

## From Rationalism to Ruin:

### The Tragic Odyssey of Gustav von Aschenbach in 'Death in Venice'

Thomas Mann's "*Death in Venice*" is a profound fable, delivering a poignant moral lesson: suppressing one's desires can lead to distortion and an unhealthy, obsessive attachment. This, in turn, may trigger frantic and perverse attempts to obtain the initial object of desire. Aschenbach's inability to confront and satisfy his sexual urges ultimately becomes his undoing. This moral framework enables me to delve deeper into Aschenbach's actions, shedding light on the underlying animal instincts that drive his inner struggle. As a character, Aschenbach embodies the archetype of the rational individual who endeavors to govern his primal, carnal urges. However, when his intellectual defenses crumble in the face of his raw desires, the battle between restraint and longing escalates into a whirlwind of uncontrollable actions. These actions catch Aschenbach off guard, and he never anticipated falling victim to them, nor did he mistrust his ability to control them. Paradoxically, he regains a semblance of control through his commitment to literary honor and morality.

While many fables rely on singular episodes to impart ethical wisdom, Aschenbach's journey unfolds as a multifaceted narrative. Throughout his story, morality becomes a destructive force that stifles his innate impulse to love. Several didactic episodes in the novella illustrate this theme. These include Aschenbach's decision not to warn Tadzio's family about the deadly sickness in Venice, his meticulous approach to the writing process, and his visit to the barber in pursuit of beauty. To elucidate these points further, I will draw a parallel between Mann's novella and Aesop's fable "*The Wolf in*

*Sheep's Clothing*." This comparison underscores the striking resemblance between "*Death in Venice*" and traditional fables, emphasizing how both forms of storytelling employ allegory and moral lessons to engage and enlighten the reader.

Aesop's timeless fable, "*The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*," unfolds the tale of a cunning wolf who cunningly disguises himself as a sheep to infiltrate a flock, intending to hunt and prey upon the unsuspecting sheep from within. The wolf deftly mingles with the flock, feigning camaraderie and acceptance among the sheep. However, a vigilant shepherd detects the wolf's subterfuge and slyly ensnares it by tightening a rope around its neck and tethering it to a tree. Witnessing this unusual restraint, other shepherds are perplexed and inquire about the rationale behind the seemingly restrained "sheep." The astute shepherd reveals the truth, exposing the wolf by stripping away its deceptive façade. The collective applause from the shepherds serves as a fitting retribution.

In much the same way, the character of Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's "*Death in Venice*" bears striking similarities to the wolf in Aesop's fable. Aschenbach, too, dons a double disguise to assimilate into his surroundings: he assumes the persona of a stoic and accomplished writer to blend in with his literary contemporaries, concealing a latent, insatiable desire beneath his composed exterior. As his attempts to suppress these desires prove futile, Aschenbach is eventually confronted by their overwhelming force. Unaccustomed to allowing them any satisfaction, he becomes engulfed in a downward spiral, ultimately leading to perversity and degradation.

Degradation becomes unmistakable in the narrative as Aschenbach becomes aware of the pervasive sickness enveloping Venice and consciously chooses not to alert Tadzio's

family. While warning them briefly crosses his mind, he realizes he is far from genuinely desiring to take such a decisive step (Mann 64). He acknowledges that such a course of action might restore his moral integrity, yet he finds himself recoiling from the idea as he is ensnared by a consuming infatuation: the desire to possess and pursue Tadzio.

Aschenbach's fixation on the boy's captivating beauty metamorphoses him into a prisoner of his senses, leading him to scorn the very concept of self-control and restraint. This deep-seated attachment erodes his once-prudent intellect and drives him to disregard the safety and well-being of his object of desire. Aschenbach's character undergoes a profound moral deterioration, rendering him practically blind to the ethical considerations he once held dear. His attachment to Tadzio's allure becomes a blinding force that not only derides the power of his formerly rational mind but also compels him to neglect even the basic principles of safeguarding the object of his affection.

In Aesop's fable, the insatiable desire of the wolf to devour the sheep becomes all-consuming, yet it deludes itself into thinking it can execute its plan without consequence. A perceptive reading of the fable reminds us that when we place our esteem solely on outward appearances, we often mistake evil for good (Aesop 23). Similarly, Aschenbach, once a writer with a solid moral compass, has shed his moral facade, believing he can evade the manic pursuit of Tadzio in this most improbable of cities. Aschenbach had placed his trust in his moral principles and intellectual prowess to shield him from the clutches of distorted desires.

However, he soon realizes morality cannot forestall his descent into the abyss of unbridled senses. It becomes evident that individuals who become excessively attached to

their moral righteousness can inadvertently make it their most formidable adversary. Aschenbach's overwhelming attachment to Tadzio stems from years of repressed desires, and the evident loss of his sanity, as seen in his decision to keep Tadzio with him in Venice even at the risk of his demise, is a consequence of his prior unhealthy fixation on morality. This fixation stifled his sensual instincts and ultimately gave rise to this excessive attachment. His attachment to the respect he enjoys within his literary circle is equally potent in its grip on Aschenbach's character.

This strength is notably evident as Aschenbach develops a foreboding fastidiousness in his writing process, using it as a defense mechanism to shield himself from the onslaught of his unwelcome desires. He fully recognizes that human emotions often settle for easy gains and superficial perfection, a truth he has come to grasp (Mann 7). As he reflects upon this meticulous approach, he acknowledges that it had, at one point, harnessed and refined his sensibilities. Had Aschenbach candidly acknowledged and satisfied his sensuous desires, he might not have felt compelled to pursue the unnecessary pursuit of surpassing his literary contemporaries.

However, by denying himself this fundamental human right, Aschenbach has arrived at a distorted view of love—a natural and powerful human emotion that he now perceives as a mere commodity for the less fortunate rather than a genuine experience. His once-prized fastidiousness, tireless labor, and determination to create masterpieces no longer reins in his desires. He has lost the discernment to recognize that what he once deemed morally upright (the repression of his desires) has now transformed into a voracious lust for privilege in his social class. Aschenbach's notions of gain and perfection

offer a lens through which we can analyze his character. His moralistic stance casts a nonchalant shadow over his diminishing ability to discern the absurd excuses he fabricates to rationalize his behavior—an effortless strategy to keep his burgeoning lust at bay. This dichotomy underscores that Aschenbach can only find solace in two extremes: the relentless toil of suppressing his sensuality or the complete surrender. He is, undeniably, a man of extremes. Due to his relentless attempts to suppress genuine emotions, Aschenbach has become an unbalanced extremist, oscillating between present hyper-morality and the looming prospect of unchecked hedonism.

In Aesop's fable, the wolf adeptly disguises itself, effortlessly blending in among the unsuspecting sheep while mocking their innocence. A moral lesson in the wolf's actions reminds us that no consideration should be given to mere appearances or outward demeanor but rather to unvarnished worth and intrinsic virtue (Aesop 22-23). In a parallel manner, Aschenbach has concealed his true nature behind the façade of a moralistic writer, even as simmering carnal urges rage within him. In this vein, Aschenbach's deceptive role within his literary circle elevates him to an undeserved and underappreciated pedestal. He mistakenly believes that the more he toils and represses his sensuous feelings, the better he can thwart the conquest of lust and desire.

However, can repression alone achieve this? Can the artificial denial of natural impulses truly degrade a person? Aschenbach's journey sadly attests to the affirmative at the cost of his humanity. It becomes evident that through relentless repression, Aschenbach has lost touch with an honest self-assessment of his inherent human nature. Uncomfortable with the notion that he is an ordinary human being with desires, he

becomes overwhelmed by his refusal to acknowledge these desires. If he were to heed them and embrace his humanity, he might coexist harmoniously with his desires. However, by suppressing and stunting them, he inadvertently transforms these desires into inner beasts, and they devour him. Indeed, they do.

Thus, although Aschenbach endeavors to cling to a moral persona while deflecting the advances of sensuous desires, his excessive moralizing nature ultimately becomes the catalyst for his suffering and turmoil. Excessive attachment, it seems, strikes in both directions. One is left to ponder how far Aschenbach can descend into the abyss of unfulfilled desires. Indeed, Aschenbach's descent takes him farther than one might initially imagine. Convinced that relentlessly shadowing Tadzio throughout the labyrinthine streets of Venice will offer him the coveted opportunity to fulfill his desires, Aschenbach embarks on a radical course of action. He resolves to rejuvenate his aging body, believing that he must become youthful once more to partake in the lustful pursuits he craves with Tadzio. This marks his most desperate endeavor, a poignant symbol of his futile struggle to attain what he believes he desires and deserves.

This pivotal moment in the narrative also symbolizes the demise of the feeble moralist within Aschenbach. It is a moment when he openly acknowledges that the presence of youthful beauty, which had once captivated him, now fills him with disgust for his own aging body (Mann 67). Despite his unwavering dedication to hard work, which had propelled him to greatness as a writer, and his commitment to stoic repression of his feelings, which had given rise to an insatiable lust, Aschenbach finds himself bereft of rational thought and devoid of any moral discernment. In his obsessive pursuit, he

fixates on his appearance, hoping to ensnare the gaze and affections of Tadzio. He no longer views Tadzio solely as a symbol of aestheticism; instead, he perceives him as a body he must possess, even as he encases his aging body in a desperate bid to allure. In Aesop's fable, the shepherd exposes the disguised wolf by binding him to a tree, for the wolf's incongruous attire is a glaring affront to the shepherd's sensibilities (Aesop 23).

Aschenbach's visit to the barber, a makeup and makeover session, lays bare the dwindling remnants of human dignity in a man whose once-illustrious literary intellect had positioned him as a moralist. Aschenbach's profound distaste for his suiting elderly appearance propels him into a transformative journey, leading him to embrace cosmetic alterations and yielding to the barber's insinuations that he can easily fall in love as soon as he desires (Mann 69). Once Aschenbach resolves to pursue his desires, the barber applauds his newfound courage to surrender to cosmetics, rouge, and dye and steers him towards the very goal he has set for himself: a path of artistic and moral decadence.

Throughout the narrative of "Death in Venice," Aschenbach repeatedly deceives himself, yet with each deception comes a toll he will inevitably pay. Gradually spiraling out of control, Aschenbach, ensnared by a stoic repression of sensuous feelings cloaked in the guise of morality, progressively loses his ability to discern rational thought. This loss, particularly impactful for an intellectual artist like him, propels him toward the precipice of ethical degradation, moralistic decadence, and, ultimately, the fateful demise that destiny has seemingly reserved for him.

"Death in Venice" is an epic fable chronicling the profound failure of a man to reconcile with his inner self. Aschenbach's downfall is rooted in the relentless battle

between intellect and the physical body, a struggle in which his zealous attempts to discipline his corporeal desires ultimately lead to his descent into madness. His rational mind labored tirelessly to suppress what it deemed unacceptable, only to veer off course in a twisted pursuit of satisfying the body's unmet needs.

A noteworthy point for further exploration is the elevation of the fable's moral to a universal plane, serving as a lens to examine Europe's deep-seated attachment to its aristocratic culture. Within this culture, the austere and Bavarian Aschenbach found validation for repressing his emotions, all while representing an entire generation of literary writers. Under the relentless siege waged by his mind and uncontrollable senses, Aschenbach's sense of self lost its "motus animi continuus," that unbroken stream of inner spirit that might have prevented his descent into degradation had he only mustered the courage to embrace love and accept it in return for the person he indeed was.

## Works Cited

Mann, Thomas. *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories*. New York: Vintage International, 1989. Print.

Aesop. *Aesop's Fables: with upwards of one hundred and fifty emblematical devices*. Philadelphia: J. Locken, 1849. Print.