

A comparison of the
environment
reflecting the
protagonists' decline
in death in ...



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The environment depicted in literature provides the foundation for which character development can progress. It also serves to create reflect their growth as individuals as well as provide knowledge and hints to the journey they are going to take. However, the environment is not just limited to the physical landscape, but also the interactions, which can be seen in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and Ibsen's *Ghosts*. The environments in these two texts reflect the decline of the protagonist through the weather, the setting, their encounters and the motifs and symbols seen within the texts. In both texts, Ibsen and Mann use the weather to mirror the protagonists' feelings. In the beginning of *Death in Venice*, the protagonist does not like the hot and humid weather in Venice, yet later on he comes to tolerate and eventually enjoy the weather, suggesting his increasing descent into passion and to his downfall. Later on, he becomes "over stimulated" and "tired" as a "storm seemed to be brewing." This tiredness suggests Aschenbach's increasing weakness of will through the Venice's heat, as he descends further into passion. Furthermore, even though he notices a storm stirring, he does not do anything to avoid it. This suggests the decadence and heat of Venice has influenced him, reflecting his loss of control over his restraint and eventually, to his decline. In contrast, *Ghosts* is continually shrouded in cold and dull weather. When *Death in Venice* does have cold weather, it is in the beginning of the novella, in Munich, when a stormy sky is brewing, signalling the tragedy to come. However, *Ghosts* continues to have a veil of rain and mist, rather than frightening storms. It has a more subtle suggestion of reflecting the stifling society and its conventions that Mrs Alving despises. The steady rain and gloomy landscape is a fitting image of this society. In the play, Mrs Alving is the only character who does not comment upon the <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-the-environment-reflecting-the-protagonists-decline-in-death-in-venice-and-ghosts/>

gloomy weather. This gives the impression that she is content with the life she has created, despite the physical and philosophical gloom. This rain also serves to weaken the atmosphere, influencing the gradual release of Mrs Alving's self-control. As the play progresses, the rain lifts but the mist is still there, emphasising her journey towards the truth and in truth, her decline. The weather in both texts foreshadows and reflects the protagonists' journey towards their terrible end and revelations. The setting of both texts is paramount to the protagonists' decline. It reflects their inner self and physically symbolises their downfall. In the beginning of *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach travels to Venice, where it was seen as grand, decadent and extravagant, however underneath the surface, it was falling apart and eroding. Its charming exterior hid its filthy canals and twisted and menacing alleyways. This physical manifestation reflected Aschenbach's deterioration and decline. His decline began in the hotel, when he first saw Tadzio, and his admiration soon turned to obsession. Venice becomes a labyrinth which he cannot leave and it begins to change with him, becoming a place of subterfuge, where he sneaks around, following Tadzio. This dramatic change in the setting shows his deterioration of a respectable man to a man of passion and impulse, eventuating to his downfall. When Aschenbach decides to dye his hair and wear makeup to appear younger, Venice is painted in fresh coats of paint - signalling the near completion of his downfall, as previously, the transformation was mental, but now it was also physical, completely mirroring Venice, showing his absolute degeneration. Moreover, Venice is important on several levels. It was a city built on a swamp, and every year, the city sunk a little more into the murky swamp. Building a city on water is by sheer human design, and this suggests that Aschenbach has only

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been able to be so restrained through sheer will, and now, he is beginning to decay, as reflected in the setting. But while the setting of *Death in Venice* frees the protagonist from his cage, the setting of *Ghosts* presents the cage that the protagonist has created for herself. In the setting of *Ghosts*, windows, rain and the indoors are central in reflecting Mrs Alving's predicament and eventual decline. From the beginning of the play, a contrast between Mrs Alving's ordered life and menacing world outside can be seen. The interior of the Mrs Alving's home is carefully controlled and artificial, which is her natural environment, compared to the dull and gloomy atmosphere of the world outside. When Mrs Alving speaks of "law and order," she is standing by the window, and she "taps on the window frame," emphasising her wish to break away from duty. Mrs Alving's glances and stares out the window are frequent throughout the play, suggesting the continual desire to be free. After the fire of the Orphanage, the characters run off to look at the fire, leaving the room empty, open to the night and darkness. This implies that her haven is no longer under her control. What was once a haven has now been invaded by something sinister. In Act III, after the revelation of Oswald's illness, Mrs Alving tries to escape from the room that once was her haven. However, in reality, it is a prison, which she realises when Oswald brings her back and locks the door. This room is a symbol of her confinement to societal conventions which she loathed, and now, the consequences are locked with her. The room that she thought protected her, in fact, ended up preventing her from leaving, forcing her to watch the deterioration of all that she had, leading to her downfall. Within *Death in Venice*, the protagonist continually meets sinister strangers, and in *Ghosts*, Mrs Alving meets acquaintances, however, in both texts the

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characters they meet similarly serve to usher the protagonists along their journey to their decline. In *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach meets several strangers throughout his journey. In the cemetery, he meets a red haired man, and this encounter weakens his self control, and inspires his journey to Venice. Later, on the ship to Venice, he notices an old man, with a group of youth, wearing a wig, false teeth, makeup and different clothing in order to appear young. This disgusts Aschenbach, but this moment is a clear foreshadowing of what he is to become. Then later, he rides in a black gondola, with a man that unnerves him with his speech. This ride is a clear reference to Greek mythology, with the Charon, transporting souls to Hades, to death. This foreshadows his journey to his death. When he later goes to the barber, he tells Aschenbach that by become young, it would present a more "truthful" way of presenting himself. By this stage, his deterioration is almost complete. His exterior finally matched the inner depths of himself. These encounters emphasise that Venice is a place of moral corruption, deceit and seduction. It reinforces the perception that the encounters are menacing, as Aschenbach is being led further into danger. With each encounter, he becomes more reckless, and acts upon impulse. However, Aschenbach fails to realise that every sinister stranger he meets has a feature or several, in common with himself; as well as each stranger bearing extreme likeness to each other. Even Tadzio, Aschenbach's reason for his passion, has poor teeth, which is linked with the man on the ship. His encounter with Tadzio is ultimately what brings about his downfall, as he is a symbol of a tempter-like figure, tempting him into a darker path of passion. In *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach's decline is made easier as he is out of his element and encounters sinister strangers. However, in *Ghosts*, even though <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-the-environment-reflecting-the-protagonists-decline-in-death-in-venice-and-ghosts/>

Mrs Alving is in her element, she cannot prevent her decline. Each individual that she meets represents a part of society, and that society that moulded her, in fact, led to her descent. When Engstrand first enters the dwelling, he is drenched from " Devil's bloody rain," as he does not wear protection from the rain, and he seems to be threatening to bring it in with him. While the other characters help lead Mrs Alving to her decline, it is ultimately Oswald who does this. Oswald is the product of a different society and the premise of his character is much like the environment in *Death in Venice*, where an outside influence changes the view of the protagonist. Oswald is the only outside influence she lets in mentally. Oswald is the reason that Mrs Alving did all she did, and so he had the influence that allowed her to divulge her terrible secret. This encounter was what ultimately brought about the demise of Mrs Alving, as she could not continue the façade that she had lived with for so many years; it was only with her encounter with Oswald where she began to change her view, " And suddenly I seemed to see my whole life... everything in a new light." These encounters had broken her control. The encounters in both texts reflect the protagonists' changes, especially their deterioration, leading to their eventual decline. Throughout both texts, motifs and symbols appear frequently. They serve to anchor significant events and foreshadow the protagonists' downfall. In *Death in Venice*, several motifs arise in the novella. The nameless strangers often have red features. Red is often associated with the devil, and thus temptation, emphasising Aschenbach's decline into sensuality and passion. The disinfectant is also a motif in the novella. Aschenbach first notices the smell in the air, and he did not like it. Yet, as the novella progresses, he begins to think it smells " sweet." This suggests the corruption and lust has already

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begun and will just continue. This disinfectant is also the city's secret, and it parallels with Aschenbach's secret passion, his crime. The constant references to Greek mythology are also a significant motif. There are references to Apollonian and Dionysian philosophical concepts throughout the novella, reflecting the juxtaposition of logic and reason, and passion and wildness. These mythological references emphasise that polar opposites cannot solely exist in a whole. Individuals need both sides to exist and live without aggravation, which can be clearly seen and is outlined through Aschenbach's decline. The damage caused by repression of one side led to his death. While the motifs and symbols in *Death in Venice* serve to foreshadow and lead to darkness, the motifs and symbols in *Ghosts* contain a revelational quality, that serve to illuminate situations, rather than provide a threatening atmosphere. Earlier in the play, Mrs Alving speaks of ghosts, and how she is haunted by them. These ghosts are society's values and attitudes, and how she is haunted by them. Her fear of these ghosts prevents her from moving on, and she resorts to controlling her life, creating lies and her eventual downfall. The Orphanage is also another significant symbol within *Ghosts*. The Orphanage represented the release of her ghosts, however with the destruction of the Orphanage; she could not free herself from the ghosts. This burning of the building was an external disaster, outside of the control of Mrs Alving. This foreshadows a disastrous end to her controlled plans. Furthermore, Oswald also sees this Orphanage as a symbol for himself, and what it represents, as his father and his sickness. He cannot separate himself from the orphanage, " Everything will burn. There'll be nothing left to remind people of Father. And here am I, burning down too," and since he is the reason Mrs Alving created the lies, his mental breakdown

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is intrinsically linked to hers. His decline hastens and deteriorates her mental health. The sun is also another crucial symbol within *Ghosts*. When the sun rises it illuminates the terrible beauty, the horrible truth and has also dispersed gloom. However, when it rises, Mrs Alving oversimplifies the rising sun, " Dawn is already breaking over the mountains," as she does not fully realise the reality of Oswald's situation here - she believes that the sun will fix everything, but with the rise of the sun, something else beyond Mrs Alving's control will arise. " and meanwhile the sun will be rising. And then you'll know," thus through Oswald's words, the sun now becomes associated with the truth. Mrs Alving no longer has any control and she finally knows the heartbreaking truth of her son's illness. The sun also illuminates the hard truth about her son. She now has to decide whether to destroy a life she worked so hard to preserve. The complete destruction of her physical and mental reality has had a monumental affect upon her, as a woman who has been able to so tightly control her life. The decision of whether or not to end her son's life is reflected through the illuminating sun, and reflects her downfall. While the environments in *Death in Venice* and *Ghosts* are different, and continually reflect the protagonists' decline, it also serves to draw several similarities. The weather and setting create the atmosphere in which characters can meet their downfall, as well as serving as a barrier to prevent them from escaping from their demise. The other characters that they meet are the catalysts towards their decline, as they influence the decisions the protagonists' make as well as providing commentary to their situation. Furthermore, the motifs and symbols found throughout the texts provide connotations for what has and could possibly happen, in addition to heightening the effect of what they suggest. Through the environment <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-the-environment-reflecting-the-protagonists-decline-in-death-in-venice-and-ghosts/>

depicted in *Death in Venice* and *Ghosts*, it continually reflects the increasing decline of the protagonists.