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## **Aschenbach's Psychological Struggle: Freud and Jung on Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice***

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### **Abstract**

*Thomas Mann was one of a small number of modern writers who continued to attract audience well beyond the narrow circle of professional readers. He was one of the most popular modern German novelists. Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912) is recognized as his best-known and most enigmatic work. The story of the novella skillfully blends psychological realism and mythological symbolism to create a multidimensional story that explores the moral transformation of an artist in quest for 'perfect beauty'. *Death in Venice* has been the subject of much critical study and is regarded as one of the masterpieces of short fiction.*

*Death in Venice is recognized as a central work in Mann's career and ranks as one of his most studied pieces of fiction. This novella is praised for his blending of symbolism, psychology, and myth, and some view the story as a cautionary tale of what happens to a person when his passion is repressed for the sake of maintaining discipline and social vanity.*

*All psychoanalytic approaches to literature have one thing in common—the critics begin with a full psychological theory of how and why people behave as they do, a theory that has been developed by a psychoanalyst outside of the realm of literature, and they apply this psychological theory as a standard to interpret and evaluate a literary work. Two of the initiators include theorists like Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung.*

*To begin with, it is known that Freudian interpretations of literature are often ingenious in explaining the 'return of the repressed'. A literary piece is taken as the conscious or the 'overt', and the interpretation of the 'covert' or the unconscious is the aim of psychoanalytic criticism. The unconscious of the author and/or the characters in the work, and unveiling the psychodrama is the function of psychoanalytic criticism.*

*Later on, Carl Gustav Jung's developments in psychoanalysis have as well become influential. Jung's concepts of the archetypes such as the 'persona', 'anima' and 'shadow' reveal the structural components of the psyche that human beings inherit, which ultimately affect human behavior, actions and inactions. Disharmony among three of these elements of*

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*human psyche, or repression of the 'anima' or 'shadow' side of personality often leads to psychological disintegration. This is what happens to Aschenbach when he represses his basic instincts too much.*

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The storyline of the novella reveals Aschenbach as a renowned German author living a lonely life. To get rid of the 'writer's block' he plans a vacation to the beautiful Venice. After going to there, he encounters an extremely beautiful young boy of fourteen years named Tadzio. Eventually he falls in love with Tadzio and starts stalking the young boy. The gradual degeneration and disintegration of his psyche results in his delirium and death. It is clear that, Aschenbach had a hidden and repressed homosexual self behind his outer shell of being a reserved and cerebral author. This paper intends to study how these hidden impulses direct his actions and inactions in the course of time.

To interpret Mann's *Death in Venice* with the help of psychoanalysis, one needs to trace the origin of this theory far back. Psychoanalysis is a revolutionary theory of the mind, of feeling and of behaviour. It evolved over time in Austria in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the ambition of Sigmund Freud and his interlocutors from around the world who were drawn to his work. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Freud worked to establish psychoanalysis as a path of treatment and research into the workings of the human mind.

Several key terms in Freudian psychoanalysis concern what might be called psychic processes, such as 'transference' and 'projection' - both of which might be seen as 'defence mechanisms', that is, as psychic procedures for avoiding painful admissions or recognitions.

One of the finest examples of important Freudian terminology is the 'dream work', the process by which real events or desires are transformed into dream images. These include: 'displacement', whereby one person or event is represented by another which in some way linked or associated with it, perhaps because of a similar-sounding word, or by some form of symbolic substitution; then 'condensation', whereby a number of people, events, or meanings are combined and represented by a single image in the dream; and finally 'symbolism', that is, the representation of repressed, mainly sexual, objects of desire by non-sexual objects which resemble them or are associated with them in prior experience. Thus, characters, motivation, and events are represented in dreams in a very 'literary' way, involving the translation, by the dream work, of abstract ideas or feelings into concrete images. Dreams, according to Freud, just like literature, do not usually make explicit statements. Both tend to communicate obliquely or indirectly, avoiding direct or open statement, and representing meanings through concrete embodiments of time, place, or person. Freud believes that a dream is an escape-hatch or safety-valve through which repressed desires, fears, or memories seek an outlet into the conscious mind. The emotion in question is 'censored' by the conscious mind and so has to enter the dream in disguise.

Freud also puts forward the view that: because 'displacement' and 'condensation' occur while we dream, these processes are referred to collectively as 'primary revision'. What we actually dream, once primary revision has disguised the unconscious message, or the dream's 'latent content', is the dream's 'manifest content'. The dream images are 'manifest

content'. What these images actually mean is the dream's 'latent content', and that is a matter of interpretation. In interpreting our dreams then, our goal is to recall the 'manifest content' and try to uncover the 'latent content'. However, we must remember that, at this conscious stage as well, we are very liable to unconsciously change the dream in order to further protect ourselves from knowing what is too painful to know. This process, which takes place when we are awake, is called 'secondary revision'. However, the Freudian analysis of dreams is based on the general assumption of 'transference' and 'projection'.

However, there also exists an obviously close connection between mythological criticism and the psychological approach: both are concerned with the motives that underlie human behavior. What psychoanalysis attempts to disclose about the individual personality, the study of myths reveals about the mind and character of a people. And just as dreams reflect the unconscious desires and anxieties of the individual, so myths are the symbolic projections of a people's hopes, values, fears, and aspirations. One of the major influences on mythological criticism is the work of Carl Gustav Jung, the great psychologist-philosopher and onetime disciple of Freud, who broke with the master because of what he regarded as a too-narrow approach to psychoanalysis. Jung believed 'libido' (psychic energy) to be more 'psychic' than 'sexual'. Jung's primary contribution to myth criticism is his theory of 'racial memory' and 'archetypes'. In developing this concept, Jung expanded Freud's theories of the 'personal unconscious', asserting that beneath this is a primeval, 'collective unconscious', shared in the psychic inheritance of all members of the human family. Jung's emphasis is not on the individual, but on the 'collective unconscious', that is a racial memory inherited by all members of the human family and connecting modern man with his primeval roots. The collective unconscious is manifested in the recurrence to certain images, stories, figures, called 'archetypes' – the 'psychic residua of numberless experiences of the same type'.

Psychological maturity, or 'individuation' entails the individual's recognition and acceptance of archetypal elements of his own psyche, for which Jung coined the descriptive terms 'shadow', 'persona' and 'anima'. Failure in this regard leads to a neurotic projection of unacknowledged elements of the psyche onto others.

One major contribution of Jung is his theory of 'individuation' as related to those archetypes designated as the 'shadow', the 'persona', and the 'anima'. The 'shadow', the 'persona', and the 'anima' are structural components of the psyche that human beings have inherited. The 'shadow' is the darker side of our unconscious self, the inferior and less pleasing aspects of the personality which we wish to suppress.

The 'anima' is, perhaps, the most complex of Jung's archetypes. It is the "soul-image", a man's life force or vital energy. Jung gives the 'anima' a feminine designation in the male psyche, whereas, in the female psyche this archetype is called the 'animus'. In this sense, 'anima' is the contrasexual part of a man's psyche, the image of the opposite sex that he carries in both his personal and his collective unconscious. The human psyche is essentially bisexual, though the psychological characteristics of the opposite sex in each of us are

generally unconscious, revealing themselves only in dreams or in projections on someone in our environment. The phenomenon of love, especially love at first sight, may be explained at least in part by Jung's theory of the 'anima': we tend to be attracted to members of the opposite sex who mirror the characteristics of our own inner selves. The 'anima' is a kind of mediator between the 'ego' (the conscious will or thinking self) and the unconscious or inner world of the male individual.

The 'persona' is the obverse of the 'anima'; in that it mediates between our ego and the external world. The 'persona' is the actor's mask that we show to the world – it is our social personality, a personality that is sometimes quite different from our true self. Jung, in discussing this social mask, explains that, to achieve psychological maturity, the individual must have a flexible, viable 'persona' that can be brought into harmonious relationship with the other components of his or her psychic makeup. He states, furthermore, that a 'persona' that is too artificial or rigid results in such symptoms of neurotic disturbance as irritability and melancholy.

Aschenbach's repression of the hidden impulses return in the novella with a vengeance in his infatuation for Tadzio and it is culminated in his dream which marks his ultimate deterioration and downfall.

There are two possible interpretations of Aschenbach's nightmare – one is the Freudian and another is the Jungian analysis. In this 'terrible nightmare', he envisions and finally confronts his long-neglected and submerged 'other' - the forbidden other-half of him. In his dream, Aschenbach is epitomized as the ultimate evil incarnate - the parts of his personality he had repressed for so long – his homosexual self.

The Freudian 'transference' and 'projection' occur in Aschenbach's dream where he envisions a total satisfaction – “the complete eradication of tension and psychic conflict”. In his dream, Aschenbach's libidinal self is represented, projected and displaced by “the alien God” – god Dionysus – who is a god of impulse, desire and eroticism. It is the image of Dionysus which he confronts in his dream – which is his ultimate confrontation with his own repressed and hidden self, dominated by and dictated towards the forbidden, libidinal drive for the young boy. The “Wooden phallus” symbolizes Aschenbach's own homoerotic desire, the pedophilic and forbidden temptation for Tadzio – his desire to have sort of sexual relationship with the fourteen-year-old boy. This “Wooden phallus” manifests Aschenbach's own phallus– his lustful longing for Tadzio. Aschenbach embraces the vision of death heralded by a group of voracious vortex of “men, animals, a swarm, a raging horde...” (Mann, p. 61). This group actually is a condensed representation of Aschenbach's own greed, lust, forbidden desires and release of all restraints: “Indeed, they were him...” (Mann p. 61). He himself felt the strong urge to join orgy : “ His heart was booming with the drumbeats, his brain was gyrating, anger gripped him, blindness, deadening sexual lust and his soul desired to join the god's dance” (Mann p. 61).

Indeed, the description of the orgy manifests a depiction of what is going on in the city “Odors crowded the senses, the biting smell of the bucks, the scent of groaning bodies and

the stench of putrid waters, also another familiar one : of wounds and sickness making its rounds” (Mann p. 61). While Venice as exterior environment becomes a parameter measuring what occurs in the interior of Aschenbach, his dream actually projects a ‘manifested’ picture of the death, deadbodies, canals, purid and foul stench of germicides spread over the streets of Venice during those particular days.

It is noteworthy that, an obvious projection of Aschenbach’s inner, dark self is manifested in the images and symbols of this dream. The ‘latent contents’ of his dream are subject to various interpretations.

According to Jungian psychoanalysis, in his dream, Aschenbach actually confronts his own animal self – his ‘shadow’ – the darker side of his personality in the images of the ‘alien god’ Dionysus and in the other members of the orgy involved in various lascivious activities, which he had been suppressing under the mask of his strict, disciplined and reserved ‘persona’. From his dream, he realizes that it is he himself who is the embodiment of the alien god and the centre of all the lascivious activities “.... the scene was his soul itself...” (Mann p. 60). When he confronts his own animal self, he cannot admit this forbidden and repressed part of him as a reality of his life.

He instantly realizes that by falling in love with, and craving for a fourteen-year-old boy, he actually breaks both the societal and religious (Christian) norms of sexuality. In a conservative and Christian German society, committing pedophilia and homosexuality are considered as not only crime but as sin and sexual perversity at least during the time when the novella was published for the first time. Both pedophilia and homosexuality were termed as social ‘taboos’ by the European society during those years, and as a consequence of the burden of his ‘collective unconscious’ German soul, Aschenbach actually is very much ashamed and shocked of his committing both the sins. Being a Christian and a member of the strict and disciplined German society and culture, Aschenbach is unable to accept this side of his self – the ‘demonic other’. The dream actually subdues his “deep mental resistance, went through and left his existence, the culture of his life, in shambles” (Mann p. 60).

Confrontation with his own homosexual self – the darker, ‘other’ side of him and the clash between this ‘self’ and ‘the Other’ lead him to his gradual disintegration where he courts the imminent death rather than escaping the city. This self / Other binary, the transgression of the societal norms of sexuality, lead Aschenbach to commit suicide – he merely lets himself be killed by the epidemic; he loses every desire to live anymore with such an acknowledgement that he is actually a ‘gay’ and he tried to involve in a sexual relationship with a fourteen-year-old boy. In denying the ‘shadow’ aspect of his personality, he rejects to be alive anymore. He is shattered now and his will to survive is at once diminished to the point where he calmly accepts death. The aftereffect of his nightmare leaves him “stricken, unnerved, shattered and limply addicted to the demon” (Mann p. 61). This demonic side of himself – or rather his ‘shadow’ (the libidinal desires, lusts) consequently clashes with his long-maintained yet rigid, artificial and non-viable ‘persona’.

The disharmonious tie between Aschenbach's 'shadow' and 'persona' archetypes lead him to his final delirium, when he is mortally infected by cholera. He tries hard to camouflage his 'shadow' but ultimately fails. The tussle between the contradictory forces of his 'shadow' and 'persona' leaves him nowhere; he demasculinizes himself by wearing jewels and make-up to look more feminine, loses the power of making any conscious decision like departing the cholera-ridden city as soon as possible.

This self/Other binary can be interpreted from another Jungian perspective : from the point of view of 'anima' archetype. Aschenbach's 'anima' aspect of the self has been buried within his psyche unless he encounters the beautiful, fragile and effeminate Tadzio. The contrasexual part of Aschenbach's psyche has been hidden but now finds an embodiment in the figure of 'Tadzio' who represents the 'Other' to Aschenbach. Aschenbach is attracted and infatuated towards a young boy of the same sex who, in turn, apparently emblemizes the qualities of the opposite female sex.

Tadzio's charm and beauty are irresistible to Aschenbach and he falls in love with the young boy at the very first sight. Tadzio, at times, represents both the 'angelic other' and the 'demonic other' to Aschenbach. Tadzio emblemizes the 'angelic' other when he is the ultimate beauty incarnate, intoxicating Aschenbach to pursue him. On the contrary, he is also the emblematic of the demon – when he beckons Aschenbach to go out into the sea and, in symbolic terms, encourages Aschenbach to submerge himself entirely in his 'unconscious'. At this point, Aschenbach compares Tadzio to the Greek god Hermes – who transports souls to the underworld. In fact, at this moment, Aschenbach has descended completely into his unconscious, as the image of Tadzio beckoning to him and him joining Tadzio occur completely in Aschenbach's fantasy, even though Aschenbach dies that very moment. Aschenbach cannot resist his self-destruction and death when he encounters the 'demonic part' of Tadzio, though he has been admiring only the 'angelic' appearances of the young boy. Tadzio also mirrors the characteristics of Aschenbach's own inner self – the feminine side of himself to which he ultimately succumbs by wearing jewels and make-up in courting Tadzio. Aschenbach now attempts to become the opposite sex – a female – whom Tadzio may appreciate and admire back. From this very incident, the hints of Aschenbach's transgendered and bisexual self, his repressed femininity, which he has been suppressing since long back, emerge to the forefront. The hidden and apparent clashes with his 'anima' image result in his psychological as well as physical affliction and agitation. In fact, "In a patriarchal society, 'femininity' seduces man to his death, or the otherwise destruction. Eros and Thanatos fuse in the novella's final passage. At the point of death, Aschenbach meets Tadzio's gaze; the gaze of Tadzio as feminized other seems a 'Medusa gaze' which implicitly brings Aschenbach's death" (Hayes and Quinby p. 160).

As the novella takes its course, Aschenbach succumbs literally to cholera and metaphorically to his infatuation with Tadzio. Aschenbach's strictly regulated life-style compels him "to lock himself into a sense of the self as separate. Having withdrawn into a shell of individual autonomy, having become alienated from his body and from the emotions associated with bodily pleasure or discomfort, having shut himself off from

contact with others around him and the 'other' side of him, Aschenbach indeed denies his dependence on the human community" (Hayes and Quinby, p. 167). He is regressed to homosexuality after alienating himself from the normal sexual impulses, in a society where heterosexuality is taken as the 'natural' norm of sexuality and homosexuality as a perverse, sinful indulgence.

Aschenbach's over-indulgence in his unconscious and repressed desires results in his eventual social, ethical and moral fall. The repressed part of his own self – his animal instincts – his perverse desire for the fourteen-year-old Tadzio get distorted in course of time. When provided a chance or rather an escape from all the restraints imposed upon him, in the seductive and beautiful Venice, these forbidden impulses return to the foreground. Perhaps, had he been offered a normal sexual life, his heterosexuality might not have turned to bisexuality and his homoerotic longing for the young boy might have not occurred. These incidents exemplify the return of the repressed, hidden and forbidden homosexuality and pedophilia which have long been submerged into his psyche due to extreme societal obligations and prohibitions. In his pursuit of the ultimate beauty incarnate Tadzio, he is so obsessed and intoxicated that he ignores all external dangers and restrictions, and is eventually infected with cholera that pollutes Venice. (3450 Words)

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