

Decadence in death in venice

[Life](#), [Death](#)



The premise of decadence was tremendously popular in late 19th century European literature. In addition, the degeneracy of the individual and society at large was represented in numerous contemporary works by Mann. In *Death in Venice*, the theme of decadence caused by aestheticism appears through Gustav von Aschenbach's eccentric, specifically homoerotic, feelings towards a Polish boy named Tadzio. Although his feelings spring from a sound source, the boy's aesthetic beauty, Aschenbach becomes decadent in how excessively zealous his feelings are, and his obsession ultimately leads to his literal and existential destruction.

Thus exemplifying, as will be examined in the following, how aestheticism is closely related to, and indeed often the cause of, decadence. Although the narrative is about more complexities, the author's use of such vivid descriptions suggest the physical, literal aspect of his writing is just as important to the meaning of the story. The first and most obvious instance of aestheticism and decadence as correlating themes in this story is the title, *Death in Venice*. By sheer nature the title relates the concepts of death and dying to the city of Venice, which implies that the location is where a death will occur.

However, this is paralleled by the opening of the story when Mann drearily tells of Aschenbach's stroll through Germany. " It was early May, and after several cold and clammy weeks, a mock summer had set in. The English Garden, though sprouting only tender leaves as yet, had been as muggy as in August. " In the reading of this passage it proves ironic that the title is *Death in Venice* as the protagonist seems to be dying in Munich: from his loss of creative ability, depletion of strength to the course of his walk

ultimately leading him to a graveyard from which weakness forced him to catch a train home from.

There lacks a sense of elegance with Mann's description of aspects concerning Germany and a typical Aschenbach. This can be contrasted with the eloquent description given to Venice, " He saw it once more, that landing-place that takes the breath away, that amazing group of incredible structures the Republic set up to meet the awe-struck eye of the approaching seafarer: the airy splendour of the palace and Bridge of Sighs. " The obvious pleasure that Aschenbach feels as a result of the aesthetically pleasing city foreshadows how aestheticism will ultimately lead to his death and decay, important ideas within the context of decadence.

This novella is a decadent meditation on the downfall of man. In an attempt to inspire his writing he decides to take a trip because he believes a change in scenery may add " those aspects of fiery and playful caprice" to his work. After arriving at his mountain cottage on an Adriatic island off the Istrian coast, he decided that the environment was " not conducive to making him feel that he had found what he was looking for. His descent into decadence begins after his arrival in Venice. Aesthetic and decadent traits are present within the context of the city – his loss of dignity for falling in love with a fourteen year old boy and subsequent degradation, also the idea that this boy prompts in Aschenbach a yearning for ideal aesthetic beauty. Immediately upon first sight, he became captivated by the boy's aesthetically pleasing appearance, " Aschenbach was amazed to see that the boy was absolutely beautiful.

His face, pale and of a graceful reserve, surrounded by honey-colored curls, with its straight nose, lovely lips, earnest expression, sweet and godly, all recalled Greek statues of the noblest era; but despite the pure and consummate form, his features exerted such a unique personal char, that the observer felt he had never encountered such perfection in nature or the arts. " Eventually his aesthetic attraction evolves to that of an emotional sort and he falls in love with him, although he at first denies this to himself, and his fixation eventually leads to his decadent demise.

Therefore transitively, it could be understood that Aschenbach's aestheticism directed him toward reckless decadence. However, as he walked down the crowded city streets scrutinizing his second destination he was repulsed. " The farther he went, the more tortured he was by the dreadful alliance of sirocco and sea air – a condition that both agitates and enervates. He sweated painfully. His eyes blurred, his chest tightened, he was feverish, the blood pounded in his temples...wiping his forehead, he realized he had to find a different vacation spot. This idea is a strong instance of aestheticism interacting with decadence in the sense that Venice originally represented to Aschenbach, beauty and renewal. His trip was supposed to refresh him as an author and an aging man but instead he reached a land that, although aesthetically pleasing, was dirty, crowded, and repugnant. The last moments before Aschenbach slipped into complete decadence, his object of adoration was not enough for him to suffer for. He packed his bags and said his good-bye's to both the boy and the city that had twice made him ill, prepared to leave.

Misdirected baggage was the practical reason for his remaining in Venice but as Aschenbach gazed adoringly at his idol he admits to himself that it was Tadzio, the embodiment of youthful beauty, who had made it so difficult for him to leave. At this point in the narrative it becomes clear that quite literally Tadzio is a representative of the aesthetic muse that Aschenbach, being an artist, was searching for. From this point on he watches as Tadzio eats his meals, plays on the beach, and even goes so far as to trail his family on land and sea around Venice.

While following him by way of gondola, Aschenbach addresses his aesthetic intoxication, “ The adventurer felt as if his eyes were drinking in the voluptuousness, as if his ears were being wooed by such melodies; he also recalled that the city was ill, but concealing its illness out of greed, and he peered more wantonly after the gondola floating ahead of him. All that the confused man knew and desire was to keep ceaselessly pursuing the object that inflamed him. ” It is interesting how in the midst of the description of Aschenbach’s therapeutic tryst, Mann shows Aschenbach’s thoughts coming back to the retched illness of Venice.

This time he goes into more detail by addressing the greediness of the people, in order to not scare away tourists, to lie about the impending disease. This passage gives insight into more than just Aschenbach’s captivation by Venice but of the decadent trance he is put in by Tadzio’s exquisite appearance. It exemplifies Aschenbach’s knowledge of the danger of disease that is taking over the city but proves that he is so deeply enthralled by the beauty of Tadzio that his senses have become greedy and

force him to remain in Venice at all costs, despite the dismay that will come to his physical being, to get their aesthetic fix.

As disease and panic runs ramped, people flee and the city becomes emptier and emptier, Aschenbach feels relieved at the lessened chance of being caught adoring Tadzio from close and far and begins to disguise his passion less. He begins dressing extravagantly in an attempt to appear more youthful and attract the young boy. “ Like any love, he wanted to please, and he was terrified that it might not be possible. He added cheerful, youthful touches to his suit, he wore jewels and used perfumes; several times a day he spent a long while getting dressed, and was adorned, excited, and anxious when he showed up for meals. Viewing the boy’s sweet, bewitching youth, he was sickened by his own aging body: the sight of his gray hair, his pinched features, mortified him, left him hopeless. He felt an urge for physical revival and renewal; he frequented the hotel barber. ” As Aschenbach changed his aesthetic appearance; donning jewels and perfumes, wearing makeup, dying his hair, he begins to recapture a youthful appearance.

With his young and radiant appearance he now resembles the two men featured in earlier chapters of the novella; the stranger who had inspired a youthful craving in him in Germany, and the deplorably exuberant old man from the boat ride to Venice. Both men embody, at least in Aschenbach’s eyes, frivolous indulgence and fraudulent aesthetics. In particular, the moronic drunkard from the boat appeared to Aschenbach bizarre and obtrusive. “ It was repulsive to see the state to which the dandified old man

had been reduced by his sham association with youth. ” However, now Aschenbach’s outlook, and appearance, has changed drastically.

He is now concerned with making his own appearance more youthful and aesthetically pleasing, giving into decadence just like the foppish man he had once scorned. Thomas Mann’s particular use of detailed descriptions throughout the narrative makes obvious the literary importance of aestheticism. As the story progresses, Aschenbach becomes more and more concerned with aesthetics. The reader can see this from his original desire to a change of scenery, to his obsession with Tadzio’s appearance, and finally the changing of his own appearance. Eventually his concern with aesthetics becomes an obsession, which ultimately leads to his decadence.

The change of scenery for something more aesthetically youthful and beautiful that Aschenbach had yearned for turned out to be the scene of a crowded, stifling city filled with cholera that eventually leads to his demise. Before this can occur however, he becomes internally decadent through his indulgence in Tadzio’s appearance. He then changes his appearance to please his idol which in turn corrupts himself by turning him into the type of decadent man he once despised. These themes of aestheticism and decadence, not in juxtaposition but in duality, are used frequently by Mann throughout the novella.