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ISSN - 2347 - 503X

Research Chronicler

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol III Issue VII : Sept. 2015

Editor-In-Chief

Prof. K. N. Shelke

Research Chronicler

ISSN 2347 – 5021 (Print); 2347 – 503X (Online)

A Peer-Reviewed Refereed and Indexed

Multidisciplinary International Research Journal

Volume III Issue VII: September – 2015

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	Indian Individual / Institution	Foreign Individual / Institution
Single Copy	₹ 600	\$40
Annual	₹ 3000	\$200
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Death in Venice: A Modernist Work of Art**Dr. Rupal S. Patel***Shree M.P. & B.A. Patel (Detrojwala) Umiya Arts & Commerce College for Girls, Sola, Ahmadabad, (Gujarat) India***Abstract**

Death in Venice is a wonderful piece of a Modernist work of art. Gustave Aschenbach, the protagonist of the novel, reflects some of the important characteristics of the modern hero who suffers from the **conflict** between the outer world and the inner world. Preoccupation of **appearance and reality** is also an important theme of the novel. Some other characteristics of the modernist work of art are description of the element of **ugliness, chaos, irony, symbolism, the quest for beauty and perfection, death and sexual obsession** etc. are excellently reflected in The Death of Venice. In that way, we can call it a perfect example of a Modernist work of art.

Key Words: conflict, appearance, reality

Thomas Mann is one of the greatest intellectual figures of the 20th century fiction and ranks with the great minds of 20th century like James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Kafka and Bertrand Russell. Thomas Mann, as a novelist and a teller of stories in the grand manner, is the late heir of the central tradition of Modern literature.

Death in Venice, a multilayered novel, raises age old questions about the difference between love and lust, about forbidden love and about what is normal love. It is one of the classics of the world literature and is about Thomas Mann's own love for a ten years old boy. For the modern novelists, the reality of human mind is much more important than the external reality. The modern writers are greatly interested in new techniques and new ideas; not in the traditional ideas and techniques. The result is the new techniques like the stream of

consciousness, metaphor, imagery, symbolism etc. are introduced. Beauty and art are also one of the fascinating themes of modern literature. Thomas Mann displays the modern psychological consciousness. Like Mann, the modernist writers do not give too much importance to the external reality but to the depiction of the inner reality.

The horns of the old dilemma – Art and Life – have perhaps become rather blunt with so much critical attention in ***Death in Venice***. The conflict between an artist and society has also a modernist view. In this novel, Mann represents the conflict between the outer world and the inner world - mind of men.

Modern novels are full of dispossessed persons, and Gustave Aschenbach is its perfect example. The protagonist or the hero of the novel is Gustave Aschenbach, an artist who is very sensitive by nature. He is the central

character of this novel. Aschenbach, an aging writer, pursues Tadzio, a young boy in Venice. His obsession addresses themes of death, delusion and desire. He is deeply concerned with beauty and art. For him art is important. Thomas Mann wants to represent his own feelings through the character of Aschenbach. Aschenbach wants to get something in his life and for its sake; he sacrifices his own time, money and life. Here we can compare Aschenbach with Marlow's Dr. Faustus who has traded his life for the sake of knowledge. Like Dr. Faustus self-centeredness is the distinctive quality in him.

Aschenbach is tired of his monotonous life and wants change. "He had sought but not found relaxation in sleep – though the wear and tear upon his system had come to make a daily nap more and more imperative and now undertook a walk, in the hope that air and exercise might send his back refreshed to a good evening's work" (Mann : 7). There is a sort of turmoil in his mind and at last he decides to go to Venice, because Venice in those days was one of the most beautiful cities. As Mann remarks :

An inner impulse made him wretched, urging him on he knew not wither, he racked his brain (Mann: 20).

The conflict between outer world and the inner world is the distinctive feature of a modern hero. As John Keats puts:

The weariness, the fever and the fret,

Here where men sit and hear each other groan;

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,

Where youth grows pale and specter thin and dies.

(Ode to the Nightingale)

This is the condition of all human beings and is quite suitable to Gustave Aschenbach also. He is tired of this universal appeal and this situation is not only of the people of Keats's time but also of people like Gustave Aschenbach.

Artistic satisfaction and intellect are the distinctive qualities in him and these are the qualities of a modernist writer too. There is an intellectual stamp about him. Physicality is secondary as far as Aschenbach is concerned which is also the feature of a 'modern hero'.

The preoccupation of appearance and reality is one of the important themes of modernist work of art. Aschenbach is an old man and he wants to disguise his old age through cosmetics. Here an old man tries to hide his age which shows the difference between appearance and reality. By and large, every human being tries to show what he actually is not. Like Aschenbach, this is the attitude of all human beings. As Arthur Miller remarks:

"We are all wonderful actors."

Throughout the novel, Thomas Mann portrays the element of ugliness through various characters like a stranger at the chapel, the manager of the hotel, the gondolier, people in Venice, the people

on the ship etc. Most of the characters whom Aschenbach meets during his journey are ugly, except Tadzio.

The stranger at the chapel is mysterious looking. The different physical attributes assigned to the stranger in the novel suggest horrible reality not only of life but also of the whole world. The stranger is of “medium height, thin, beardless and striking snub nosed; he belonged to the red hair type and possessed milky, freckled skin” (8). Aschenbach wants to escape from this horrible reality of life. So he decides to go to Venice, which is for him, a symbol of beauty. The stranger represents death and Aschenbach has a keen desire to see life and perfect beauty.

The gondola is as black as a coffin. Through the phrases like “as black as coffin,” “exposed teeth”, “deformed chin”, “snub nose”, “wrinkles on the brow”, and “goat like skin”, Thomas Mann wants to represent ugliness, destruction and decadence. Through all these ugly characters, Thomas Mann suggests symbolically that the whole world is ugly and in this way, the ugliness is universal.

On the other hand, Mann represents beauty and perfection through the character of Tadzio and chapel “The Mortuary Chapel, a structure in Byzantine style (8). Through all these characters, including Tadzio, Mann represents the theme of perfection, beauty and ugliness as well as the theme of appearance and reality. These themes are gradually developed in the whole

novel. In *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann represents the techniques like imagery, metaphor and symbolism. The image of vulgarity is destroyed by the character of Tadzio. Aschenbach is very much surprised to see the beauty and perfection of Tadzio when he was bathing in the sea. Thomas Mann presents the wonderful description of Tadzio:

A long haired boy of about fourteen. Aschenbach noticed with astonishment the boy's perfect beauty. His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture – pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honey – coloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth the expression of pure and godlike serenity. Yet with all this chaste perfection of form it was of such unique personal charm that the observer thought he had never seen, either in nature or art, anything so utterly happy and consummate. He wore an English sailor suit, with its breast – knot, lacing and embroideries, lent the slight figure something rich and strange, a spoilt, exquisite air (Mann : 31).

Tadzio is beautiful, but at the same time contains germs of disintegration. Biological decline is also there in him.

Here there is juxtaposition between the phrases like beautiful as a tender goat, pure, godlike serenity and as black as a

coffin, snub nose, exposed teeth, deformed chin, wrinkles on the brow etc. One represents beauty and life while the other represents ugliness and death which is the characteristics of the modernist work of art.

In this way, as a modernist writer, Mann, with the help of symbols depicts the theme of ugliness on one hand and the theme of beauty on the other hand. Of course the beauty of Tadzio, later on proves fatal for Aschenbach. He gives up his own life in search of beauty as a contrast to the external world. The modern writers like Thomas Mann are always conscious about eternal reality. As Matthew Arnold points out:

“The eternal note of sadness in”.

(Dover Beach)

According to D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann and Flaubert are not much concerned with the rhythm of life as it is like Shakespeare’s plays. The opinion of D.H. Lawrence is that Thomas Mann’s introspective literature depicts the author’s egocentric self analysis and social questions. As D.H. Lawrence remarks:

Thomas Mann seems to me the last sick sufferer from the complaint of Flaubert. The latter stood away from life as from leprosy? And Thomas Mann, like Flaubert, feels vaguely that he has in him something finer than ever physical life revealed. Physical life is a disordered corruption, against which he can fight with only one weapon, his

fine aesthetic sense, his feelings for beauty, for perfection, for a certain fitness which soothes him and gives him an inner pleasure, however corrupt, the stuff of life may be. Work has none of the rhythm of living thing, the rise of a poppy than the after unfit of the bud, the falling of the flower and the pride of the seed – head (Heller : 1958, 27).

D.H. Lawrence’s severe attack on Thomas Mann and his admiration for Shakespeare leads us to infer that, in his opinion, art must deal with real life which is not in Mann’s novel. In D.H. Lawrence’s heroes, the emotional fulfillment is much more important, but in Mann’s heroes like Aschenbach, there is a quest for beauty and artistic perfection which is the modernist feature of Thomas Mann’s novel.

The quest of beauty and perfection is a basic human instinct, and this human instinct, is found in Gustave Aschenbach which is the central theme of this novel. This is also the attitude of the modernist writer. Aschenbach is in search of beauty, but he is unaware that he is undergoing biological decline. Aschenbach is a modern artist and we can see the sophistication and refinement of art in him which is the main characteristic of the modernist writer.

According to D.H. Lawrence, the actual reality is too far from the work of Mann. As Lawrence points out:

“Thomas Mann and Flaubert run away from the real life” (1958, 79).

But in the case of *Death in Venice*, one would like to differ with D.H. Lawrence. Mann describes external reality as a destructive element. When we read *Death in Venice*, the element of external reality is found in Venice which is a plague ridden city. Here, the city is a symbol of universal ugliness. All the passions, fevers and corruption are depicted in Venice which is the greatest example of external reality. The atmosphere of Venice omits a foul smell. It suggests that there is something wrong in the city, in fact, in the whole world. Venice becomes an extended metaphor of the modern diseased world and sickness, like Camu’s plague ridden city – Oran. Thomas Mann also transmutes the external reality through symbols and allegory.

In this novel, Thomas Mann represents the concrete form of beauty in Tadzio. When any human body represents beauty and perfection, it proves disastrous. Aschenbach degrades himself on account of this beauty and perfection. He comes out from the intellectual height. The sole preoccupation with beauty and perfection may be tempting but it proves dangerous.

Before Aschenbach met Tadzio, he was highly intellectual and a man with self command, but when he meets Tadzio, all

is declined. There are germs of destruction in beauty. It proves that through the character of Tadzio, Thomas Mann describes that human beauty is corruptible. This is the difference between the concept of Wordsworth and of Thomas Mann about beauty. Wordsworth’s beauty has an aesthetic approach which cannot prove fatal for a man.

In order to understand Thomas Mann’s intention as a modern writer, we must have enough knowledge of various symbols which are used in *Death in Venice* in a dexterous manner. Throughout this novel, Mann portrays the conflict between passion and artistic control in the character of Aschenbach. “Bearing the burden of his genius, then upon such slender shoulders and resolved to go so far, he had the more need of discipline – and discipline, fortunately, was his native inheritance from the father’s side” (14).

Aschenbach’s journey to Venice is very symbolic. During the journey by ship, the various people in the ship and the tempest in the sea present chaos. “The sky was grey, the wind humid. Harbour and Island dropped behind, all sight of land soon vanished. Before the boat was an hour out a canvas had to be spread as a shelter from the rain” (22).

From this incident Thomas Mann starts to develop the theme of chaos. We can notice that Aschenbach is going to the world of death. Both the outer and inner world of Aschenbach is chaotic. The inner turmoil of Aschenbach is presented

by the external turmoil. Thus metaphorically, Mann represents the inner struggle of Aschenbach. During his travel by ship, Gustav Aschenbach becomes conscious about death or coming death. The ship in which he is traveling is also very symbolic. It describes the journey to death, destruction and decay.

The sailor describes Venice as a “glorious city” and the voyage as an “excellent choice”. The appearance of the glittering objects is not so glorious. They hide the germs of death and destruction. It is the irony that the voyage represents fear of death and Venice is a plague ridden city. The ship, the sea and the sailor represents microscopic humanity. The symbolic significance is that human world is constantly being threatened by the external force.

Aschenbach meets a strange man in the ship. He is with the group of young students who are probably making their holidays in Venice. That strange man looks young, but actually he is no young; but very old.

Aschenbach’s eye dwelt on him, and he was shocked to see that the apparent youth was not youth at all. He was an old man beyond the doubts (21 – 22).

Through cosmetics, he hides his appearance. Here, we can see the theme of appearance and reality again. This strange character mirrors Aschenbach’s own condition also because later on

Aschenbach also tries to hide his old age by all these cosmetics.

After arriving in Venice, Aschenbach asks a gondola to take him to the shore. Mann describes the gondola in the same suggestive way as he describes the ship, a symbol of death and horror. Here gondola misleads Aschenbach as he is a cheater. Through the example of gondola, Thomas Mann represents that the whole world is a great cheater. Here we can find Mann’s universality also.

The ‘straw hat’ is a symbol of death. The gondoliers wear straw hats. As a matter of fact, all the strangers, whom Aschenbach meets during his journey from Munich to Venice and also in Venice, put on straw hats and through it, Thomas Mann tries to show oneness. It is also very interesting that ultimately Aschenbach himself puts on a straw hat before his death making him one with the death figures.

The whole atmosphere outside the hotel mixed with oil, perfumery, cigarette smoke and carbolic acid suggests death, destruction and decay:

There was a hateful sultriness in the narrow streets. The air was so heavy that all the manifold smells wafted out of houses, shops and cook shops – smells of oil, perfumery, and so forth – hung low, like exhalations, not dissipating. Cigarette smoke seemed to stand in the air, it drifted so slowly away (40).

Aschenbach decides to leave Venice, but all these become a part of his life as he is

near the horror of death. But when he decides to leave the place, it is too late to change his mind. He has already become a victim of death.

The overripe strawberries represent death. Aschenbach's eating of the over ripe strawberries suggests his association with death. The over ripe fruits are the house of foul germs that start the process of death from within. "He was plagued by intolerable thirst. He looked about for refreshment, of whatever sort, and found a little fruit shop where he bought some strawberries. They were over ripe and soft; he ate them as he went (79).

The guitar player whom Aschenbach meets before the hotel is also a satanic figure like a gondola who creates a false atmosphere by hiding the fact that Venice is a plague ridden city. This incident represents the theme of appearance and reality. Actually Venice is a plague ridden city, but this man shows Venice as a beautiful and "glorious city" (17). This is quite typical and significant. Here we can see juxtaposition between the beauty of Venice as well as the ugliness of Venice.

The most important symbolic description of death and sexual obsession is Aschenbach's dream before his death in Venice. The dance of the people is a kind of cosmetic death and dance signifies total annihilation. Despite, the smell of death, Gustave Aschenbach remains in the world of illusion. It is quite symbolic when Thomas Mann compares Aschenbach's whole appearance with "over ripe

strawberries". Of course, Aschenbach himself becomes an overripe strawberry. He is an equivalent to the over ripe strawberry. As Kenneth Bruke remarks:

Human motives re-represented in symbolic actions and Death in Venice are a perfect example of it.

The title *Death in Venice* itself is also very ironical. It is the irony that an artist, Gustav Aschenbach goes to Venice in order to see the glory and beauty of the city. But the glory of Venice also represents decay and death symbolically.

Thomas Mann in this novel does not tell us anything directly or in a straightforward manner but indirectly, through certain symbols, imagery and metaphors. So in *Death in Venice*, we can see the element of "Objective Correlative" as Thomas Mann creates the whole situation in such a manner that the whole situation itself proclaims everything.

In this way, Thomas Mann's concept of art, beauty and perfection is worth noticing, praiseworthy and very important to understand the novel. The whole novel represents the eternal problems of an artist. The artist and his inner life and also the environment in which he operates are new to literature. This is the characteristic of an extraordinary modern novel. The novelty lies in Thomas Mann's method. His language with its symbolic suggestions makes the short novel a unique and moving experience.

In this way, the modernist writers reject the technique of realism and adopt the techniques like symbolism, allegory, imagery and also metaphor. All these elements are excellently presented in

Death in Venice. Besides, this novel contains all the features of a great modernist novel. So we can say that *Death in Venice* is a great modernist work of art.

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ISSN - 2347 - 503X

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