

Death in venice as a window to modernity essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Gustave von Aschenbach is the protagonist of the novella and the character on which the whole story is mostly concentrated. The author keeps strict limitations on the other characters introduced in the novel and they seem to have the only function – to create the background which would help to uncover the traits of the protagonist. For instance, Tadzio is carefully described but remains only the object of Aschenbach's frantic passion, like a marble or a Greek marble statue, he is frequently compared with.

Aschenbach, his thoughts, his reflections possess the chief place in the novella and this suggests an idea that Aschenbach is the superman, a hero that is similar to Nietzsche's vision of a protagonist. There are many Aschenbach's character traits that help him to embody a Nietzsche's superman. Aschenbach is a man of art, a writer, who fulfills his will to power and ambitions of conquering the world through writing books and achieving high popularity.

Mann notes that the rich talent of his main character is highly estimated by the contemporaries: Aschenbach is a national writer, an "author of the lucid and vigorous prose epic on the life of Frederick the Great; careful, tireless weaver of the richly patterned tapestry entitled *Maia*...; creator of that powerful narrative *The Abject*, .. ; and lastly .. the writer of ... discourse on the theme of Mind and Art whose ordered force and antithetic eloquence led serious critics to rank it with Schiller *Simple and Sentimental Poetry*. " (Mann "Death in Venice", p. 8)

The author of the novella depicts the superman of the modern world, who is "early ripe and ready for a career", at the age of forty becomes successful

and somewhat tired of his fame: “worn down by the strains and stresses of his actual task”. As a real romantic hero Aschenbach wants to escape from the world already explored and conquered and to look for unknown horizons in the foreign world of the South. The protagonist of the novella is fully dedicated to the classic ideals and his life brightly uncovers all the strengths and weakness as well as the contradictions hidden inside the philosophy of classicism.

Aschenbach reconsiders the old contradiction between public and private. Classical art is supremely public. The presence of classical art is felt in many ways throughout the story. When Aschenbach approaches Venice he sees such public buildings as for example, Palladio’s church of San Giorgio Maggiore. Aschenbach’s literary style is formalistic and imitates the public style of Ancient Greek literature. The author of the novella compares the public life of modern society to that of the ancient Greece.

Thomas Mann stresses that his contemporary society has morals that much differ from the understanding of morality accepted in the classic world. First of all it concerns homosexuality. Athenian people considered homosexual relations between boys and men as a normal part of Athenian public life, while modern society strongly sensors for any public demonstration of love between similar sexes. Thus, homosexuality has turned from a public behavior into a hidden private passion. Moreover, Aschenbach’s preoccupation with classicism in some way encourages his homosexuality.

Aschenbach meets the ideals of classical male beauty in the face of a young man. The main character reaches an aesthetic satisfaction while looking at

the classical forms poetized by Greek artists. "Aschenbach noticed with astonishment the lad's perfect beauty. His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture-pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honey-coloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity." (Mann "Death in Venice", p. 25)

The appreciation of a beautiful human body glorified by classic sculptures released Aschenbach's homosexual desires, the expression of which was prohibited by existing ethics. In this way Mann explores the unstable relation between art and desire, which has been in the center of a long-standing philosophic discussion. In particular, the discussion was aimed at finding an answer for the following: Does art sublime desire or release it? The discussion was initiated by Burke (On the Sublime and Beautiful) and Kant who in his essay on the sublime suggested his own definition of aesthetic experience.

The point of view of Kant was opposed by Stendhal's who described aesthetic experience as 'une promesse de bonheur'. Finally, Nietzsche juxtaposed the theories of Kant and Stendhal and asked the famous question: 'Who is right, Kant or Stendhal?' (at Robertson Classicism and its pitfalls: Death in Venice, p. 95) While experiencing the balance between desire and art, Aschenbach finally tips towards physical passion. Similarly, the protagonist declares that he prefers philosophy of Dionysus to that of Apollo: "I am a disciple of the philosopher Dionysus, I should prefer to be even a satyr to being a saint." (Nietzsche, *Esse Homo*, Preface).

On the whole, Aschenbach is described as a man living in the modern world and facing problems of modern people. " He was the son of an upper official in the judicature, and his forbears had all been officers, judges, departmental functionaries—men who lived their strict, decent, sparing lives in the service of king and state. " (Mann " Death in Venice", p. 8) Aschenbach is an intellectual, refined and hardworking citizen of the town L, who has " nerve-taxing work, work which had not ceased to exact his uttermost in the way of sustained concentration, conscientiousness, and tact." (Mann " Death in Venice", p. 3)

The strength of Aschenbach's character is seen through his thoughtfulness, the capability to ratiocinate and to build logic judgments on the basis of his observations. Aschenbach represents a vision of a successful man imposed by the pragmatism and money-pursuit goals of the modern society: " From childhood up he was pushed on every side to achievement, and achievement of no ordinary kind; and so his young days never knew the sweet idleness and blithe laissez aller that belong to youth. " (Mann " Death in Venice", p. 9)

The author of the novella emphasizes that the main character did not have a happily idle childhood and has sacrificed his private life for the sake of higher public goals. However, as a modern man Aschenbach suffers from meaninglessness of his life, the vice which goes together with cynicism and questioning the origin and function of values. At this point there is a strong connection with the nihilism of Nietzsche. Nietzsche's utterance " God is dead" symbolized the era of devaluation of the highest values created by philosophy and religion.

However, when there is no god, the existing emptiness needs to be filled with supplanting ideals. Using the example of Aschenbach, Mann shows an individual who is devoted to his work as an absolute which can invest his life with meaning. When the protagonist reaches his middle age, he has to reconsider his previous ideals and values. Consequently, work as an absolute bringing meaningfulness into life becomes doubted and ultimately is replaced by feeling. Nietzsche declares that people who deny instincts serve false ideals and can not be happy.

Feelings, instincts, emotions guarantee spiritual and physical health of a man: " The lie of the ideal has so far been the curse on reality, on account of which mankind itself has become mendacious and false down to its most fundamental instincts to the point of worshipping the opposite values of those which alone would guarantee its health, its future, the lofty right to its future. " (Nietzsche, *Esse Homo*, Preface) No wonder that loneliness is accompanying Aschenbach throughout the story.

The author stresses many times that his protagonist is lonely. " He had grown up solitary, without comradeship; yet had early been driven to see that he belonged to those whose talent is not so much out of the common as is the physical basis on which talent relies for its fulfillment. " (Mann " Death in Venice", p. 9) On the one hand, the loneliness of Aschenbach excludes him from society, but on the other hand, it fosters his belief that he is outstanding, better than the rest, and must fulfill his superman's mission.

Mann offers that thoughtfulness and the ability to reason were acquired by Aschenbach thanks to his solitary life: " A solitary, unused to speaking of

what he sees and feels, has mental experiences which are at once more intense and less articulate than those of a gregarious man. " (Mann " Death in Venice", p. 24) In this way, Thomas Mann draws a border between an individual and society, showing the confrontation between one and many, discussed in the context of modernism.

The critical moment of the protagonist's change and transformation takes place when Aschenbach leaves his country. Joseph Brennan in his *The Novels of Depaysement* advances a theory that outward alteration has a strong effect on a human's personality. Brennan maintains that " much literature has been made round the notion that a man's being taken out of his element, finds himself suddenly transported to exotic soil, can lead to an important shift in his moral soil of gravity. " (p. 223)

Brennan, notes, however, that such moral transformation of a man is usually regarded by his relatives and friends as deterioration or loss of moral bearings. It may be concluded that Aschenbach's trip to Venice motivates his transformation from a man of reason to a man of senses. This change is not approved by the morals of Aschenbach's society and consequently the protagonist has to experience the gap between his desires and the official rules of morals and public behavior.

In the novella Aschenbach faces the classical contradiction between reason and passion. It becomes a most discussed theme in Aschenbach's books: " Within that world of Aschenbach's creation were exhibited many phases of this theme: there was the aristocratic selfcommand that is eaten out within and for as long as it can conceals its biologic decline from the eyes of the

world; the serene and ugly outside, hiding the embers of smouldering fire—and having power to fan them to so pure a flame as to challenge supremacy in the domain of beauty itself.” (Mann “ Death in Venice”, p. 10)

Also this contradiction was focused by Nietzsche in his *Esse Homo*. The philosopher contrasted the sunlit sculpture of Apollo, a symbol of reason and control, with the dark and sensual sculpture of Dionysius, symbolizing passion. Forster argues that the reference to the bipolarization (Apollo and Dionysius) testifies to the strong influence of Nietzsche on Mann’s *Death in Venice*. (Gillinspie, *Comparative Literature*, vol. 37, #1)

Many philosophers come to the conclusion that moderation and beauty of the Greek world rested on the underground of insight and suffering, which disclosed by the forces of Dionysius. Like the protagonist of *Esse Homo*, Aschenbach has to experience tragedy and destruction in order to find the eternal truth and to perceive his inner world. Nietzsche argued that only in the experience of tragedy the discordant forces of Dionysius and Apollo could be held together in order to find out one truth.

The alienation of Aschenbach is seen by many critics as an element of Dionysius, while his homosexuality evidences the presence of the forces of Dionysius. So, “ the last phase for ... Aschenbach ... surrender to the alien god of instinctual excess” is seen by some critics as “ an outcome far from Nietzsche’s ideal of sovereign individualism. ” (Gillinspie, *Comparative Literature*, vol. 37, #1) On the whole, the novella *Death in Venice* can be viewed as a modern attempt to solve the discourse between passion and reason initiated by the literature of classicism.

In the novella the author examines the relation between the two forces using the following contrasts: the reason of the protagonist and his passion of homosexuality; art and desire; public and private etc. The influence of Nietzsche on the novella can be observed through the following traits: the protagonist as a superman, and his will to power realized with the help of artistic career; meaninglessness of life based on the philosophy of nihilism.

Nietzsche's theory of art expounded in *The Birth of Tragedy* is interpreted by Mann using for example, such elements: the protagonist is an artist, the protagonist is occupied with classicism, reason and passion are the main concerns of the protagonist. Also, it was found out that in his novella Thomas Mann suggests his own critical understanding of the old classical discourse, more specifically Mann shows that sensuous pleasure as an experience in art may take different, even frightening forms, for example love or passion for destruction, but sensuous elements are also parts of classicism.