

Jean Halverson

Thomas Mann

Death in Venice

Death in Venice was written in the year 1912 by the German author Thomas Mann. This book stands apart from many of his other books in that it takes a taboo subject and creates a multilayered work of art around which many other important themes revolve. The themes of music, morality, death, and the search for beauty take on intertwined meanings.

Mann was born in 1875 in the city of Lübeck in Germany. He was educated in the Ludwig Maximilian's University of Munich as well as the Technical University of Munich where he studied art history, literature, economics and history. His career as a writer started with the publication of his first short story in 1898. Mann was inspired in his writing by Friedrich Nietzsche, and that influence is very evident in Death in Venice. There is also a subtle influence by Oscar Wilde.

One of the influences on several of Mann's writing was Friedrich Nietzsche's work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, which was written in 1872. Nietzsche's work explores the dichotomy between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Characteristics of the Apollonian include logic, order, self-control and individuality, whereas the Dionysian character represents instinct, passion, chaos and community. Nietzsche postulated that one character should not overpower or destroy the other or

serious imbalance would ensue, therefore the two sides create balance and harmony. He also theorized that the balance of these two states were what made the essence of the Greek tragedy a holistic and healthy experience for the spectator. Nietzsche received a large amount of criticism for his work, however Mann seems to have taken it to heart and used the ideas quite frequently throughout much of his writing. (Beckett 2; Nietzsche 46, 47, 65)

Throughout *Death in Venice* one has von Aschenbach's rational consciousness: self-controlled and logical; juxtaposed with his irrational sub-conscious: passionate and chaotic. The first view of this juxtaposition comes in the first few pages of the book, where a silent and thoughtful von Aschenbach encounters a red-haired stranger. When the red-haired stranger responds in a silent yet almost forcefully defiant manner to von Aschenbach's stare, for some inexplicable and irrational reason he makes the conscious decision to travel south for a vacation. There are a few other notable strangers mentioned in the book, each of which creates in von Aschenbach a deviation from his taciturn, Apollonian controlled actions. Von Aschenbach moves from a staunch Apollonian character into a Dionysian character, a process which, while seemingly a de-evolution into immorality, could be looked at as merely the embodiment of the Apollonian and Dionysian extremes, both of which are detrimental to the individual and to society (Beckett 2).

Music works subtly as a Dionysian influence interspersed throughout the work. Von Aschenbach is described as the son of a Southern woman whose father was a conductor. In his dreams music signals a descent into a chaotic realm and the chaotic sounds of a city sinking into epidemic are described as "accords so weirdly lulling and lascivious." The Dionysian art of music, as opposed to the Apollonian visual arts, seem to be associated with vice and thusly with disease in the context of a Venice in the throes of a cholera epidemic. Even Tadzio's voice, the

words of which von Aschenbach does not understand because he speaks no Polish, is described as music (Beckett 3; Mann 12, 39, 63).

While the influences of Nietzsche are open and quite easily seen and understood as such, the influence of Oscar Wilde is quite the opposite. The first appearance and hint occurs with the appearance of the first red-haired stranger, who is seen unexpectedly on the street wearing a yellow suit carrying a gray overcoat. Brinkley believes that this is a discreet reference to Oscar Wilde, in that the red hair denotes Wilde's Irish nationality, the gray overcoat refers to Dorian Gray and the yellow suit refers to the yellow book in Wilde's novel "The Portrait of Dorian Gray" (Brinkley 8; Mann 3).

With the persona of Oscar Wilde making an appearance so early in the text, the theme of homosexuality is brought even more to the forefront of the novel than is even apparent in the fascination von Aschenbach has with Tadzio. In fact, it is Wilde's appearance which spurs von Aschenbach to take a trip to Venice. In deconstructing the appearance itself one also finds that the entire sequence resembles that of 19th century homosexual "cruising". It seems, however, that von Aschenbach doesn't fully comprehend the significance of the red-haired man's attention. Yet immediately afterward he is thrown into a fantasy with significant phallic and sexual imagery (Brinkley 9).

Shortly after the encounter with the red-haired man von Aschenbach begins his journey by train to Trieste then Pola, but was very dissatisfied with both locales. He then decided to take a boat to Venice. This is significant as it is the depiction of the typical start of a hero's descent into the underworld as described by Joseph Campbell. In myths around the world the hero often begins a significant quest by crossing over a body of water, his search for some item of import

actually being of minor consequence compared to the self-discovery that occurs along the journey. According to Campbell, adventures that seem to start by a happenstance blunder are in actuality times where the hero is drawn into action by suppressed desires. In the typical myth, however, the hero descends and suffers various difficulties that test and subsequently strengthen his character, upon which he then ascends and attains his true goal. Von Aschenbach, however, seems to be lured in by a search for something that is at first intangible, yet shapes itself into the seemingly uplifting ideal of classical beauty found in the form of Tadzio. However, this eventually morphs into something akin to madness and the ensuing reality and its' ending result is chaos and then death (Campbell 51; Mann 11, 142).

Bibliography

- Beckett, Lucy. "Aschenbach, Mann and Music." *The Musical Times*, Vol. 114, No. 1564 (Jun., 1973), pp. 579-582. Musical Times Publications Ltd. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/955544>.
07/10/2010 22:04
- Brinkley, Edward S., Mann, Thomas. "Fear of Form: Thomas Mann's "Der Tod in Venedig"." *Monatshefte*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 2-27. University of Wisconsin Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30153759>. 07/10/2010 22:07
- Campbell, Joseph. "The Hero With A Thousand Faces." Princeton University Press. 1973.
- Mann, Thomas. "Death in Venice." HarperCollins Publishers. New York, NY. 2004.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Birth of Tragedy." *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Random House, New York, NY. 2000.