

Art and extremism



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In Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice," Gustave von Aschenbach is described as "the watcher" (73), who becomes interested in the young Tadzio, eventually leading to a dangerous obsession that causes his death. In the novella, Mann uses Aschenbach's sudden passionate fascination with the young Tadzio to portray the dangers of art taken to one extreme, and the need for a balance between the Dionysian and Apollonian-between drunken hedonism and detached rationalism. Aschenbach's heavy reliance on the Apollonian prior to his visit to Venice backfires on him, thrusting him to the Dionysian without any hope of finding stability. Tadzio's role in the story is passive, as he is the impetus for Aschenbach's transformation, but does not necessarily encourage Aschenbach's destructive behavior. Furthermore, Aschenbach himself is not fully aware of his changing, for he becomes somewhat delusional, dying relatively happily and peacefully. Almost as soon as he sees Tadzio, Aschenbach becomes delusional, as discrepancies between what he perceives and what the narrator reveals become apparent. In Tadzio, Aschenbach sees a boy whose "face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture-pale...the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity" (25). However, "Tadzio's teeth were imperfect, rather jagged and bluish, without a healthy glaze of, and of that peculiar brittle transparency which the teeth of chlorotic people often show" (34). Interestingly enough, imperfect teeth, especially those with gaps, traditionally represent a lack of chastity-a far cry from Aschenbach's belief that Tadzio is "virginally pure and austere" (33). As Aschenbach's obsession intensifies, he loses his grip on reality even further. In the beginning of the story, Aschenbach was "moved to shudder" when he looked at the "old man...with wrinkles and crow's feet round eyes and

mouth; the dull carmine of the cheeks was rouge” (17). Later on, as the barber applies makeup to Aschenbach so that “ a delicate carmine glowed on his cheeks...the dry, anaemic lips grew full, they turned the colour of ripe strawberries,” Aschenbach “ sat there comfortably; he was incapable of objecting to the process-rather as it went forward roused his hopes” (68). Aschenbach is unable to realize his sudden resemblance to this deathlike ominous figure, from his false-youth down to his red neck-tie. The allusion to the ripe strawberries foreshadows Aschenbach’s own consumption of the dangerous fruit in the next scene, and his inability to see his own downward spiral towards destruction. While following Tadzio, Aschenbach manages to “ lose his bearing...he did not even know the points of the compass; all his care was not to lose sight of the figure after which his eyes thirsted” (69), and the strawberries become the quencher for his impulsive desire. Aschenbach grows more delusional, as Mann states that his sentences are “ shaped in his disordered brain by the fantastic logic that governs our dreams” (70), and Aschenbach no longer lives in any sort of reality. When a confused Aschenbach feels “ a sense of futility and hopelessness,” he is unsure “ whether this referred to himself or to the outer world” (71). Since he is unsure of his situation, Aschenbach’s death may be considered tragic to the reader, but not to Aschenbach himself, who “ sat just as he had sat that time in the lobby of the hotel when first the twilit grey eyes had met his own” (73), and may not understand how his plunge into the world of the Dionysian ruined him. When Aschenbach dies, he simply “ rested his head against the chair-back and followed the movements of the figure” (73), enjoying his last glimpse of Tadzio. Although he dies lonely, “ a shocked and respectful world received the news of his decease” (73), and Mann indicates <https://assignbuster.com/art-and-extremism/>

that his admirers will not soon forget him. While Aschenbach of the novella dies without fully understanding the ramifications of his inability to balance the Dionysian and Apollonian, the Aschenbach of Luchino Visconti's dramatic film is aware of his problem and tragically sees that he cannot stop himself. In the film, Tadzio takes on a more active role, as he looks directly into the camera, luring Aschenbach by waiting for him to follow. The Tadzio of the film is seductive and beautiful not only in Aschenbach's eyes, but to the plain viewer. Thus, Aschenbach is no longer delusional, but is quite reasonable, since Tadzio engages in this game with him. Aschenbach is aware, then, of his precarious behavior, but sees no way to stop it. This is apparent in the scene near the close of the film, in which Aschenbach fervently pursues Tadzio, and when he loses him and sits by the well, is sweating and crying, as if to indicate his sadness at the inescapability of his fate. Perspiring and panting, Aschenbach appears urgent and pained, and does not seem to take pleasure in chasing Tadzio, but seems unable to stop himself. By knowing his problem but being unable to control himself, Aschenbach is a more tragic figure, and his death is far unhappier than in the story. In the film's dramatic close, Mahler's music plays as Aschenbach gasps and appears injured, as black hair dye mixed with sweat drip down his face. He does not seem, as Mann described, to have a "relaxed and brooding expression of deep slumber," and though "the pale and lovely Summoner out there smiled at him and beckoned" (73), the film depicts Aschenbach being lured and painfully attempting to near Tadzio, as if pulled by a string, and somewhat unwillingly. Visconti ends the film by zooming out on the sad scene and does not close with Mann's somewhat uplifting message, in which the world mourns him. Instead, Aschenbach dies lonely and isolated, fully-knowing his

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problem and watching his descent into destruction, without the slightest ability to control it.