Amor Fati:
The Death of Gustav von Aschenbach

despite lack of bib annotation, well done -

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LITT 2123-002
Introduction to Literary Research
Professor Kinsella
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"To rest in the arms of perfection is what all those who struggle for excellence long to do; and is the void not a form of perfection?"

- from *Death in Venice*

It is not until the novella's final word that the true significance of the title of Thomas Mann's masterpiece *Death in Venice* becomes fully clear. The fatal outbreak of cholera in Venice discovered by the protagonist Gustav von Aschenbach might be taken by first time readers to have satisfied the title's required mortality quota before the last page has been reached. But Aschenbach himself is also fated to expire as the novella concludes. His is the "Death" of the title.

It is easy and no doubt correct to interpret *Death in Venice* as a tragic work. The matter of Aschenbach's obsession with the fourteen-year-old Tadzio cannot but disturb the sensibilities of the vast majority of readers, now no less than when it was written. But I would like to suggest that the complexity of Mann's narrative leaves an opening for a more positive, if subversive, interpretation. There is evidence within the text to suggest that Aschenbach's death may not be so simply "tragic" as it may seem. I would like to examine the novella and attempt to establish the case that Aschenbach is in his own way triumphant, even in death.

In 1911, Thomas Mann visited Venice and his journey provided virtually the entire scenario described in his tale: "... [N]othing was invented. The traveler at the north cemetery in Munich, the gloomy Polesian ship, the old dandy, the suspicious gondolier, Tadzio and his family, the unsuccessful departure due to a mix-up with the luggage et cetera, et cetera---it was

all there; the cholera, the honest clerk in the travel agency, the malicious itinerant singer, or whatever else mentioned---everything was given; it really needed only to be employed to demonstrate its remarkable ability to be interpreted compositionally" (Mann 109). The novella is ultimately fictional, of course, but the raw material was real and Thomas Mann lived it largely as it is recorded. The decisive difference, of course, is that Mann did not pathologically obsess over Wladyslaw Moes, the "real 'Tadzio'" (Luke 198). It seems, rather, that he carried out something of an "experiment" (Reed 150) soon thereafter wherein he considered the path that such a dangerous course of action might (fictionally) take. The result is *Death in Venice.*

Mann and Aschenbach have more than the trip to Venice in common. T.J. Reed points out that they share: "racially mixed ancestry, disciplined bourgeois background, slow and tortured compositional method, concentration on a certain type of character, residence in Munich, Upper Bavarian country house" and more (150). As well, there can be little doubt that Aschenbach's mental landscape is not dissimilar to that of his creator... up to a point, of course. Mann's wife, Katia, clarified the nature of her husband's interest in Moes: "He did not follow him through all of Venice, but the youth did fascinate him, and he thought about him often" (Tobin 214). Katia's existence, of course, also distinguishes the life of the factual Mann from the fictional Aschenbach, who, we read, is a widower (Mann 12). In addition, Mann, at the time of his writing *Death in Venice*, was thirty-six, while Aschenbach is past fifty. These connections (and dissimilarities) do not give us license to assume that we can read the author's mind, however. Despite the striking relationship between this author and his character, we must look to the text itself for evidence of the nature of Aschenbach's fate.

From the first, the atmosphere in *Death in Venice* is somnambular, if not actually morbid. Aschenbach's walk around Munich is virtually solitary. He follows "[i]ncreasingly quiet paths" until he is alone at a cemetery: "[N]othing stirred behind the fences of the stonemasons' shops, where the crosses, headstones, and monuments for sale formed a second, untenanted graveyard" (3). Here, he passes the time waiting for his tram reading scriptural passages on the mortuary facade "such as, 'They are entering the house of God,' or, 'May the eternal light shine upon them'" (4).

It is quite easy to overlook this last seemingly insignificant fact when we then encounter the first of the novella's "traveler(s) from afar" (4). The striking, "not altogether ordinary" appearance will become familiar before long: the red hair, the colorless eyes, the threatening teeth. There is little doubt that this figure is associated with death, and with his accompanying "apocalyptic beasts" and his oft-mentioned "Adam's apple," he is practically the devil himself here. And perhaps as the result of "some physical or spiritual influence" (4) on his part, Aschenbach is drawn into a mysterious vision of a primeval jungle replete with "lurking tiger" (5).

The opening scenario described above would not be out of place were it found in a work by H.P. Lovecraft. Aschenbach, though, is undisturbed: "Then the vision faded, and with a shake of his head [he] resumed his promenade along the fences bordering the headstone-makers' yard" (5). His seeming nonchalance is revealed to be the result of an on-going situation which we as readers have encountered *in media res*. Gustav von Aschenbach is suffering difficulties with his work, and his work, quite literally, is his life. Mann reveals a great deal before the close of the first chapter:

> He had to admit it to himself: it was the urge to escape that was behind this yearning for the far away and the new, this desire for release, freedom, and forgetfulness. It was the urge to get away from his work, from the daily scene of an inflexible, cold, and passionate service. Of course he loved this service and almost loved the enervating struggle, renewed each day, between his stubborn, proud, so-often-tested will and his growing lassitude, about which no one could be allowed to know and which the product of his toil could not be permitted to reveal in any way... (6)

Mann meticulously weaves together the strands of his plot here. Aschenbach exists largely through (as well as *for*) his work. Although we have not yet observed the full extent of this reality, it is clear that this is no mere "overachiever." In fact, he "consider[s] perfectionism the basis and most intimate essence of his talent" (6). His as yet undefined conflict is internal and it is secret and it seems to go much deeper than mere "writer's block." And his desire is not for a remedy, but for "release, freedom, and forgetfulness."

Only now, after learning so much about the present mindset and situation of Aschenbach, are we formally introduced to the man. We learn that "his entire being was bent on fame" (7) from an early age. His life had been quite as it is presently for some time; the "grandeur" of his work is created "layer by layer, out of small daily doses of work and countless individual flashes of inspiration" (9). There are hints toward Aschenbach's fatalism: "Early on an observant critic had described the new type of hero that this writer preferred, a figure returning over and over again in manifold variation: it was based on the concept of 'an intellectual and youthful manliness which grits its teeth in proud modesty and calmly endures the swords and spears as they pass through its body'" (9). And it continues: "For meeting one's fate with dignity, grace

under pressure of pain, is not simply a matter of sufferance; it is an active achievement, a positive triumph" (9).

Thus the pieces are in place for Aschenbach's journey. It is immediately clear that the dreamlike atmosphere established in the first chapter still holds. After a brief sojourn on "an Adriatic island," Aschenbach realizes that Venice is where "he had wanted to go all along" (13). In short order, he has been escorted by a "hunchbacked" sailor to an "old time ringmaster" of a ticket salesman and secured passage to the city. After encountering the "old fop," the second incarnation of the "traveler" to visit Aschenbach, he notices for himself: "It seemed to him that things were starting to take a turn away from the ordinary, as if a dreamy estrangement, a bizarre distortion of the world were setting in..." (15).

Here, finally, Aschenbach encounters what is in effect his true destination: the sea. Finally away from the pier, he relaxes at last. His relaxation, however, sounds a lot like death: "Beneath the overcast dome of the sky the immense disk of the desolate sea stretched into the distance all around. But in empty, undivided space our sense of time fails us, and we lose ourselves in the immeasurable" (15). Shortly thereafter, he finds himself aboard a gondola "painted the particular sort of black ordinarily reserved for coffins" (17) on which he laments, "The trip will be short... if only it could last forever!" (18) By the time this ominous "ferryman" informs Aschenbach, "You will pay" (19), the reasonably alert reader has guessed that cash is not the suggested currency. Thus we see that although Gustav Aschenbach clearly did not travel to Venice seeking Tadzio, upon whom he has not to this point laid eyes, he may have traveled there seeking death. We may consider this to be a "subconscious" attraction for Aschenbach, as he does not seem aware of such a goal, but the same cannot be said for his creator; Thomas Mann

did not compose *Death in Venice* haphazardly. He was aware of every word, every phrase, for his writing technique was no doubt quite similar to the one described by Aschenbach. Nothing was left to chance.

What are we to make of this "death wish"? There is an element of *release*, as already noted, an apparent desire to put aside once and for all the "tortures and vicissitudes" (8) of his work. This conflict is already well-along when the story begins. The trip to Venice is itself intended as a sort of relief from the increasingly overwhelming strain required to maintain the level of work to which Aschenbach's readers have become accustomed. There is something else here, though, something secret and unspeakable. Like Mann himself, Aschenbach seems to be struggling to come to grips with his sexuality (Tobin 207). He is, the text makes clear, a "lonely, quiet person" (20), suffering a loneliness which fosters not only "that which is original, daringly bewilderingly beautiful poetic," but also "that which is perverse, incongruous, absurd, forbidden" (21). In short, Gustav von Aschenbach is a powder keg full of issues and Tadzio, it is clear, is a spark.

Tadzio's "truly godlike beauty" (25) overwhelms Aschenbach's aesthetic sensibility. Here is the personification of the "perfection" for which Aschenbach has suffered. The "discipline" exhibited by the Polish boy's family attracts his attention. Immediately, Tadzio's influence is apparent. Considering the "transcendent matters" of artistic form and creation, he concludes (shortly after having encountered the boy for the first time) that "his thoughts and discoveries resembled those inspirations that come in dreams: they seem wonderful at the time, but in the sober light of day they show up as utterly shallow and useless" (23). Although Aschenbach is clearly unaware of the full impact his encounter with this boy is to have, already he has found

that his own artistic efforts suffer in comparison with this embodiment of artistic perfection. That he can so quickly come to such a startling conclusion about his own work is telling in a way that he himself cannot (as yet) comprehend.

Tadzio unifies Aschenbach's conflicting desires: he is the perfection of artistic beauty, heretofore sought through work, and the release from discipline, dignity, and decorum, the promise of unrestrained pleasure and passion. And there is still more to Aschenbach's attraction to Tadzio: when encountering the Russian family, the plot's embodiment of a simple, balanced, natural life, Tadzio's reaction is shocking:

> His brow darkened, his lips began to curl, and from one side of his mouth emerged a bitter grimace that gouged a furrow in his cheek. He frowned so deeply that his eyes seemed pressed inward and sunken, seemed to speak dark and evil volumes of hatred from their depths. He looked down at the ground, cast one more threatening glance backward, and then, shrugging his shoulders as if to discard something and get away from it, he left his enemies behind (Mann 26).

Perhaps even more shocking is Aschenbach's reaction to this unpleasant display: he "felt cheered and shaken at the same time---that is, happiness overwhelmed him" (26). Our surprise is lessened, though, when we consider his previous placid responses to the disturbing "travelers" with whom he has previously dealt and his other grim preoccupations. This dark episode serves only to increase Aschenbach's fixation on the boy, and ultimately with his own death, two obsessions that will increasingly be seen to be related.

Tadzio himself is associated with death in short order. Like those of his narrative foretellers, his teeth are "not a very pleasant sight. They were rather jagged and pale and had no luster of health but rather a peculiar brittle transparency such as

one sometimes sees in anemics" (29). "He will probably not live long," Aschenbach thinks. This is certainly not the pleasant imagery usually associated with love, which Aschenbach is soon to proclaim. Rather, it is, yet again, the call of death. From the start, Aschenbach's relationship with the idealized image of Tadzio, created "layer by layer," is not simply unhealthy or taboo, but is in fact morbid and death-obsessed. And this is true *before* the cholera epidemic has been mentioned.

Again, the sea's "enormity," its "uniform mistiness of empty space" (26), calls to Aschenbach. It calls him to relax once and for all. Aschenbach embraces this call willingly, following the sailor-suited boy all the way to the water's edge. It is simply a matter of the pieces falling into place one by one as the remainder of the novella depicts Aschenbach's descent. He will, we recall, eventually become himself one of the demonic-appearing "travelers" himself (58-59). The tiger of his "wanderlust" vision will travel halfway around the world to meet him in the form of the plague of cholera besetting Venice. And he will die attempting to follow Tadzio into that "immensity full of promise" (63) that is the sea.

And so we return to the question of this death. Aschenbach succumbs at last to his urge for release from the "tortures" of his work by embracing everything that he has fought off all of his life. He shrugs off the discipline that has allowed him to create the art that brought the fame that was his real goal. And what is fame if not the love of others, strangers, in fact? He finally is left to realize that both courses of action, the disciplined and dignified pose which he has spent his entire life perfecting,

as well as the abandonment of such, the freedom of complete and utter release, encapsulated in his dream of pagan sacrifice (56-57), end in death.

Aschenbach, in the end, does not act on his feelings for Tadzio in any real, physical way. Although Mann hints at Aschenbach's physical desire for the youth, nothing takes place for which Aschenbach would deserve to be punished. His greatest sin may be in acquiescing to the official silence about the cholera epidemic: "He considered doing the decent thing, the thing that would cleanse him" (55). But of course he does not. Rather, he recalls "a white building decorated with inscriptions that gleamed in the evening light, inscriptions in whose radiant mysticism his mind's eye had become lost" (55). This building, of course, is the mortuary chapel where the decision to go on his journey was inspired. The inscriptions Aschenbach ponders ("They are entering the house of God," "May the eternal light shine upon them") reflect his understanding of his situation: he accepts that death will in reality overcome us all. In not alerting the boy's family or himself fleeing, Aschenbach may not be "cleansed" as many would not doubt find satisfying. But neither is he to be condemned: what exactly would be "decent" about using his inside information to alert his beloved to the danger while allowing every other tourist in Venice to be left in the dark? Perhaps his decision to remain silent, like so much in the novella, is more ambiguous than it at first seems.

Ultimately, then, Aschenbach's death was not so simply the tragedy of a man consumed by his own iniquitous desire that it might seem to be. Aschenbach, finally, is released, still passionately pursuing his beloved, although, as is fitting given the

circumstances, still chaste as well. Mann manages to portray the depth and sincerity of Aschenbach's longing for the divine beauty that Tadzio represents. But as well, he also unflinchingly gives us the pathological behavior that Aschenbach's repressed desires cause to become manifest. The suggestion is that it is not the nature of Aschenbach's desire, *but its repression*, that is to be seen as his downfall. Finally, when he has given in whole-heartedly to this long-hidden "fiery" (7) impulse, it is too late for anything but complete abandon and the ultimate release of death. By comparison, the Russian family "kiss... each other on the cheeks... car[ing] not a whit for anyone who might witness their scene of shared humanity" (26). This must be seen as Mann's vision of the healthy, life-affirming openness and freedom that Aschenbach was unable to achieve.

Mann, of course, knew "Aschenbach" well. He (Mann) struggled with issues of a sexual nature throughout his life. His time and place demanded behavior such as Aschenbach's be condemned, and so it was: Aschenbach dies alone and mourned only by strangers. But we also can see that he was given, by Mann, what he had always wanted: Aschenbach is free at last.

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A

Intro to Research in Literature Final Paper

Repression and Destruction in Gustav von Aschenbach

Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* is essentially an extremely close study of the character of Gustav von Aschenbach; Mann puts the reader in such close proximity to Aschenbach's every thought and action that his gradual psychological decay, not any action in the world outside of Aschenbach's mind, becomes the focus of the novella. Careful characterization from the very first pages of the novella establishes that Aschenbach is a highly repressed man; he lives a rigorously disciplined life that even he admits is contrary to his inner nature. He is also highly abstract and philosophical; he uses this constant abstraction and philosophical justification for his actions and behaviors to distance himself from his real and repressed sensual urges. Aschenbach's vacation in Venice precipitates a loosening of the strangling hold he previously kept on these desires, and he progresses quickly to succumbing completely to these repressed, passionate urges. Paradoxically, he maintains distance from reality and his actions through continued philosophical abstraction; he retreats further into his mind where his completely inappropriate behavior is transformed into a matter of art and poetry.

Discussion of repressed desires and urges inevitably evokes the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Freud's "concept of repression that will inevitably avenge itself" (Symington 131) appears very clearly in Aschenbach; he lived a life of rigorous discipline, repressing all his subconscious desires, and eventually this repression caused complete psychological dissolution. It is unclear exactly how much the ideas of Freud influenced Mann, but it is almost certain that he was exposed to them; "it was inevitable that he would in some measure be affected by them, or would

feel their effect, or at least have an opinion about them" (130). Likely exposure aside however, "there is almost nothing in the depiction of Aschenbach's psychology that we could not also trace to the influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche" (130) making it unlikely that this novella is simply an artistic expression of Freud's ideas. Therefore, my analysis will not be entirely Freudian or psychoanalytical, but my idea that Aschenbach's repression of desire led to his destruction is given credence by the more scientific, psychological views of Freud.

After seeing a strangely sinister man standing on a mortuary portico in the Englischer Garten, Aschenbach hallucinates "a landscape, a tropical quagmire beneath a steamy sky...a kind of primordial wilderness" and sees "the eyes of a crouching tiger gleam out of the knotty canes of a bamboo thicket" (Mann 6). This passage represents a complete assertion of Aschenbach's imagination upon the narrative, which happens more frequently toward the end of the novella. This vision is "primordial", primitive and wild, and is an entirely sensual outburst; it is an outpouring of "his imagination, as yet unstilled from its morning labors" (6). This unsettling[1] hallucination of "rank, lecherous places...swollen plant life...stagnant pools...strange birds...fear and puzzlement" (Church 649) is a pure product of Aschenbach's mind, suggesting a dark undercurrent that is normally channeled into his "morning labors" (Mann 6) of writing. McNamara posits that this tiger might "represent Aschenbach's long-repressed animal nature" (McNamara 234), a position supported by the conflict of impulse and reason that takes place surrounding his sudden desire for travel and exoticism.

The man between the "apocalyptic beasts" (Mann 3) and the tiger in the fearful jungle function as both symbols and foreshadowing for the reader but for Aschenbach they are subconscious triggers for his urge to travel. This "wanderlust" (5) is one of the urges he has

1 As Mr. Potter pointed out, who dreams of fearful tigers when they imagine a vacation?

always attempted to suppress. The narrator explains that Aschenbach had previously viewed "tourism as nothing but a hygienic precaution to be taken willy-nilly from time to time" (7), but this sounds false when coupled with Aschenbach's fantastic hallucination of a florid jungle and the admission of his "yearning for freedom, release, oblivion—an urge to flee his work, the humdrum routine of a rigid, cold, passionate duty" (8) that comes a paragraph later. Aschenbach has perhaps always had a desire to travel and experience "freedom, release, oblivion" but he denied himself this (likely among other pleasures) in the name of his "duty" to write. Most startling is not his simple denial of indulgence in this desire but his denial that the desire even exists by claiming to be "quite content with the view of the earth's surface that anyone can gain without stirring far from home" (7). Aschenbach seems to be only half-aware of his submerged desires and lies to himself about their existence through abstract justification.

Despite many reservations and after fairly extensive thought, Aschenbach decides to submit to this sudden urge for travel and take a vacation. His impulse is "restrained and redressed by reason and the self-discipline he had practiced from an early age" (Mann 8). This restraint and discipline over his subconscious, perhaps primitive desires is the defining feature of Aschenbach's life and character early in and before the time of the novella. Though perhaps iron-fistedly rigorous, Aschenbach is certainly a reasonable and deliberate man at this early point; he is not subject to giving in to whim or impulse easily and maintains his disciplined manner even when faced with such powerful outbursts of imagination and desire; though Aschenbach was "eager to be on his way" he stays in Munich to take care of "several matters of a mundane and literary nature" (25).

More explicit characterization of Aschenbach comes in Chapter Two. Mann quickly establishes that Aschenbach's life is highly constructed in a way that is frequently contrary to his

nature. The narrator relates that "a strain of more impetuous, sensual blood" (Mann 12) made its way into Aschenbach's family heritage, suggesting that his rigorously disciplined life is an imposition he has created and not a natural outgrowth of his character. This is confirmed later when the narrator relates that Aschenbach "was merely called to constant industry, not born to it" (13). His constant work and highly structured life are not natural to his character; he must necessarily impose his will over the threatening formlessness of his sensual impulses. His "primary aim has been discipline, a self-mastery which conceals the rank decay which has been glimpsed in Part One" (Church 649) in his dark imagination. T.E. Apter argues that Aschenbach's "discipline is a necessity, for it is a means of gathering up his meagre capacities and, at the same time, a way of making sure he uses up all his energy, so he has none left to corrupt him" (Apter 360). The reader has already seen Aschenbach's mind produce a frightful image, that of the tiger in the jungle, when left unchanneled and unrestrained. As soon as Aschenbach ceases channeling his energy into writing entirely, during his stay in Venice, his subconscious desires begin to take over, leading to his obsession and infatuation with Tadzio.

Aschenbach's early sense of propriety and dignity as well as his critical analysis of the world and himself is perhaps best exemplified by his reaction to the "spruced-up fossil" (Mann 33) who shares his boat to Venice. This man's inappropriate, gaudy and even vulgar youthfulness despite definite signs of age is foreshadowing to the transformations that Aschenbach will undergo. More importantly though, the reader sees pre-Venetian Aschenbach's reaction to this type of person—the person he will himself eventually become. Aschenbach "shudder[s]" at the sight of this man and asserts "that he had no right to be wearing their foppish, gaudy clothes, no right to be carrying on as if he were one of them" (29). Later, when the man is even more pathetic in drunkenness and disarray Aschenbach watches him "with a frown, and once more a

feeling of numbness came over him, as if the world were moving ever so slightly yet intractably toward a strange and grotesque warping" (33). It is "as though the real world were being seen through the sick eyes of Gustav von Aschenbach" (Hollingdale 353). This warping is a portent of the complete transformation into this parody of a man that will soon take place.

That Aschenbach's transformation into the very thing that caused him such repulsion is not met with the same critical eye he employed earlier is the true indicator of Aschenbach's descent into surreality and detachment from his former self. Near the end of the novella and his death, Aschenbach undergoes a physical transformation at the hands of the hotel barber that parallels the transformation of his entire personage. He becomes clownish, vulgar, and entirely artificial: he saw "his eyebrows arch more distinctly and evenly...saw his lips...swell raspberry-red...and the wrinkles under his eyes vanish beneath face cream and the glow of youth—he saw, his heart pounding, a young man in his prime" (Mann 132). He "becomes like the pathetic dandy on the boat to Venice, an older man desperately trying to recapture his lost youth" (Swales 361). More significant even than the fact of this transformation is that Aschenbach sees nothing vulgar or nauseating in it, indicating a complete detachment with his former self.

Aschenbach's increasing intoxication and disharmony with reality is conveyed to the reader by the narrator's commentary on his actions and the excursions into Aschenbach's thoughts. While listening to the street singers in his hotel Aschenbach takes in the "vulgar tootle and soulful melodies with avidity" (Mann 110). This avid enjoyment of something "vulgar" seems unfitting with the proudly intellectual and artistic Aschenbach of earlier passages; the narrator explicitly comments that "passion dulls one's sense of discrimination and yields in all seriousness to charms that sobriety would treat as a joke or reject with indignation" (110). Aschenbach has succumbed to the passionate, sensual impulses he avoided throughout his early

life and has lost nearly all of his former personality traits as a result. Along with the boundary-crossing implicit in Aschenbach's increasingly inappropriate obsession with Tadzio comes a crossing of his intellectual and artistic boundaries as well; he has entirely lost his powers of discrimination and judgment.

An important motif throughout the work is that of the "abyss"; though it is impossible to define exactly what the abyss represents, it clearly has connections to the repressed elements of Aschenbach's character. The first mention of it in Chapter Two notes that Aschenbach's later literary works renounced "all sympathy with the abyss" (Mann 20), suggesting a renunciation of an essential part of Aschenbach's own character, for later it becomes clear that the sea, which is connected to and becomes symbolic of the more abstract "abyss" or "void", holds special significance for Aschenbach: "He loved the sea and for deep-seated reasons...a propensity—proscribed and diametrically opposed to his mission in life and for that very reason seductive—a propensity for the unarticulated, the immoderate, the eternal, for nothingness" (55). Aschenbach is aware that he loves the sea and is drawn to the eternal idleness and formlessness it represents but he sees it as "opposed to his mission in life" and therefore dangerous. He allows himself to sit and muse upon the sea only during this prescribed period of rest and repose and he masks his perhaps innate and primitive attraction to the sea with abstract, philosophical discussion of its merits; he (via the narrator) muses, "To repose in perfection is the desire of all those who strive for excellence, and is not nothingness a form of perfection?" (55). It is hardly relevant what this statement even means, its significance lies in its function—obscuring and abstracting Aschenbach's desires and pleasures.

As Aschenbach dreams "his way deep into the void", his view is interrupted by Tadzio walking by. Aschenbach's diametrically opposed feelings for the sea are shifted onto Tadzio.

Tadzio represents an object of dangerous and forbidden desire for Aschenbach, just like the sea or the "abyss." Though I disagree with his reduction of the sea to a single meaning, Apter notes this connection: "The sea, in its eternal, unorganised simplicity and vastness, is a symbol of the imagination. When Aschenbach first catches sight of Tadzio, the boy is like a figure rising up from the sea, and it is to the sea that Tadzio points while, dying, Aschenbach observes him for the last time" (Apter 36). These two highly significant scenes (the beginning and the end of Aschenbach's obsession with Tadzio) link the boy and the sea symbolically. Right after this first intersection however, Aschenbach begins to mask his attraction to Tadzio in philosophical abstraction; he notes that Tadzio is a "feast for the eyes" and "already remarkable for his beauty" (Mann 37), which indicates Aschenbach's initial physical attraction to him. Rejecting this physical, wholly sensual attraction however, Aschenbach quickly transforms Tadzio into "something worthy of deeper consideration" (57). Just as Aschenbach justifies sitting idly by the sea as a contemplation of the infinite, he justifies ogling a young boy as a contemplation of art and beauty.

The utter dissolution of self Aschenbach experiences by the end of *Death in Venice* is the inevitable result of his psychological repression of subconscious, perhaps "animal" (McNamara 234) desires. This repression is outlined and explained at the very beginning of the novella and was clearly present in his character well before his fateful trip to Venice. During this trip he ceases channeling his energies and applying the strict, rigorous discipline so central to his life prior to it and he becomes overwhelmed by sensual passion. "His moral rigidity, a weapon of his intellectual creativity, left him vulnerable and open to invasion from the world of the senses" (McNamara 234). He physically acts out to some extent his repressed desires by becoming increasingly idle, obsessively following Tadzio (the primary object of his desires) and eventually

physically transforming into a grotesque parody of his former self, but mentally he keeps his distance from this reality by abstractly and philosophically justifying it. As soon as Aschenbach allowed himself some sensual freedom, some enjoyment of the pleasures he viewed as "opposed to his mission in life" (Mann 55) he was overtaken by them. His disciplined life was blown off course by passionate obsession with the boy Tadzio and his powers of reasoning were so diminished that he remained in a location so clearly unsuitable to his health that it resulted ultimately in his death. His physical death is the end result of the death of his former reasonable and disciplined self, symbolically emphasized by his final vision of Tadzio and the sea, both representative of the formless "abyss" Aschenbach desperately avoided throughout his entire life but ended up ultimately succumbing to.

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