



Death in Venice

By Thomas Mann
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Introduction

"It may have been the stranger's perambulatory appearance that acted upon his imagination or some other physical or psychological influence coming into play, but much to his surprise he grew aware of a strange expansion of his inner being, a kind of restive anxiety, a fervent youthful craving for faraway humdrumplaces." -- from *Death in Venice*

When he crosses paths with a mysterious stranger while waiting at a tram stop in Munich, Gustav von Aschenbach is seized by a sudden need to escape the confines of his well-ordered life. An aging and successful writer, he yearns for "freedom, release, oblivion -- an urge to flee his work, the routine of a rigid, cold, passionate duty."

Aschenbach's wanderlust leads him to Venice, where the spiritual fulfillment he is seeking instead becomes an erotic quest with tragic consequences. Against the backdrop of a Venetian beachfront hotel, Thomas Mann charts the course of Aschenbach's infatuation with a fourteen-year-old Polish boy.

Aschenbach's relationship with Tadzio never progresses beyond one of sight -- they never exchange even a single word -- and yet for Aschenbach his passion intensifies with each passing day. Tadzio's youth and "truly godlike beauty" make Aschenbach acutely aware of his own rapidly fading years. He slides deeper into an abyss of his own making, even daring to follow Tadzio and his family through the streets of Venice.

As Aschenbach's preoccupation with Tadzio escalates into an obsession, so too does his determination to uncover the secret that is being harbored to protect the tourist trade -- Venice is bracing for an epidemic. When he finally learns that cholera has already claimed several lives, he refuses to leave the city as long as Tadzio remains.

Death in Venice was published on the eve of World War I, a decade after Mann's first novel, *Buddenbrooks*, had established him as a literary celebrity at the age of twenty-six. One of Mann's most celebrated and compelling works, *Death in Venice* embodies many of the themes that he expressed throughout his work -- particularly the conflict between the artist's inner self and outward persona. "It is a story of the voluptuousness of doom," Mann wrote about *Death in Venice*. "But the problem I had especially in mind was that of the artist's dignity."

A work of psychological intensity, *Death in Venice* is an exploration of art and beauty, life and death, obsession and reality, love and despair -- a graceful and tragic portrait of an aging man at odds with his soul.

Discussion Questions

1. What was your initial perception of Aschenbach -- both as a writer and as a man -- and did that perception change as the story progressed?
2. What ignites Aschenbach's wanderlust and compels him to leave his home on a holiday? What does he hope to gain during his travels?
3. When Aschenbach sets out on his journey from Munich, he does not have a destination in mind. What ultimately leads him to Venice?
4. In what ways does Aschenbach embody both his father's "sober, conscientious nature" and the "darker, more fiery impulses" (pg 12) of his mother?
5. Other than physical beauty, what is it about Tadzio that attracts the interest of Aschenbach? Is the attraction merely sexual in nature, or does Tadzio represent something more to Aschenbach?
6. How does Mann's use of Greek mythology illuminate Aschenbach's story?
7. Is it possible to have a relationship with someone by sight only, as Aschenbach believes in regard to himself and Tadzio (with whom he never speaks directly)? Does Aschenbach imagine Tadzio's returned interest?
8. How does Aschenbach's fervent interest in learning the truth about the cholera outbreak mirror his obsession with Tadzio?
9. Why does Aschenbach decide to stay in Venice despite the risk of contracting cholera, a disease that is often fatal?
10. The book's title is an indication of how the story ends. Did having this foreknowledge affect your reading of *Death in Venice*?
11. How do you interpret the story's ending?
12. What, in your opinion, is the message Mann is conveying in *Death in Venice*?

About the author

Thomas Mann was born in Lübeck, Germany, on June 6, 1875. His first novel, *Buddenbrooks*, a multi-generational saga based on his family history, was published in 1901. A vocal opponent of the Nazi regime, Mann and his wife moved to Switzerland in 1933, shortly after the Nazis came to power. He later became an American citizen and lived in Santa Monica, California from 1941 to 1953. He then returned to Europe and made his home in Zurich, where he died in 1955. Mann's other works include *The Magic Mountain*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *The Beloved Returns*. A revered essayist, cultural critic, and novelist, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929.