

## Thomas Mann: *A Death in Venice*

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## Quick Replay

- **Apollonian / Dionysian Conflict**
  - **Apollonian: principle of individuation; the basis of all analytic distinctions; pure form. (1845)**
    - Ashenbach's "sober conscientiousness" (1842)
  - **Dionysian: corresponds roughly to Schopenhauer's conception of Will & is directly opposed to the Apollonian. (1847)**
    - All forms of enthusiasm and ecstasy are Dionysian because in these states man surrenders individuality and submerges himself in a greater whole.
    - Dionysian: the red haired stranger (1841); "fiery impulses" (1843)
- **Aschenbach's conflict**
  - Aschenbach "had pandered to the intellect..." (1846).
  - Intellect and reason are flipside of passion and desire (1847, 1849, 1866)

## The Grotesque in Literature (from Wolfgang Kayser)

- Grotesque: characterized by distortions or striking incongruities in appearance, shape, or manner; the fantastic and bizarre.
- Aschenbach on ship to Venice notices older man who clings desperately to younger people and his youth.
  - Two-faced Dionysian-Apollonian: man wears a "mask of pseudo-youthfulness." (1849)
  - It heightens the "sense of decay" when Aschenbach falls into the "exact replica" of this man, a "grotesque vision" of European decay. (1878)
- Entering the "estranged world" (1848).
  - Coffin-like Gondola, like ferry on Styx, carries him across. (1852)
  - Re-enters the estranged world (1864-1865)
- A pregnant moment: Tadzio (1855)
- The world ceases to be reliable, we feel unable to live in this changed world. (1857, 1861)
- Unlike the gothic, the grotesque instills fear of life rather than death. (1859, 1861)

## Plague

- **Asiatic Cholera (Mann 1882)**
  - Naples, Italy 1885-1911
- Mann: "The Freudian theory is one of the most important foundation stones for an edifice to be built by future generations, the dwelling of a freer and wiser humanity."
  - Freud: civilizations are started to provide safety (superego), but they deprive us of sex and violence (id).
- The modern "plague" of security, rationalism & repression constitutes a "variety of ills."
  - Dionysian chaos thrives beneath Apollonian rationalism (1866, 1873)
    - Dionysian and Apollonian forces two-faced: "Image and mirror" (1868-9)
    - Failure of individual will in face of craving, desire (1870-1)
  - Too much civilization might not be worth it. Society should provide safety, but should also meet human desire for passion.
- Plague threatens civilization (civil order). (1875)
  - Disease doesn't distinguish between important and unimportant civil agents.

### René Girard, "The Plague in Literature and Myth."

- Plague is "present in myth and ritual in the entire world."
  - The plague, as a metaphor, is "universally presented as a process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specificities." Permits "social hierarchies" to be "first transgressed, then abolished."
- Ritualized plague in the literature of modernity.
  - "Plague," can be "viewed as a generic label for a variety of ills that affect the community as a whole...."
  - The pollution cycle (Mann 1862)
- Ritualized plague produces an "overwhelming impression of disintegration."
  - "all the death and suffering from the plague is not in vain, ... the ordeal is necessary to purify and rejuvenate society."
- Girard argues that the beginnings of human society are based on religious "transformation of mimetic violence into the collective sacrifice of a scapegoat."
  - Scapegoat provides "collective transfer": no need for everyone to die.

### Our Scapegoat

- Aschenbach's intellectual pursuit and subsequent passion for Tadzio embodies modern social ills (1875, 1876-7).
  - Apollo and Hyacinthus: Aschenbach re-enacts Apollo's own loss of reason (1872)
- Asiatic Cholera increases tempo of moral decay (1877, 1883).
- In many ways Aschenbach becomes perfect "scapegoat" for the ills of European repression and rationalism.
  - He embodies 2-faced morality: he dreams about the "stranger god" and Bacchic frenzies (1884-1885)
    - Freud: Dream reveals a breakdown between the superego and the id.
- Aschenbach desires symbolize moral pollution—again the ideal scapegoat (1886-7, 1888-9, 1890).

### The Pollution Cycle

- Kenneth Burke also uses the Pollution Cycle to describe the way a kind of plot moves. Although the terms obviously have a religious basis, the cycle can be applied to plots with no religious context.
  - Pollution is the beginning state; there is something already wrong, some imbalance, conflict, disharmony. For example, there is already a plague in Venice when Aschenbach arrives—but it is hidden from view. In Oedipus, a plague strikes Thebes before the first act.
- 1. **Guilt** over the cause of the pollution. The idea is that nothing happens without a moral cause. Blame or responsibility must be assigned. In *Oedipus*, the guilt is Oedipus's having killed his father and married his mother. Removal of the guilt leads to...
- 2. **Purification**. Whatever means are appropriate are used to restore the balance. Oedipus's suffering purifies Thebes. When the guilt has been purged, the situation is restored to health or balance, leading to...
- 3. **Redemption**. When Oedipus blinds himself, Thebes is redeemed from the plague. What will redeem Venice from its social ills?