Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories

Thomas Mann , H.T. Lowe-Porter (Translator)

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In addition to *Death in Venice*, this volume includes "Mario and the Magician," "Disorder and Early Sorrow," "A Man and His Dog," "Felix Krull," "The Blood of the Walsungs," "Tristan," and "Tonio Kröger."

These stories, as direct as Thomas Mann's novels are complex, are perfect illustrations of their author's belief that "a story must tell itself." Varying in theme, in style, in tone, each is in its own way characteristic of Mann's prodigious talents. From the high art of the famous title novella ("A story," Mann said, "of death...of the voluptuousness of doom"), to the irony of "Felix Krull," the early story on which he later based his comic novel *The Confessions of Felix Krull*, they are stunning testimony to the mastery and virtuosity of a literary giant.

Translated from the German by H.T. Lowe-Porter.

Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories for online ebook

Alexandra says

Jetzt gleich mal ein Fazit: Thomas Mann und seine Kurzgeschichten sind meiner Meinung nach total überbewertet. Die Germanisten unter Euch mögen mich hinrichten, aber dieses nutzlose verkrampfte geistige Gehirnwichsen ergibt einfach keinen Sinn. Eines muss man dem Autor lassen: Er kann Schachtelsätze, aber das ist auch schon alles. Ausführliche Details ob dieses Trauerspiels in den Einzelbeurteilungen.

1. Tod in Venedig 2,5 Sterne
Der Beginn ist ein unnötiges verkrampftes nichtssagendes Geschwurbel über Kunst (genaue Beschreibung der Schwurbelei bei Tristan). Als sich der Hauptprotagonist Aschenbach nach Venedig aufmacht, wird die Geschichte zwar mit pädophilen homosexuellen Zügen behaftet aber recht erträglich.

2. Tristan 2,5 Sterne
Auch hier läßt es sich der Autor nicht nehmen, über Musik zu schwurbeln. Der Mann'sche Stil, um es Euch zu beschreiben, ist so wie bei den Leutchen, die zwar selber keine Künstler sind, sich aber bei den sehr progressiven Kulturfestivals in der Foldertextbeschreibung einen auf pseudo-intellektuell abonanieren, indem sie versuchen, präpotent mit der Sprache die Kunst nachzustellen, ohne natürlich auch wirklich mit der Sprache umgehen zu können. Eine Aneinanderreihung von wertlosen Fremdwörtern, Wortschöpfungen und Metaphern, die einfach keinen Sinn ergeben, nicht wissend, dass man manche Kunst einfach erleben und nur die Rahmenbedingungen wie Stil Hintergrund etc. beschreiben sollte. Nachdem man die Beschreibung des Theaterstücks, Musikstücks... gelesen hat, hat man gar keine Ahnung was einen erwartet oder was die Scheisse soll.
Nachdem man sich als Leser durch dieses unsägliche nutzlose Elaborat durchgewühlt hat, kommt wieder etwas Plot und Figurenentwicklung und die Geschichte wird recht erträglich.

3. Die vertauschten Köpfe 0-1 Stern (0 kann man ja in Goodreads gar nicht geben weil dies nicht beurteilt bedeutet)
Das ist wirklich der Gipfel an schlechter Literatur. Auf 100 Seiten nur 1 Szene, die es wert ist, erzählt zu werden. Die vertauschten Köpfe sind wieder mal nutzloses Geschwafel in Form eines indischen Märchens über eine Dreicksgeschichte zwischen zwei Freunden und einer Frau, da tun sich literarische Abgründe auf, die man sich gar ned vorstellen möchte - dagegen ist Tod in Venedig ein mittelmäßiger Lercherlschas ;-).
Meine Empfehlung im Originalton an die Protagonisten, die es verdient haben, alle zu sterben, aber ihre Entleibung einfach zu langsam durchgezogen und mich dadurch leider mit ihrem nutzlosen Dasein viel zu lange gequält haben. "Ja bringts Euch alle um, denn Ihr seids sogar zum ordentlichen hinterlistigen Ehebruch zu deppat und brauchts a Kopftausch Ausrede und extrem viel hirnloses Gelaber als Rechtfertigung für Eurer dreieckiges Swingerabenteuer :D unpackbar."

4. Gladus Dei 3,5 Sterne
Ok diese Story ist durchaus gelungen, aber in Anbetracht der Tatsache, dass dies eine Kurz-Kurzgeschichte von 10 Seiten ist, wäre diese schwerlich auch noch so zu vergeigen, wie die anderen.

5. Schwere Stunde 3 Sterne
Der Hauptprotagonist quält sich bei der Erstellung von literarischer Kunst in einem Schreibprozess einen ab. Nicht schlecht aber eben auch nur 10 Seiten. Eine Geschichte dieses Umfanges können auch

Deutschmaturanten in einer Schularbeit.

6. Das Gesetz 3,5 Sterne
Das war die erste Geschichte, die mir im Ansatz ganz gut gefallen hat. Das Gesetz ist die Story von Moses: eine Perlenkette atemberaubender Inkompetenzen - gut angelehnt an die alten Überlieferungen aber aus anderer Sicht erzählt.

Fazit: Wenn ich alles zusammenzähle, kommen 2,5 Sterne raus. Weil es aber der Thomas Mann ist, kriegt er ob seines Namens einen Promibonus, und ich runde sehr gnädig auf.

Ach ja so wie Thomas Mann ständig in seinen Geschichten herumlaviert, möchte ich meine Gefühle bezüglich dieser Lektüre mit dem Zitat von Christian Tramitz aus dem Schuh des Manitu ausdrücken: "Ich bin mit der Gesamtsituation unzufrieden. [...] ständiges sinnloses herumschleichen und dauernd am Marterpfahl."

William2.1 says

Read "Death in Venice." Love and Death. No wonder Woody Allen referenced the story in *Annie Hall*. Aschenbach, a writer in his fifties, an artist raised by the Kaiser to the aristocracy, sees the boy-god Tadzio on a beach in Venice and promptly loses his reason. It's a very human story. Who hasn't lost their head over someone? The references to Plato's Symposium are spot on. The prose might be a little dense for some. I enjoyed it but found it excruciating, so affecting is its theme. In that sense it reminded me of Knut Hamsun's Pan, another tale of love run amok. Though at least in *Pan* there's consummation. In *Death in Venice* the lovers never exchange a word, only glances. Anyway, this is what fiction can do. By the way, this is the preferred translation according to The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation, ed. Peter France. I'd like to hear from anyone who's read Joachim Neugroschel's version *and* the original German.

Richard Derus says

The Book Report: I feel a complete fool providing a plot précis for this canonical work. Gustav von Ascherbach, literary lion in his sixties, wanders about his home town of Munich while struggling with a recalcitrant new story. His chance encounter with a weirdo, though no words are exchanged between them, ignites in Herr von Ascherbach the need to get out of town, to get himself to the delicious fleshpots of the South. An abortive stay in Illyria (now Bosnia or Montenegro or Croatia, no knowing which since we're not given much to go on) leads him to make his second journey to Venice. Arriving in the sin capital of the early modern world, and even in the early 20th century possessed of a louche reputation, brings him into contact with two life-changing things: A beautiful teenaged boy, and cholera. I think the title fills you in on the rest.

My Review: I know this was written in 1911-1912, and is therefore to be judged by the standards of another era, but I am bone-weary of stories featuring men whose love for other males brings them to disaster and death. This is the story that started me on that path of dislike. Von Ascherbach realizes he's in love for the first time in his pinched, narrow life, and it's with a 14-year-old boy; his response is to make himself ridiculous, following the kid around, staying in his Venetian Garden of Eros despite knowing for sure there's a cholera epidemic, despite being warned of the dangers of staying, despite smelling decay and death and miasmic uccchiness all around, because he's in love. But with the wrong kind of person...a male. Therefore

Mann makes him pay the ultimate price, he loses his life because he gives in and falls hopelessly, stupidly in love. With a male. Mann makes his judgment of this moral turpitude even more explicit by making it a chaste, though to modern eyes not unrequited, love between an old man and a boy. Explicit references to Classical culture aside, the entire atmosphere of the novel is quite evidently designed to point up the absurdity and the impossibility of such a love being rewarding or rewarded. It's not in the least mysterious what Mann's after: Denial, denial, denial! It's your only salvation, faggots! Deny yourself, don't let yourself feel anything rather than feel *that*!

This book offends my sensibilities. Gorgeously built images and sonorously elegant sentences earn it all of its points.

Jessica says

Holy hell, *Death in Venice* is fucking amazing. If, like me, you somehow just never got around to reading it, pull yourself together and do something about that now.

Blair says

I did this a bit of a disservice by reading the first two stories in October last year, and then not picking it up again until January - my intention was to spread the stories out over a couple of months, in the hope that this would make me savour and appreciate them more, but... it didn't really work out. Though a couple of characters grated, and the repetition of themes dulled their impact slightly by the end, I loved these stories, with 'Little Herr Friedemann', 'The Joker', and 'Death in Venice' itself standing out as favourites.

Jason Koivu says

"Read this," you said, handing me *Death in Venice*, "you'll enjoy it!"

"What's it about," I asked.

"It's a story whose entire premise is based on a perverted old man lusting ghoulishly after the youth of a handsome, young boy," you said.

"Fuck off," I shouted.

I don't usually go in for the old-man-desires-the-youthful-essence-of-a-boy genre, but *Death in Venice* spoke to me. Maybe it's vanity and the fear of losing the beauty and natural exuberance of youth, or the sadness felt at the passing and irretrievable loss of those carefree days. The fear of growing old and eventually dying, that inevitability of having lived, is strong in most of us. We chase it with creams, ointments, dyes, jells, injections and surgery. But it only comes once for all of us. Even if it's the beauty of another which we wish to preserve, as is also the case with the main character in Mann's book, we must come to grips with the loss. As precious as it may appear, the seeming perfection of youth is fleeting in us all. Enjoy it while you can, but realize you must sooner or later let go.

Fabian says

It's fantastic to be completely swayed by century-old works; to be turned- on completely by some German dude who probably thought so differently from you that anything he produced is just receptive to awe alone, and no discernible connections between you and the author exist. Not true. If you saw the dreadful film "A Single Man" (or read the novel) & thought that the idea for that was elsewhere inscribed, well, you were super right! It is this masterpiece by Thomas Mann it tries to emulate; an excursion to a Venice that with ironic signs of pestilence & death still invites in the ideas of love and artistic inspiration.

Aschenbach, the fictional writer that was likely based on Mann himself, takes a trip and takes us there with him. When the omnipresent narrator gets inside of Aschenbach's head, then describes in utter beauty the ugliness of the scene & the main character's bittersweet, and altogether human experience in the old world, we have a forerunner to Patricia Highsmith's beloved "The Talented Mr. Ripley" and a brother to Hawthorne's "The Marble Faun," another Italian adventure with pah-lenty of gay sensibility.

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p. says

> *"What do you mean, Diotima,' I said, 'is love then evil and foul?' 'Hush,' she cried; 'must that be foul which is not fair?' 'Certainly,' I said. 'And is that which is not wise, ignorant? do you not see that there is a mean between wisdom and ignorance?' 'And what may that be?' I said. 'Right opinion,' she replied."*
> — Plato. *The Symposium* (trans. by Benjamin Jowett).

Fuzzy Logic is a paradigm often applied to Artificial Intelligence, though its applications may vary. It’s a kind of logic that was introduced in order to contrast boolean logic, wherein a variable’s value is strictly either 0 or 1. Therefore, in fuzzy logic a variable may fall in the range between 0 and 1, showing a more accurate approach on how, in the real world, things are (or at least should be). For example: according to some, a 400 page book may be mildly long, but for others, it may be slightly long, whereas for someone else it may be short. We classify things this way, in fuzzy logic, not just as either black or white, big or small, zero or one, right or wrong — and not even completely heterosexual or completely homosexual, in regards to sexuality. Thus, it shouldn’t be a scandal that a straight man feels attraction towards another man (age aside), like it happened to Thomas Mann in 1911 when he took a trip to Venice where he met W?adzio: a boy who inspired the writer’s subject of beauty, his Phaedrus, his god, his literary inspiration and fascination. Whereas Mann wasn’t actually as absorbed as to stalking the boy throughout the Piazza di San Marco, he certainly was compelled by him, according to his wife. So one may say that this *did* happen. On the other hand, bringing back my introductory efforts to state that emotions aren’t ruled by boolean logic, *Death in Venice* is often regarded as a beautiful approach to queer literature — beautiful as we scarcely find in great classics — even though the author thereof isn’t exactly queer.

Mann transferred his experience in Venice to Gustav von Aschenbach, a 50(-ish) year-old writer and widower, who after an opening scene decides to take a trip to clear his mind in order for his work to bloom again. The aforementioned opening scene is that of a mysterious man in a cemetery and Aschenbach’s lugubrious omen and sudden decision to go to Venice; and from this point on one falls under a sort of

sombre ambience and an ill spell that won't leave the reader until the final paragraph. Many things happen, delightfully described, but as for the main thread, at his arrival at the hotel, and more precisely, at supper, Aschenbach meets Tadzio, a young boy who catches his attention immediately and its then when the plot begins to unravel into a deadly and dreadful ending. Mann keeps symbolisms constant and fate also plays an important part, as when he intends to leave Venice due to health issues, his luggage keeps him from doing so. He also makes allusions to greek mythology, especially Plato's *Symposium*, relating Aschenbach and Tadzio to Socrates and Phaedrus in a reverie of sorts and exposing the greek philosopher's ideas of beauty, love and the god thereof — that is Eros, who resides in the loving rather than the beloved. Also, Mann, in my opinion, tried to un-taboo the love between two men whose ages are disproportionate using Socrates's ideal of love and to remark that there's nothing despicable about the beauty of the senses that resides in youth drawn to the kind of beauty that is rather spiritual and resides in maturity — that love as we know it is rather fuzzy than boolean, and it is always beautiful and somewhat artistic. The dark side of it lies in the abuse and the excess of this passion, when it becomes dangerous not only to oneself but also to the beloved, having both well-beings at risk, like Aschenbach did keeping the truth about Venice to himself, in a frenzy and feverish delusion that his love for Tadzio was still pure.

> *"Nothing is more bizarre, more ticklish, than a relationship between two people who know each other only with their eyes—who encounter, observe each other daily, even hourly, never greeting, never speaking, constrained by convention or by caprice to keep acting the indifferent strangers. They experience discomfort and overwrought curiosity, the hysteria of an unsatisfied, unnaturally stifled need to recognize and to exchange, and they especially feel something like a tense mutual esteem. For people love and honor someone so long as they cannot judge him, and yearning is a product of defective knowledge."*

Death in Venice is doubtless an incredible masterpiece, not only because of its lyrical and delightful prose and because it challenges the reader to bring the barriers of taboo down, but also because of this sense of personal approach that makes a great work great: that is, the writer's ability to touch and kindle our souls — like Mann himself wrote:

> *"But even on a personal level, art is, after all, a more sublime life. It delights more deeply, it consumes more swiftly. It carves the traces of imaginary, intellectual adventures into the features of its servant."*

The rest of the stories are magnificent as well — not as engrossing as the *Venice* but still worth reading in order to appreciate how most of their characters share the same artistic, obsessive and solitary nature of Aschenbach; like Tonio Kröger: a literate young man who struggles with life in the arena of literature; or Spinell, a lonesome writer in a sanatorium, found in *Tristan*, the novella that would later develop into *The Magic Mountain*. Overall, there's bleakness in Mann's world, but then again, there is always beauty to be found in the bleak.

Thomas Mann captivated me literarily but also personally, (view spoiler), taking my memories and experiences as nourishment. In dust I became and I shall float by the ill weather of Mann's Venice, eternally tracing beauty and love, to which, I think, I'll eventually approach by the way of literature.

> *"Never had he felt the pleasure of words more sweetly, never had he knowm so deeply that Eros is in words as in the dangerously delicious hours when he sat at his crude table under the aiming, with his idol in full view, the music of that voice in his ears: he was modeling his little essay on Tadzio's beauty, forming that page and a half of exquisite prose whose purity, nobility, and quivering emotional tension would shortly gain the admiration of many."*

Edward says

Introduction

--Little Herr Friedemann
--The Joker
--The Road to the Churchyard
--Gladius Dei
--Tristan
--Tonio Kröger
--Death in Venice

Schmacko says

I know, it's a crying shame I haven't read this classic years ago. And now, having read it, I can say, "What a fascinating, disturbing little melodrama, " set this brief but dense book aside, and then never pick it up again.

Death in Venice by Thomas Mann was published in 1912. It's about Gustav von Aschenbach, a successful septuagenarian German author who leaves his very staid, regimental life for a whim-filled holiday in Venice. While there, Aschenbach slowly shrugs off his straightjacket existence and starts to feel fiery passion. This is brought on by another vacationer to the island – a 14-year-old Polish boy named Tadzio.

Death in Venice is about what 70-year-old Aschenbach's passion means. Is it an artist's appreciation of physical beauty? Is it the sickly old author longing after his own youth, acknowledging that that Tadzio takes youth for granted, not even realizing that his beauty is fleeting. Is Aschenbach a pedophile? Is his unnatural lust brought on by Aschenbach's previously restrictive existence?

Mann does a beautiful job of balancing all these complicated questions in a story that is both prosaic and tense. The book veers from being a confessional of sickness to an uncomfortable apologist creed for pedophilia as an education for the youth and an appreciation of physical beauty by older men.

I happen to be a strong believer in social structure and propriety on this given subject, so I found myself a little squeamish, even the though the book itself is otherwise chaste. I was frustrated by Mann's ability to both vilify the emotion and then create a shaky logic for why it exists. In that sense, the book is very successful.

In another sense, this book is pure 1912 melodrama. A horrible plague has befallen Venice, a mysterious malady that becomes a major plot point. Aschenbach plummets from his formerly logical and lofty moral

values into an obsessed and passion-controlled wisp of a thing. Achenbach is erudite enough that he goes into long narratives about the history of man-boy love and its acceptance in other cultures. You can feel the German trying to justify his own increasingly senseless emotions as he grows both physically and mentally sicker. Finally, it's blindingly clear that the mystery disease and Achenbach's lust are parallel metaphors, in which Mann gives his final judgment on the overarching subject of the book – the appreciating of youthful beauty versus pedophilic lust.

I get it. I read it. I can move on.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

a brief chronology ::

19xx, May :: purchased Bantam *Death in Venice and Other Stories by Thomas Mann*.

19xx, June :: read "Death in Venice" in class along with two things from *Dubliners*, *Mrs Dalloway*, something from Sartre, something from Robbe-Grillet, and a few other things. Pretty cool.

19xx, May(?) :: saw the *Orlando* film. Still have not read the novel.

20xx, Sept :: read "Little Herr Friedemann", "The Joke", "The Road to the Churchyard", "Gladius Dei", "Tristan," and "Tonio Kröger" in the hops field at midnight. Thought they were pretty fantastic.

20xx, ?? :: read *Magic Mountain*. Very happy to have done so.

20xx, today :: finally reread "Death in Venice" several years later.

20?? (future) :: watch some filmic translation of "Death in Venice".

20?? (still the future) :: more Mann ; either Joseph or the one about the composer. Or *Buddenbrooks* (auf Deutsch?)

James Catt says

I just finished reading this marvelous book of short stories. My favorite among them was "Little Herr Freidman", a sad tale of a mans peace of mind turned on its head by desire.

Yair Ben-Zvi says

It can be a joy to be wrong sometimes. Going into this collection I didn't have much to go on regarding Thomas Mann. I'd heard some biographical details and titles of works, but nothing more. I'd heard his name mentioned in the same breaths and sentences as Kafka, Goethe, Hesse, in German literature particularly, and in the same vein along some of the writers of the highest echelons of the world generally, but I, for lack of a

better term, never got around to him. I expected him to be the runt of the German litter, the one who came late to the party and only made it in by the skin of his teeth. I was wrong beyond words.

But one early evening segueing languidly into night in Jerusalem, I popped into a used bookshop (which, wonderfully, Jerusalem has plenty of) and picked up a few tomes for my soon to be coming move back to America. I was in an odd state of mind as I was tremendously relieved to be traveling back to the country of my upbringing with all that that entailed...but I was also more than a bit sad, troubled even, that I hadn't succeeded in Israel. Not getting into the army, not learning Hebrew quickly enough to get a job to improve it further and also being unable to attain the Masters degree I had to set out to obtain...I was tired, so tired, in so many ways.

On that night though, I picked up (if I recall correctly) Peer Gynt, a copy of A History of Ancient Philosophy, and this Thomas Mann collection.

A lot happened between my buying the collection and my actually reading it. For one thing, I left Israel and spent an eventful and infinitely memorable six days in Estonia. After that I made my way back home to California. It was there I started thumbing through Death in Venice.

It was a slow process. I thought after reading Saul Bellow I'd be ready for languid prose that took it's time and suffused the pages as well as nearly overwhelmed the reader with no acquiescence to ease or convenience. But Bellow would be the speaker at the dinner party, the man surrounded by onlookers throwing out as many cultured references and allusions as he can muster in an attempt to do through force what a writer like Mann, the one sitting around a fire place with a sparse but intimate number of friends can do easily, casually, with no less effort, but with infinitely more grace, calculation, and, dare I say, skill.

Death in Venice is haunting to me because it acts, completely knowingly, as a collapsing bridge between two exclusive worlds beyond joining, that are also inexorably linked. The ancient world of the classics, of Greek, of Latin, of Gods and and passion and feeling more fluid, more primal than what we have now. And the second world, our ostensible world, a world trying harder and harder to divest itself of its more flexible, even more sylvan past, and maintain everything through repetitious, near dogmatic assertions of reason, logic, philosophy, science, all of it meant to make explicable, make real, make palatable our reality. But Mann in this story, depicts a man torn in half who vacillates between straddling the line and, finally, inevitably, letting it cut him in two, destroying him utterly. It's a fecund and feverish story that's relentless in its artistry. Objectionable due to the content? Of a grown man fallen in hopeless love and lust for a boy? Oh, most definitely. But that's the point. It's from this vantage point Mann shows us two worlds colliding, and all the passionate and destructive fallout that ensues. It's a lush and even deadly story.

Now, as for the rest of the collection. What can I possibly say? They are all excellent. And considering this is a short story collection that's doubly impressive. I don't think I've ever given a perfect score to any collection like this before, not even Joyce's Dubliners. Tonio Kruger is as beautiful an authorial and even artistic manifesto as one is likely to find (hand in hand with Portrait of the Artist), Man and his Dog is a humble and warm slice of life, Tristan is a maddening look at human frailty and the power coupled with futility of the written word, Blood of the Walsungs is a masterwork of decadence and narcissism and an incredible depiction of an empty and superficial generation descending into apathy and slow irrelevant death. Mario and the Magician is a deft satire about the rise of character based cults in German leadership and chilling given its context. Disorder and Early Sorrow feels like a blueprint for later works, a slow and drawn out exhalation that still holds true and still shows the keenness of Mann's vision. And finally Felix Krull, while funny, is also unexpectedly tragic, so much so that I believe the last few lines of it, of a son paying tribute to a dead father through the gift of his tears, will stay with me for quite some time, if not for the rest of my time

I read and think.

It's a powerful collection, at times, many times, even sublime. Please devote yourself to it when you get a chance, make the time for it even. It's worth far and beyond the time and energy needed to read it and will pay you back emotionally, even spiritually, in dividends, as an affirmation or possibly a reaffirmation of the awesome and necessary power of true words written by a divinely skilled hand. And now, as per a friend's advice, I must start the Magic Mountain, possibly even putting my life on hold until it's finished and appreciated fully.

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karen says

european men, stay put. seriously, nothing good ever happens to you when you leave whatever small european town you are from and venture into the wider world. whether it is gide and tunisia, conrad and the congo, robbe-grillet with wherever that was, various graham greenes; statistically, there will be temptations which you are not equipped to resist and you will either succumb or drive yourself to humiliation and despair with the wanting to succumb. and i totally get it - different surroundings, absence of judgmental peer group, it's vacation morality. when i was in prague, i totally stole a guinness mug from the irish pub i fell in love with. so i am no stranger to a wild life of crime and transgression. i left the children alone, though...

(for the record, lawrence durrell is totally exempt from this advice, although since he is dead, it doesn't really matter...)

and just so we're clear - i only read *death in venice*. the other seven stories can go screw for now - this is just book club fare, and if i have time in my life to read more troubled intellectual germans, i will know where to turn. but for now, i must bake book club cake and enjoy my free snow day.

readers, thinkers, and drinkers feb 2010

David says

> I stand between two worlds, am at home in neither, and in consequence have rather a hard time of it. You artists call me a commoner, and commoners feel tempted to arrest me ... I do not know which wounds me more bitterly. Commoners are stupid; but you worshippers of beauty who call me phlegmatic and without yearning, ought to reflect that there is an artistry so deep, so primordial and elemental, that no yearning seems to it sweeter and more worthy of tasting than that for the raptures of common-placeness.

IT'S SO HARD TO BE AN ARTIST, YOU GUYS!

I have heard Thomas Mann described as this towering literary genius, a monumental figure of German literature. So I was kind of looking forward to *Death in Venice* and other stories as a sampler before maybe I try one of his novels. Well, his short stories have killed that desire stone cold dead.

I won't deny he's great with language. He slowly, painstakingly, verbosely paints the inner and outer lives and pained souls of all these lugubrious connoisseurs of truth and beauty, who are all just so woeful and tormented and **woe! woe! woe!** But each and every story was slooooooow and went basically nowhere. It's like staring at a painting. And staring. And staring. And staring. The first few minutes, yeah, it's beautiful, and I suppose if you are a true lover of fine arts you can probably stare at it for hours and be entranced, but I would like to move on and look at something else.

The most interesting part of this collection was the translator's notes on how difficult it was to render Thomas Mann's elegiac German into elegiac English. The linguistic structures of German, which Mann makes proficient, masterful use of, are different enough from English that translation requires nearly as much artistry as that possessed by the original writer. A straightforward idiomatic translation simply won't capture Mann's use of language.

Unfortunately, for a bunch of racy tales about incest and pedophilia, Mann managed to bore me out of my mind and also make me squirm at what a creeper he is. The title story, *Death in Venice*, is about an old writer who becomes so infatuated with a young boy that he stalks the kid all over Venice while moping about how unbearably beautiful the boy is.

Yes, there are lots and lots of allusions and metaphors. *Death in Venice* is a protracted exercise in literary allusions, as are Sieglinde and Siegmund in *The Blood of the Walsungs*.

> She kissed him on his closed eyelids; he kissed her on her throat, beneath the lace she wore. They kissed each other's hands. They loved each other with all the sweetness of the senses, each for the other's spoilt and costly well-being and delicious fragrance. They breathed it in, this fragrance, with languid and voluptuous abandon, like self-centred invalids, consoling themselves for the loss of hope. They forgot themselves in caresses, which took the upper hand, passing over the tumult of passion, dying away into sobbing...

Aww, that's so sweet and kind of steamy.

And by the way, they're brother and sister.

So, from the incestuous Sieglinde and Siegmund to the tormented, angsty, artist *Tonio Kröger* to the doomed writer Gustav von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, there are an awful lot of whiners and people who are either having inappropriate sex or wallowing in misery thinking about people they want to have inappropriate sex with. This is stroke fiction for tormented German intellectuals. I really wanted to like these stories because as I said, Thomas Mann is supposed to be **great** but... ugh.

This collection included the following stories, of which only a couple left an impression on me and the rest kind of passed over me as I sank into a glazed stupor:

The Will for Happiness
Tristan
Little Herr Friedemann
Tobias Mindernickel
Little Lizzy

Gladius Dei
The Starvelings: A Study
The Wunderkind
Harsh Hours
Tonio Kröger
The Blood of the Walsungs
Death in Venice

Okay, go ahead and tell me I'm an uncultured peasant. It's not like I'm some short-attention-span teenager who can't stand literary fiction. But I'm starting to think I just don't like German literature. I still need to give Hermann Hesse one more shot, and maybe, *maybe*, I will try one of Thomas Mann's novels. But not any time soon. I am giving this 2 stars, which I'm sure is a crime against the Aesir, but even though I normally rate books based on a combination of how well I enjoyed them and how well-written I think they are — and Mann *is* a great writer, I can see that — 3 stars would mean that I didn't find the experience completely unenjoyable, and frankly, I was dying to be done with this.

Ted says

Don't know if I've read all these stories or not, so the rating is primarily for *Death in Venice*. I remember (not very well) reading it years ago, and just now scanned it again.

That scanning was enough to convince me it fulfilled all my criteria for a 5-star read. But now I must still go back and read it more carefully. Not because I might change my mind, but because I know I'll enjoy it even more.

When I wrote this short review, I was reading *Buddenbrooks*, and noted that it was amazing to experience again this great short story that Mann wrote many years after his first triumph with the novel.

The Vintage edition pictured contains two of Mann's earlier stories which are said to be, with DiV, his most famous: *Tristan* and *Tonio Kroger*.

(view spoiler)

Barbara says

When I was in college, I read *Death in Venice* for the first time. I can't imagine what I made of it then. Of course, the story of an older man drawn to a beautiful young boy is compelling, but the sense of time running out can't have meant much to me at that point in my life. I read the novella again recently and was struck by its power. Mann captures so effectively the emptiness of Von Aschenbach's life. Though the story is full of people, he is apart, alone, a writer, a recorder of life, not a participant. His growing infatuation with Tadzio threatens his safe world, but his desire for contact with the boy overwhelms everything else.

Here is part of how Mann describes Tadzio when Von Aschenbach seems him for the second time. "It was the head of Eros, with the yellowish bloom of Parian marble, with fine serious brows, and dusky clustering ringlets standing out in soft plenteousness over temples and ears." In the beginning, he is a statue, something beautiful to admire.

Yet at the end of the book, Mann writes, "Once more he paused to look: with a sudden recollection, or by an impulse, he turned from the waist up, in an exquisite movement, one hand resting on his hip, and looked over his shoulder at the shore. The watcher sat just as he had sat that time in the lobby of the hotel when first the twilit grey eyes met his own. . . It seemed to him the pale and lovely Summoner smiled at him and beckoned"

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Elements in a Composition

"Death in Venice" was published in 1912, when Thomas Mann was 37. The protagonist is in his mid-50's.

Both Mann and his wife, Katia, acknowledged that virtually all of the elements of the plot were modelled on their trip to Venice in 1911. However, I don't see any value in trying to analyse the novella as an exploration of Mann's own homoeroticism.

Mann had to choose, prioritise, sublimate and arrange his inspiration as "elements in a composition".

I'd prefer to approach the novella on the basis that it addresses abstract issues that were of concern to Mann for the whole of his life. Indeed, most of them were of equal concern to Goethe, Nietzsche and Freud, not to mention Socrates and Plato before them and Nabokov subsequently.

To paraphrase Anthony Heilbut, I'd prefer to "contemplate the metaphysical implications than the sordid reality". I don't really care if there was a sordid reality.

"Overindulged Intellect, Overcultivated Erudition"

Gustav von Aschenbach is a prominent writer who has achieved critical, popular and official success. He has his "father's sober, conscientious nature" (an Apollonian influence) and the "darker, more fiery impulses of the mother" (a Dionysian influence).

Though he had passed through a "libertine chrysalis stage", he "had never [truly] known leisure, the carefree idleness of youth,...he had...stumbled in public, made false moves, made a fool of himself, violating tact and good sense in word and deed. Yet he eventually gained the dignity to which…every great talent feels instinctively drawn."

In the manner of his father, he had "overindulged the intellect, overcultivated erudition", combined the "rapture of the will with clever management" and so never managed to become an "incorrigible bohemian".

He was married, but soon after became a widower with a daughter who is now married. He is unencumbered by any significant female presence.

An experience while waiting for a tram rattles his composure. In a scene that foreshadows the primary drama of the novella, Aschenbach scrutinises a relatively nondescript male in a bast hat who looks at him "so belligerently, so directly, so blatantly determined to challenge him publicly and force him to withdraw it".

This experience awakened in him a latent desire, and this desire "sported eyes". He learns to look, he learns to see, he learns, perhaps, to gaze:

"His imagination…conjured forth the earth's manifold wonders and horrors in his attempt to visualize them: he saw."

While he has always been "averse to diversion and no lover of the external world and its variety", he feels an "urge to flee his work, the humdrum routine of a rigid, cold, passionate duty."

Aschenbach's flight from diligence witnesses him depart to Venice, a city which is half fairy-tale and half tourist trap.

He has succumbed to a Wanderlust.

The Lust of the Wanderer

One purpose of the trip might be to satiate not just Aschenbach's need to wander, but his lust as well.

Not only does Aschenbach embark on a journey into the outside world, but he commences a journey into his own psyche.

Again, Mann uses a "double" to foreshadow what is to come, this time by describing the atmosphere of one of Aschenbach's novels:

"Elegant self-possession concealing inner dissolution and biological decay from the eyes of the world until the eleventh hour; a sallow, sensually destitute ugliness capable of fanning its smoldering lust into a pure flame, indeed, of rising to sovereignty in the realm of beauty; pallid impotence probing the incandescent depths of the mind for the strength to cast an entire supercilious people at the foot of the Cross, at their feet; an obliging manner in the empty, punctilious service of form; the life, false and dangerous, and the swiftly enervating desires and art of the born deceiver."

This language of dissolution, decay, destitution, ugliness, impotence, superciliousness, punctiliousness, deception hints at the nature of Aschenbach's inner desire. However, I prefer the view that this pejorative language is intended to describe not the nature of his desire, but the consequences of repressing it. To the extent that we repress desire, we are inauthentic.

The Journey to Elysium

There is a duality in the journey. It seems to be genuinely life-affirming, but it recognises the inevitability of Aschenbach's death (which is foreshadowed in the title of the novel).

Mann describes the journey in terms of the Elysian Fields:

"Then he would feel he had indeed been whisked off to the land of Elysium, to the ends of the earth, where man is granted a life of ease, where there is no snow nor yet winter, no tempest, no pouring rain, but only the cool gentle breath released by Oceanus, and the days flow past in blissful idleness, effortless, free of strife, and consecrated solely to the sun and its feasts." 1, 2

Implicit is not just the promise of a certain joie de vivre, but perhaps also a joie de mort.

It's arguable that Elysium represented both the beginning and the end of Aschenbach's life, perhaps the realization of his life. It is a place where the quick and the dead, mortals and immortals, men and gods are one.

The Middle of the Journey

On the ship out, Aschenbach experiences another potential double, an ugly version of himself– an older man consorting with youths, dressed in an extravagantly cut, foppish, gaudy suit with a "rakishly uptilted Panama hat" (does the hat maketh the man?), whom he describes as a "superannuated dandy":

"...it was repugnant to behold the state to which the spruced-up fossil had been reduced by his spurious coalition with the young…he displayed a pitiful exuberance, buttonholing everyone who came up to him, jabbering, winking, sniggering, lifting a wrinkled, ringed finger as a part of some fatuous teasing and licking the corners of his mouth with the tip of his tongue in a revoltingly suggestive manner."

Note the almost vicious assonance – spruced-up, reduced, spurious, exuberance, fatuous, suggestive – which might owe something, if not everything, to the translation.

Clearly repulsed, Aschenbach describes his feelings in terms of "warping" (bent, twisted, distorted):

"He had the impression that something was not quite normal, that a dreamlike disaffection, a warping of the world into something alien was about to take hold…Aschenbach watched him with a frown, and once more a feeling of numbness came over him, as if the world were moving ever so slightly yet intractably towards a strange and grotesque warping, a feeling which circumstances kept him from indulging in..."

The Weft and the Warp in the Social Fabric

The reference to "indulging" seems to suggest that he might have participated, but for the circumstances that intervened.

This dualism is woven into the fabric of the novel, it is its weft and warp. As Aschenbach summarises the events of his voyage, he remarks:

"The observations and encounters of a man of solitude and few words are at once more nebulous and more intense than those of a gregarious man, his thoughts more ponderable, more bizarre and never without a hint of sadness.

"Images and perceptions that might easily be dismissed with a glance, a laugh, an exchange of opinions occupy him unduly; they are heightened in the silence, gain in significance, turn into experience, adventure, emotion.

"Solitude begets originality, bold and disconcerting beauty, poetry. But solitude can also beget perversity,

disparity, the absurd and the forbidden."

Solitude can breed aberrant or deviant behavior. Society is a leveler, a normaliser.

"Wretched Figure"

Mann hints at this duality earlier when he summarises Aschenbach's novel "Wretched Figure", about a character who acts out of "debility, depravity, or ethical laxity".

Aschenbach's creative process reflects a moral rigor or ossification as he abandoned his youthful embrace of the existentialist "abyss". He had sided with convention, and "cast out" the non-conformist:

"The power of the word by which the outcast was cast out heralded a rejection of all moral doubt, all sympathy with the abyss, a renunciation of the leniency implicit in the homily claiming that to understand is to forgive, and what was under way here, indeed, what had come to pass was the 'miraculous rebirth of impartiality,' which surfaced a short time later with a certain mysterious urgency in one of the author's dialogues...

"Was it an intellectual consequence of this "rebirth," this new dignity and rigor, that at approximately this time critics observed an almost excessive intensification of his aesthetic sensibility, a noble purity, simplicity, and harmony of form that henceforth gave his artistic production so manifest, indeed, so calculated a stamp of virtuosity and classicism?"

The Aesthetic Form

Still, Aschenbach speculates that this moral rigidity contains a paradox:

"...does not moral fortitude beyond knowledge—beyond disintegrative and inhibitory erudition—entail a simplification, a moral reduction of the world and the soul and hence a concomitant intensification of the will to evil, the forbidden, the morally reprehensible?

"And has not form a double face? Is it not moral and immoral at once—moral as the outcome and expression of discipline, yet immoral, even antimoral, insofar as it is by its very nature indifferent to morality, indeed, strives to bend morality beneath its proud and absolute scepter?"

Something powerful has occurred in these Nietzschean words.

The type of erudition that Aschenbach targets is inhibitory, repressive, inauthentic and disintegrative. It creates a false dichotomy, which ironically intensifies the lure of evil.

Equally importantly, Aschenbach has severed form, beauty and aesthetics from the realm of morality.

This permits the remainder of the novel to concern itself with beauty, desire and the gaze, free of moral connotations.

It's up to us, the readers, to determine whether this quest is legitimate.

The Beauty of Tadzio

This is when a beautiful long-haired blonde 14 year old Polish boy called Tadzio comes into the picture.

As would later be the case with "Lolita", this sentence might be less disturbing for readers, if the boy's age began with a digit other than "1".

I wish to postpone my discussion of hebephilia to the aesthetic or metaphysical issues. I also want to divorce the metaphysical issues from any concern whether the relationship is homoerotic or heteroerotic.

Aschenbach first spies Tadzio while seated on the promenade outside his hotel:

"Aschenbach noted with astonishment that the boy was of a consummate beauty: his face—pale and charmingly reticent, ringed by honey-colored hair, with a straight nose, lovely mouth, and an expression of gravity sweet and divine—recalled Greek statuary of the noblest period, yet its purest formal perfection notwithstanding it conveyed a unique personal charm such that whoever might gaze upon it would believe he had never beheld anything so accomplished, be it in nature or in art."

The response is an aesthetic one. It focuses on formal perfection as if the boy was a work of art, a classical Greek statue. To the extent that he is beautiful, he is also divine, a product or act of the gods. However, Mann goes further than pure artistic analysis: Aschenbach observes a unique personal charm, one that might not be found in either nature or art.

Mann elaborates:

"Good, good, thought Aschenbach with that cool, professional approval in which artists encountering a masterpiece sometimes shroud their delight, their excitement."

I'm interested in his choice of the word, "shroud", which could mean either "clothe" (which is relatively neutral) or "hide". If the latter meaning was intended, then it introduces a sense of disingenuousness or insincerity.

Divine Beauty

Later, Aschenbach describes the statue as godlike. He associates beauty with the divine. It is how the divine manifests itself on earth. Beauty is perfection of form, and perfection is representative of the divine:

"His eyes embraced the noble figure standing there at the edge of the blue, and in a rush of ecstasy he believed that his eyes gazed upon beauty itself, form as divine thought, the sole and pure perfection that dwells in the mind and whose human likeness and representation, lithe and lovely, was here displayed for veneration."

Aschenbach quotes Socrates to Phaedrus:

"For beauty, my dear Phaedrus, and beauty alone is at once desirable and visible: it is, mark my words, the only form of the spiritual we can receive through our senses and tolerate thereby.

"Think what would become of us were the godhead of reason and virtue and truth to appear before our eyes!...Hence beauty is the path the man of feeling takes to the spiritual, though merely the path, dear young Phaedrus, a means and no more."

The sight of true beauty unsettles Aschenbach, as if he had never experienced it in nature or in art before:

"This was intoxication, and the aging artist welcomed it unquestioningly, indeed, avidly. His mind was in a whirl, his cultural convictions in ferment; his memory cast up ancient thoughts passed on to him in his youth though never yet animated by his own fire."

Gazing at Tadzio forces Aschenbach to cast off his moral rigidity. He now resides solely within the aesthetic (and therefore, the spiritual) sphere, or so it would seem.

Platonic Forms

The word "form" is vital to Mann's analysis of beauty. It reflects Plato's theory of Forms or Ideas. It's probably also worth mentioning Kant in this context (but that's a whole other story). The ideal form is the path by which beauty allows us to travel to divinity or spirituality:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_o...

Still, Mann appears to poke fun at the idea as well:

"Tired yet mentally alert, [Aschenbach] whiled away the lengthy meal pondering abstract, even transcendental matters such as the mysterious connection that must be established between the generic and the particular to produce human beauty and moving on to general problems of form and art only to conclude that his thoughts and discoveries resembled certain seemingly felicitous revelations that come to us in dreams and after sober consideration prove perfectly inane and worthless."

Again, it's difficult to determine whether this apparent aside is designed to undermine our perception of Aschenbach's sincerity.

The Subject's Relationship with the Object of Beauty

Once an object of beauty exists, we can look at and see it. We gaze at it. We desire it. "Our desire sports eyes." To reverse the order of Socrates' dictum, beauty is both visible and desirable.

The object of my desire is a vehicle through which I can experience something beautiful, feel good, and witness something divine, godly or spiritual.

The German word "Sehnsucht" describes the sense of longing, yearning or craving for the object of desire, as well as the sense that something is missing or incomplete:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sehnsucht

Aschenbach feels this Sehnsucht more acutely, because he is a writer. Again, he cites Socrates:

"...we poets cannot follow the path of beauty lest Eros should join forces with us and take the lead…passion is our exultation and our longing must ever be love—such is our bliss and our shame."

Our longing manifests itself as love. So it is that Aschenbach:

"...whispered the standard formula of longing—impossible here, absurd, perverse, ridiculous and sacred

nonetheless, yes, still venerable even here: "I love you!"

Yes, Aschenbach has made a silent declaration of love, but has he made a fool of himself again?

Lust in Longing

The perception of beauty gives the subject an experience of the divine. This allows the subject to internalize the divine.

Mann/Aschenbach uses this mechanism to describe a paradox:

"And then he [Socrates] made his most astute pronouncement, the crafty wooer, namely, that the lover is more divine than the beloved, because the god dwells in the former, not the latter, which is perhaps the most delicate, most derisive thought ever thought by man and the source of all the roguery and deep-seated lust in longing."

Socrates' describes the desire for a whore or a "comely maid" as lust, whereas a man's desire for his wife is love, even though it is also part lust.

Perhaps, the quotation of Socrates is directed at the dissociation of love and lust, where lust dominates, in which case it constitutes "roguery".

While Aschenbach does not consummate his love or longing for Tadzio, some readers might believe that his "love" is mere rationalization of his lust.

Transgressive Lust

I don't consider homoerotic love to be transgressive. The gender of the love object is personal to the subject. I am more interested in the metaphysics and the mechanisms of desire, lust and love (and their mutual fulfillment) than the gender of the object.

I also don't see any point in trying to analyse Mann's personal views on homosexuality within a literary context. I think that he places all forms of love within the same metaphysical framework.

I believe that beauty, desire, lust and love are subjective. Each of us carries around in our mind a "form", which we apply to each object upon which we gaze. To the extent that the object and the ideal conform, we find it beautiful and we feel good. Social standards and ideals of beauty might impact on us, but that does not detract from the subjectivism of our own preferences.

You Can Look, But You Can't Touch

Readers might wish to form a view with respect to Aschenbach's hebephilia.

This is a moral and legal issue determined and enforced by social sanction. Mann suggests that Aschenbach lost his moral compass:

"...when he sat in the morning by the sea, his gaze—heavy, injudicious, and fixed—resting on the object of his desire, or when, as evening fell, he resumed his undignified pursuit through the narrow streets clandestinely haunted by loathsome dying, things monstrous seemed auspicious and the moral code null and

void."

However, apart from thinking and stalking, Aschenbach never actually did anything either immoral or illegal. He never consummated his passion for the object of his desire. He might have had a cosmetic makeover, he might have been "in search of his lost youth", but he did not transgress with any other lost youth. I think he was genuinely "in love".

Sun, Leisure and Sea Breezes

Aschenbach's journey took him to the edge of the Elysian Fields, the edge of the sea, Oceanus, a beach where "the sun diverts our attention from the intellectual to the sensual". Tadzio was the metaphorical vessel by which he arrived there.

As we can glean from the title, Aschenbach also died there.

As Aschenbach dies in his chair, Mann plays around with the identity of the perspective he is describing. At first, it is Aschenbach's, then it appears to be Tadzio's, then it reverts to Aschenbach. Each one gazes at the other.

I suspect that Mann's intention was to transmit Aschenbach's aesthetics to Tadzio, if he did not already subconsciously share them.

If we remove the hebephilic issue by substituting a consenting adult object, then the novella is an eloquent argument not to repress desire, except within moral and legal limits. It is the "overindulged intellect", "overcultivated erudition" that is disintegrative and inhibitory, and therefore unhealthy.

Mann was trying to integrate the Apollonian and the Dionysian spirits. I still think it's a good idea.

Jessica says

Knocking another one down for the novella challenge, I finished Death in Venice this evening. I'm not sure what exactly I was expecting when I choose this story, but it certainly wasn't the tale of a respected older writer gentleman who falls in love with a fourteen year-old demigod boy and eventually dies of cholera because of it. Nope. That's not what I expected at all.

Gustav von Aschenbach sees a strange red-headed man in Munich and suddenly decides to go on vacation. Before retiring to his summer house, he stops in Venice, a city he has visited often. The red-headed man makes numberous appearances throughout the story as a man on the ship, a gondolier, and a street musician. Aschenbach arrives at the hotel and sees Tadzio, a young polish boy, "[p]ale and elegantly reserved, with ringlets of honey-colored hair, a straight sloping nose, a lovely mouth and an expression of divinely belseed solemnity, his face called to mind Greek sculputres of the best period." Aschenback falls in love with the boy and begins to follow him around Venice. Meanwhile, Venice is suffering from the plague. Aschenback knows this but keeps the secret along with the government officials of Venice. Becoming further and further debased, Aschenback falls ill with the cholera and dies.

I did enjoy the progression of the story, though there, at times, seemed to be a number of digressions that slowed down the plot. However, the story is packed with metaphors and literary allusions to Greek

mythology and other arresting techniques. For example, the health of the city of Venice declines at the same rate as does the mental health of our hero. Also, our hero's greatest written achievement is a short story entitled "A True Wretch." I think you can guess by this point who turns out to be that True Wretch. The best part about the story is that a second reading would reveal a number of insights that I missed the first time.

Here are a few of my favorite passages:

"But he discovered in the end that his thoughts and inspirations were like the intimations of a dream, which always seem inspired at the time but prove utterly shallow and useless to the waking mind."

"His nerves lapped up the tooting and jangling, the vulgar pining melodies, for passion criples taste, solemnly following the lure of pleasures that sobriety would either laugh at or reject altogether."

"Ultimately, we are only as old as we feel in our hearts and minds."

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

Finishing fantastic books should be like beating levels in Zelda...wait, WAIT! Here me out...

All I mean to say is that, as a reward for reading something as near-perfect as *Death in Venice*, Goodreads should unlock an extra star, so that we may *properly* rate such rare gems of literature...sort of like extra hearts in Zelda, no?
Fine, fine, never mind.

You indulge in the illusion that your life is habitually steady, simple, concentrated, and contemplative, that you belong entirely to yourself-and this illusion makes you quite happy. For a human tends to believe that the mood of the moment, be it troubled or blithe, peaceful or stormy, is the true, native, and permanent tenor of his existence...whereas the truth is that he is condemned to improvisation and morally lives from hand to mouth all the time. So now, breathing the morning air, you stoutly believe that you are virtuous and free; while you ought to know-and at the bottom do know-that the world is spreading its snares round your feet...

Have a great few moments, all!
