

Venice: Objective Correlative of Aschenbach's Repressed Self in Thomas Mann's Death in Venice

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ABSTRACT

Published in 1913, Death in Venice marks the end of the earliest phase of Mann's career and the beginning of a transitional phase in which the author wrote only non-fiction works for several years. Death in Venice is considered among the finest novellas in world literature. The work skillfully combines the psychological realism and mythological symbolism to create a multi-dimensional story that explores the moral transformation undergone by the artist in quest of perfect beauty. This classic situation is depicted in the decline and ultimate collapse of Mann's artist-hero Gustav von Aschenbach, a renowned German author who, after years of living a morally and artistically ascetic life, surrenders to the sensual side of his nature during a sojourn in Venice. There the sultry Venetian setting incites Aschenbach's homoerotic passion for Tadzio, a beautiful god-like youth. As Aschenbach succumbs to long-repressed spiritual and physical desires, he loses control of his will, and his resulting degradation leads to his death.

Aschenbach's craving for release is first expressed in a vision of the East, the tropical marshland, the jungle. Unwilling however to undertake so long and difficult a journey, he happily recognizes the natural goal he should choose. When one wanted to arrive over night at the incomparable, the fabulous, the like nothing else in the world, where was it one went? Venice is the outpost of the East, half Byzantium, half Bruges, flower of the Italian Renaissance and yet in contact with Asia; it is a city of mystical longing and romantic expansiveness – the natural complement to Florence, which is purely rational and western. A strange combination of sea and land, built on tepid, miasmatic swamps, it is another symbol of the conflicting passions in Aschenbach's own soul. Therefore, this paper attempts to project, in Mann's

novella, Venice, being the "objective correlative" of Aschenbach's repressed, becomes a place which gives Aschenbach glimpses of extreme beauty that the artist's mind was craving for, and exacts a heavy price for that glimpse.

Keyword: Venice, Repressed, Objective correlative, Death in Venice, Aschenbach, Tadzio.

LITERATURE

The theory of objective correlative as it relates to literature was largely developed through the writings of the poet and the literary critic T.S. Eliot who is associated with the literary group called the New Critics. Helping define the Objective Correlative, Eliot's essay "Hamlet and His Problems"¹ republished in his book The Sacred Woods: Essays on Poetry and Criticism discusses his view of Shakespeare's incomplete development of Hamlet's emotion in the play Hamlet². Therefore, the Objective Correlative's purpose is to express the character's emotion by showing rather than describing feelings as discussed earlier by Plato and referred to by Peter Barry in his book Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory. According to formalist critics this action of creating an emotion through external factors and evidence linked together and thus forming an objective correlative should produce an author's detachment from the depicted character and unite the emotion of the literary work. In Thomas Mann's Death in Venice³, Venice played the role of the mental landscape of Aschenbach's another self that has so long been repressed by the artist. Venice is a place which has on one hand architectural splendour, yet it is also the site of corruption and degradation. It is this combination of the beautiful and the squalid which

Mann can use easily to portray his tale of love and death, beauty and sickness.

In 1892, the poet, translator and critic, John Addington Simonds⁸ went to Venice and it was there that he was finally able to express his homosexuality away from the strictures of England and his marriage. The late German poet August Graph Von who was also homosexual, thought that Venice held for him a "special melancholia" – this special melancholia can be seen in Mann's *Death in Venice*. By the time Mann sets his novella in Venice, it already had a secure place in the literary imagination as a place of beauty, sadness, sensuality and exoticism. In Mann's novella, Venice, being the "objective correlative" of Aschenbach's repressed, becomes a place which gives Aschenbach glimpses of extreme beauty that the artist's mind was craving for, and exacts a heavy price for that glimpse.

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The city of Venice played a significant role German literature. The opening lines of one of Platen's Venetian poems bring into relation Venice, beauty and Death. The poem in a way is strangely prophetic, is actually entitled "Tristan" and if we are to understand the mood and associations Mann seeks to convey, it is in fact above all to Wagner that we must turn, and through Wagner to Nietzsche. It was in Venice that Wagner wrote *Tristan and Isolde*⁴ and it was here that he died – the "hallowed hour" as Nietzsche called it.

The setting which worked as the objective correlative too Aschenbach's repressed has a significant role to play within the fabric of the novella. The strange Venetian amalgam of the classic, the oriental and the western, associating the monuments of a glorious histories with the sordid realities of social decay, has particularly attracted writers of the last fifty years – James for example, and Proust and Eliot. Viewed in certain lights, Venice is a kind of microcosm of European civilization, a meeting place where the bustle of bourgeois "tourism" has not quite succeeded in obliterating the traces of a past which only makes the present seem more appalling. No setting could underscore more aptly the eschatological feelings which Mann attempts to convey; the final agonies of the European mind take place fittingly in the hot semi-barbaric atmosphere.

There is one particular connecting link between Nietzsche in Venice and the action of Mann's story that may have been in Mann's mind when he worked out his theme. Mann, influenced by Nietzsche, has aptly put Venice as the background of his novella which worked as the "objective correlative" that was extremely essential to enhance Aschenbach's journey from the Apollonian world to Dionysian influence. Venice does not remain a mere setting in the novella but seems to become a character in its own right – a character that plays the part of both Apollonian messenger of warning and Dionysian messenger of sensuality, disorder and liberation. These two roles ultimately combine in the way it brings death to Aschenbach.

Death in Venice owes its patina of "classicality" not only to what it contains, but also to what have been left out; specially to Mann's certain elimination of the traditional coordinates of time and place. It is only by penciling these in "posthumously," as it were, that one fully appreciates the author's achievement in raising the story above them and in dismantling the scaffold of the Here and Now. If the determination of these coordinates is a positivistic undertaking, so be it. Our task is not to provide new interpretative insights into the story, but to outline the factual basis on which it rests.

In the novella Death in Venice, Mann assigned to the city of Lagoons – which was very dear to his heart and which, on his visits, had again and again deeply impressed him anew – a role important actually crucial, to the development of the action. In the drama *Fiorenza*⁵ of 1905, the Italian landscape is still of very minor importance: in the second act the writer leads us into the garden of the Villa Medici, where "the open Campagna with cypresses, stone-pines and olive trees" extended into the distance. The Florence of the Renaissance is only a backdrop in front of which the problematic of the characters are brought into relief. In the novella Death in Venice, on the other hand the city of Venice and the landscape surrounding it – that is, in this case, the sea – are of determining significance; indeed, actually a part of the action itself.

Romantic Venice, the Venice of Platen, Wagner and Nietzsche, reflects an older cultural epoch and is yet at the same time a city of the modern. And Thomas Mann, the stylistic artist, succeeds, through the help of the description of the real world, in fashioning a rich symbolism.

Before Aschenbach, the hero of the novella decides upon his trip to Italy, he has in Munich the vision of a wild exotic landscape: "a tropical swampland under a thick, steamy sky, humid, rank and monstrous, a kind of primeval jungle wilderness of islands, morasses and slime-bearing channels". He decides to prepare for the trip, for a puzzling yearning has seized him, a longing for such a landscape which will enable him, after all his self-imposed discipline and narrow existence, to let all resistant fall away and to find his true self.

For Aschenbach there is no doubt that the South will bring him the fulfilment of his wish for self-release. Just as the heroes of Thomas Mann's early novellas – Paolo Hofmann⁶, the Dilettante and Tonio Kroger⁷ – Aschenbach also travels to Italy, since by means of its colourful, spirited animation he promises himself deliverance from his previous isolation and self-discipline. Thus, he comes to Venice, and on seeing this city recollections come alive in him of the poet Platen, that "melancholy and enthusiastic" poet, "for whom once upon a time the domes and bell-towers of his dreams had risen from these waters"

With every fibre Aschenbach drinks in the fabulous beauty of Venice, as he glides slowly on the ship through the canal of San Marco, and is delighted that by the open sea he reaches this city, whose character is so strongly defined by the water surrounding and penetrating it:

"Then he saw it again the most remarkable landing place, that dazzling composition of fantastic structures which the republic set facing the awestruck gaze of approaching seafarers: the graceful magnificence of the place and the Bridge of Sighs, the columns with lion and saint by the shore, the splendid

projecting flank of the fairy-tale temple, the vista of archway and clock of the giants, and looking at it he reflected that arriving in Venice by land at the railway station is the same as entering a place through a back door, and that in no other way except as he was now, except across the high seas, should one arrive at the most improbable of cities." (Death in Venice)

For Mann Venice has the same two-fold character it had for Nietzsche. The music of Venice mingles with the sea that encroaches on the town. It is a symbol of the longing, present here as in the music of Tristan, for the eternal, the immeasurable, for nothingness. Venice is also a city built out of the ocean, the achievement of Man's courage, and a monument to the beauty he can create. The glorious facade and the incredible loveliness that meet the stranger as he approaches from the sea are the noblest creation of Man's will. But again, there are inner corruption decay and disease and the former queen of the seas has fallen victim to a petty and predatory commercialism. Is this not too symbolic of Aschenbach's fate – the external pretence, the front that can suggest greatness and achieve beauty for a short time only?

Yet the impression of beauty and incredibility becomes supplemented by a feeling of dread as Gustav von Aschenbach enters the gondola which is to bring him out to the Lido. Suddenly he becomes distinctly conscious of how much in form and colour it (the gondola) resembles a coffin: "Who might not have to subdue a fleeting terror, a secret aversion and uneasiness, when for the first time or after a long absence the moment came to step into a Venetian gondola? That peculiar craft, handed down, completely unchanged from balladesque times and so singularly black, as otherwise only coffins are among all things, - it calls to mind silent and criminal adventures in the plashing night, still more it calls to mind death itself, the bier and mournful funeral and last, silent voyage." (Death in Venice)

The sweet exotic fullness of life that seduces the visitor from the north into erotic adventures now becomes intimately fused with the motif of extreme danger, indeed, of inescapable destruction. But simultaneously, in this work, Italy for the first time for Thomas Mann, also signifies the land of antiquity. He described the figure of the boy Tadzio with all the attributes of a noble Greek sculpture, of the kind he had studied closely in the museums on his first visit to Italy. "The head of Eros, out of the yellowish mellowness of Parian marble, with fine and serious brows, temples and ears duskily and softly hidden by the springing ringlets of his hair."

The central locale of the novella, Venice, "the sunken queen" is caught by Mann's bifocal vision as the "flattering and dubious beauty... half fairy-tale, half tourist trap" in its sordid reality and mythical splendour. We are not spread the oppressive sultriness and fetid stench of its alleyways, nor the garbage floating on its canals with their evil exhalations; yet above these very waters there rises the "graceful splendour" of its places, bridges, churches of its fairy-tale temple, rendered in a rhythmical prose of exquisite limpidity and grace.

After establishing Aschenbach's severe self-mastery at the beginning, the rest of *Death in Venice* records the gradual undermining of his resolve. Thus, almost as soon as he arrives in Venice, Aschenbach begins to experience the pull of an alien force which gradually overcomes his will and destroys his self-mastery; and he quickly abandons himself to his obsession for Tadzio. When the mysterious gondolier rows him to the Lido against his wishes, the normally self-possessed Aschenbach finds it impossible to resist. Likewise, when he discovers that his trunk has been misdirected, he does not experience annoyance so much as a "reckless joy" that seems to be bound up with the oblivion of personal responsibility and the happiness of self-dispossession. Later we are told that Venice alone "had power to beguile him, to relax his resolution, to make him glad." (Death in Venice). Indeed, the city itself seems to lure Aschenbach into self-abandon, as he

begins to live only for Tadzio, following the family all over Venice, and even resting his head, one evening on the boy's bedroom door.

The weather information provided in the text is equally unsatisfactory. A "false midsummer" following on the heels of a damp and cold April is as unbreakable for Munich as "rain and oppressive air" are for the Istrian coast or the sirocco for a Venetian summer. Yet it is here that Mann's determination to depict his Venice, and not the Vernice of 1911 or any other year, is most pronounced. Had he wanted to fix the story as precisely in time as he did in locale, he could most easily have done so by mentioning a circumstance that set 1911 apart from all other years since the beginning of the century: the summer was the hottest within memory. The spreading of the cholera epidemic throughout the city is the "objective correlative" of Mann's inner corruption.

The danger to Aschenbach from the ominous atmosphere of the city, hidden beneath the magnificence and splendour emerges in the ever more strongly emphasized picture of decay and putrefaction. A loathsome sultriness lay in the narrow streets, the air was so heavy that the smells which issued from dwellings, shops, eating-houses, oil fumes, clouds of perfume and many others lay in exhalation without dissipating. Aschenbach begins to feel unwell, until finally he knows that he must leave. The longer he walked the more agonizingly he was seized by the abominable state which the sea air combined with the sirocco can produce, and which is at the same time stimulating and enervating. He has himself conveyed to San Marco by gondola. Yet on the trip the fascination of Venice, which has become ambiguous for him, wraps Aschenbach in its spell: "through the gloomy labyrinth of the canals, beneath delicate marble balconies, past grieving palace facades" (Death in Venice)

REFERENCES

NOTES

- [1] "Hamlet and His Problems" is an essay written by T.S. Eliot in 1919, which offers a critical reading of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*.
- [2] *Hamlet* is a tragedy written by William Shakespeare at an uncertain date between 1599 and 1602.
- [3] *Death in Venice* is a novella written by German writer Thomas Mann, published in the year 1913.
- [4] *Tristan and Isolde* is a music drama, written by German writer Richard Wagner in 1859.
- [5] *Fiorenza* is a play by Thomas Mann.
- [6] *Paolo Hofmann* is a novella by Thomas Mann written in 1896.
- [7] *Tonio Kroger* is a novella by Thomas Mann written early in 1901.
- [8] John Addington Simonds is an English poet and literary critic.

PRIMARY SOURCE

- [1] Mann, Thomas. *Death in Venice*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995. Print.

SECONDARY SOURCE

- [1] *Thomas Mann: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Henry Hatfield, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1964. Print.
- [2] Kahler, Erich. *The Orbit of Thomas Mann*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969. Print.
- [3] *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. James Hardin, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1988. Print.
- [4] Lukacs, Gyorgy Georg Szegedi. *Essays on Thomas Mann*, trans. Stanley Mitchell, London: Merlin Press, 1964. Print.
- [5] *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism Vol 8*, ed. Sharon K. Hall, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1982. Print