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### Illness as a theme in Thoman Mann's *Death in Venice*

Abstract:

Thomas Mann is arguably one of the most prominent writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Among his works, *Death in Venice* is a novella in which he uses illness as a theme. Gustav von Aschenbach is the protagonist of the novella who dies of cholera in the end. This paper aims to study how Mann uses illness as a theme to philosophically and psychologically examine Aschenbach.

If we ponder upon the question of who all are the greatest figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, Thomas Mann would be a name that would undoubtedly top the list. Thomas Mann was born in 1875 and is famous for both his fiction and critical essays. Mann's works mainly focus on the philosophical examination of the characters presented. One of the major recurring themes in Mann's work is the conflict between art and life which was to be seen right from his first major work *Buddenbrooks* (1901). *Death in Venice* (1912) is the culmination of Mann's work on this theme. Mann has also explored the themes of travel, asceticism, and passion in his later works.

Though the conflict between art and life is the major theme in *Death in Venice* an equally important yet subtle theme it deals with is the theme of illness. Gustav von Aschenbach is the ailing writer in *Death in Venice* who dies of cholera in the end. The theme

of illness in *Death in Venice* was brought under study by Susan Sontag in her seminal work *Illness as Metaphor* which was published in 1978. Sontag primarily dealt with the history of the cultural assumptions about illness in general. However, she was not concerned with how the disease affects the afflicted person but was concerned with the “punitive or sentimental fantasises” (Sontag 3) of the public about the particular disease and its effect upon the patients. Sontag opines of Mann’s *Death in Venice* and *The Magic Mountain* which both treat the subject of illness, “In one fiction, disease (cholera) is the penalty for secret love; in the other, disease (TB) is its expression” (37). She argued that cholera was a disease which occurred as a punishment for the sins committed by the patient and hence the patient’s plight could be used as a lesson or rather a warning to the public. Sontag’s work was monumental in understanding the intricacies of the literary depiction of illness.

Right from the very beginning of *Death of Venice* Gustav von Aschenbach is presented as a man who has double identity. When he turned fifty, the Prince as an honour to his literary services gifted him with the respectable name ‘von Aschenbach’. That late into his life he was willing to accept a change of his name which reflected the possibility of him being open to other changes in life as well. Aschenbach made an unpredictable decision of taking a vacation abroad when he saw a strange man with a “distinctly foreign, exotic air” (Mann 4) during his afternoon walk. The strange man caused in Aschenbach a sudden rush of emotions. He described the feeling as “a fervent youthful craving for faraway places, a feeling so vivid, so new or else so long outgrown and forgotten” (5). It had been a long while since he travelled extensively but the desire to travel had always remained with him buried deep in his consciousness.

Mann uses the language of illness to describe Aschenbach’s feelings about travel. The desire consumes him “like a seizure” (6). Aschenbach’s feeling that he was “no lover of the external world” (7) had previously prevented him from travelling extensively. But now he

craves for “an influx of new blood” (10) and the tempting “foreign atmosphere” (11) excites him. Aschenbach’s desire to travel is in fact a necessity. He decides to take an evening walk that day where he met the strange man because he is “overwrought from the difficult and dangerous labours of the late morning hours, labours demanding the utmost caution, prudence, tenacity, and precision of will” (1). This description of his would make us think that he is involved in some dangerous profession. But Aschenbach was only a writer and even that had taken a toll on him. He is “unable to halt the momentum of the inner mechanism” (1) and must nap daily in order to restore himself. In spite of his apprehensions about him as a writer, Aschenbach is regarded as a respectable writer in Germany. He had completed works of criticism and fiction which earned him the title of “artist...creator...thinker...” (11). But in the recent years his works dealt with less serious topics and he was no longer thought of as a philosopher. His physical strength only permitted him to deal with lesser works. His body’s weakness had an impact upon his mental capacity as well. Mann constantly emphasises that Aschenbach’s career is physically and emotionally demanding.

Aschenbach’s literary characters are reflections of himself. They possess “an elegant self-possession concealing inner dissolution and biological decay from the eyes of the world until the eleventh hour” (17). The ‘biological decay’ of his characters foreshadows the undesirable end that awaited him. Aschenbach is presented as a man exhausted with his career, “much as the nation honored it, it gave him no pleasure” (9) because all his life he strived for success. A sudden withdrawal by a man as meticulous as him looks strange or even wrong at first. But his decision to take a vacation to Venice was also his first step in relinquishing the control over his life.

Venice was chosen by Aschenbach for its “fairy tale like qualities” (26). But even before he arrives in Venice he feels, “as if the world were moving ever so slightly yet intractably towards a strange and grotesque warping” (33). Venice is an intoxicating,

insidious place which infiltrates Aschenbach's body and makes him feel ecstatic, but it is also full of a "cutpurse mercantilism" (64) that breaks the spell and shifts his perception. In Venice, "antiquity and present merge into a oneness, into perfect harmony" (Jonas 37), but the past and present are perhaps the only things that exist harmoniously in Venice. Aschenbach remains uneasy through the early days of his stay in Venice. He soon finds out that his health is deteriorating. A sudden decline of his health is presented as a result of the weather in Venice but it is rather odd that only him was affected by the weather whereas everyone else enjoyed their vacation. It is evident that something is trying to assault Aschenbach. The weather did not improve on the second day either and he decided to leave. It was not the first time that Venice's weather proved out to be too much for Aschenbach, "was this not the same listless fever setting in? The pressure in the temples, the heavy eyelids?" (Mann 50). These minor symptoms indicate how sensitive Aschenbach is to pain and discomfort. Venice is the place where he has suffered "physical defeat" (69) twice, suggesting that the city posed a challenge to which he could not rise. It is the city itself, not the country or the people, that Aschenbach considers dangerous to his health. Aschenbach's body proves out to be an imperfect container for the soul.

Aschenbach refuses to leave the city that is making him sick when he stumbles upon a young boy, Tadzio, who is "purest formal perfection" (45). Though Aschenbach marvelled at Tadzio's perfect physical state he still wonders, "Was he ailing" (46) upon seeing his frail and delicate nature. Aschenbach concludes that Tadzio "will probably not live long" (62). Aschenbach feels "satisfied or consoled" (62) at this realization. This realization makes him feel better about his poor health for he is reassured that perfection is not sustainable in this world. Aschenbach is soon overcome by his feelings for Tadzio and this liberates him to a great extent. In *Thomas Mann and Italy*, Jonas compares Venice's deadly, ominous quality to

Aschenbach's forbidden love of Tadzio: "it is Venice, the beguiling city, which symbolizes the enormous danger in which he finds himself owing to his passion for a fourteen year old youth" (38). When the visitors in Venice are warned of an epidemic Aschenbach is thrilled rather than threatened. This is a radical change in his attitude towards illness one which was probably caused by his affection towards Tadzio. Aschenbach refused to believe in the common conception that an epidemic was the punishment for a community's sin or an individual's sin. He did not believe that his love for Tadzio is the reason for the epidemic in Venice. Aschenbach asks many of the locals their opinions on the epidemic and everyone denies the epidemic mimicking their government to keep their city running as usual.

Mann explains his idea of "Indian cholera" (Mann 119) and describes the spread of cholera as a fearful event that is brought about by man itself though unwittingly. The Venetian authorities chose to suppress information about the epidemic due to financial reasons. Throughout the story, Venice is referred to as sick, "the stricken city" (133), which allow the cholera epidemic to be a judgment of the city rather than the individuals who contract the disease. Perhaps, Mann's choice of cholera was simply due to the prevalence of the disease, but cholera is also useful symbolically because it strikes people quickly and indiscriminately.

After Aschenbach came to know about the epidemic from the British Man he feels that it is his responsibility to warn Tadzio and his family to leave Venice immediately. He believes that this action would this action would "lead him back, restore him to himself" (124) but he is unable to reconcile with the idea of bidding farewell to Tadzio. In the end he decides not to tell the family and "the image of the infested and abandoned city" (125) thrills and excites him. Aschenbach decides to leave his previous life for a carefree life that will most certainly destroy him. The very thought of returning to his old life "was so abhorrent to him that his face twisted into an expression of physical revulsion" (125). Aschenbach

conjures up for himself a situation in which he cannot return to his old life but also finds out that his body is unable to withstand the physical pressures of his new life. Thus he decides to stay in Venice, a place where he does not belong knowing that there is nowhere to go now that he has experienced a fuller life. Aschenbach wilfully falls deep under the spell of both Venice and Tadzio.

As Aschenbach falls ill, he experiences “dizzy spells that were only partially physical” (138). He is sick with love as well as cholera. He also felt a great deal of anxiety. These were the only symptoms before he dies on the beach just as Tadzio’s family leaves Venice. Aschenbach dies a rather peaceful death one without any discomfort or suffering. Death is a blessing to a man like him who had apparently spent the bulk of his life in little or no pleasure.

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