadzio, a feat impossible without utilizing his newfound instincts, independence and aggression. The evolution of Aschenbach's relationship to his luggage ultimately allows Aschenbach to pursue his love for Tadzio without constrictions of society and demonstrates the random, uncontrollable nature of love, and illustrates the permanence of both societal pressures and innate natural instincts, and how dependence upon logic is ultimately an obstruction to human autonomy. Aschenbach's progress is proven by two parallel events that brought his transformation full circle. When Aschenbach first entered Hotel des Bains, he refrained from unpacking; an action that shows logic is still the dominating reason within his head as well as his excessive use of caution. Also, by not unpacking, Aschenbach acknowledges the inevitable departure from Venice and a return to the mundane. During his second stay in Hotel des Bains, after his lost trunk has been returned, Aschenbach takes full advantage of his second opportunity and shows his disregard for the constrictions within his life by considering his debacle "so happy a mischance... then the lost trunk was set down in his room, and he hastened to unpack" (Mann, 40). Since the luggage has been returned, it shows that the social order is still in place, however, the social forces have lost its influence over Aschenbach as demonstrated by his unpacking. The physical distance established between Aschenbach and his luggage, as well as the emptying of his suitcases through unpacking shows that logic no

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longer holds dominance over Aschenbach's impulse. Aschenbach is free to pursue his natural desires by embracing his obsession for Tadzio without the pressures of having to conform to societal values. The process of how Aschenbach lost his luggage is also crucial. The trunk had been placed with the wrong luggage before morning, and is "on its way in precisely the wrong direction" (Mann, 38). Mann's emphasizes that the loss of luggage was a random occurrence that Aschenbach could not possibly control in order to create a parallel to the random nature of attraction, love, and sexuality. All three sentiments are based upon natural instincts and similar to the lost luggage, cannot be controlled. Also, since the luggage is heading in the completely wrong direction, it shows that the values represented by luggage such as social influence and a fear of impulse has led Aschenbach astray in the past, but after his transformation, Aschenbach's path is free from the influence of those values. As a result of Aschenbach's new disregard of logic and standards of acceptable social conduct, Aschenbach's hidden sexuality begins to emerge. When his trunk is first removed, Aschenbach "answered with some heat" (Mann, 36). The mention of heat evokes imagery of passion and sex. The freedom from restriction results in "a reckless joy, a deep incredibly mirthfulness shook him almost as with a spasm" (Mann, 38). The reckless joy shows freedom from control and the deep spasms act as sexual imagery, in order to associate his independence as the source of his realized homosexuality and embrace for his love of Tadzio. Only when Aschenbach has been freed by his luggage, Aschenbach loses his obsession for order and reason and gains the ability to place the importance of his own natural instincts over that of the opinions of society; as demonstrated by his pursuit of Tadzio. Throughout life, "luggage" is always present in the form of flaws, <https://assignbuster.com/mans-search-for-human-autonomy-in-death-in-venice/>

insecurities, and outer influence. However, people need to be able to overcome and “lose” their luggage in order to embrace inner desires and bring to fruition the goals of highest importance.