Tod in Venedig

**Space/ place- Munich/ Vienna-** Aschenbach cultural values/ collapse of identity.

* Although it first appears that it has little to do with the forces of modernization as it is set in venerable old Venice, the novella is steeped in symbols that signal the age of modernization (Reiselust; border crossings; international travel timetables; hotels; transport; new communication technology etc.).
* When we start looking at this, we can see that Venice is deeply embedded in a modern world that connects cities, countries and continents. The modern infrastructure and communication systems seem to stand for a social order that is subject to rational decisions and planning.
* **Geography can then be considered to be quite important in the narrative, as it reveals the cultural values on which Aschenbach has based his life, as well as the collapse of this identity.**
* Western civilisation= based on masculine authority, rationality and reason at the expense of desire, feelings and ambiguity. By the end, these are under attack.

**Encounter w Gondolier**

**Gender Roles**

**Transgression of boundaries- modernism (Globalization)**

* As the story progresses, Aschenbach’s sense of inhabiting a stable order which provides clear points of orientation is eroded by his prolonged stay in a place where boundaries are fluid (water/landscape). Aschenbach’s love for Tadzio seems to be mapped onto the city in a way -- especially if you think about how orientation becomes increasingly uncertain as Aschenbach succumbs to his passion while chasing Tadzio through labyrinthine Venice (even engaging in a gondola pursuit)
* The musicians that appear in the hotel bring the reminder of disease and illness (smell), but also they dissolve the social order, forcing their audience into a particular response – infecting them with laughter – that eradicates all markers of social difference such as class and gender in favour of a moment of shared revelry. They are also important for a moment of “connection” with Tadzio.
* Illness also knows no boundaries, originating in the Ganges Delta which perhaps symbolises a threatening counterpart to Venice, the cholera travels to Europe (through Afghanistan, Persia, Moscow…). In the text, Syrian merchants import it to several Mediterranean ports. In Venice, the bodies are disposed of and the disease secretly takes hold as the authorities engage in a cover up to protect tourism. As it spreads then the disease somehow feminises the city, but also Aschenbach as they represent passivity and corruption. Aschenbach keeps the city’s secret to keep Tadzio close.

**Masculinity (homosexuality)**

**Stranger in Munich**

1. **Focusing on the description of the stranger** that Aschenbach sees in Munich, analyse the following passage from Thomas Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig and its significance for the novella as a whole. What other unusual figures does Aschenbach encounter on his travels and what significance do they have? (A)
2. With reference to the focus on **geography** in Thomas Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig, **discuss Aschenbach’s cultural identity and the reasons for his breakdown.**
3. **Dreams**, **in Freud’s view, were all forms of “wish fulfillment”** by which the unconscious tries to resolve some form of conflict which may be recent or from the recesses of the past. Discuss the role of dreams in two of the following texts: Schnitzler’s Fräulein Else, Walser’s Jakob von Gunten, Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig.
4. According to Franz Kuna: “The feeling of not quite fitting into the age, of being strangely out of tune, was a matter of considerable moral and psychological concern to the ‘moderns’; and they contrasted the solid bourgeois spirits who seemed to sit so harmoniously in the world with their own situation: passive, nervous, decadent, ugly, men without qualities**.” To what extent do you agree with this assessment of modernism?** Refer in your answer to two of the following texts: Walser’s Jakob von Gunten, Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig, Kafka’s Die Verwandlung.
5. Focusing on the role **of cultural geography** in Thomas Mann’s Tod in Venedig, analyse the significance of the following passage in the context of the novella as a whole. Discuss to what extent Aschenbach’s crisis enacts the crisis of a particular German identity.
6. Modern literature challenges **conventional gender roles**. Compare and contrast the representation of gender roles in two of the following texts: Kafka’s Die Verwandlung; Schnitzler’s Fräulein Else, Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig, Walser’s Jakob von Gunten . You must base your argument on examples from the texts.
7. **Compare and contrast the break with tradition and the longing for renewal in two of the following texts:** Kafka’s Die Verwandlung, Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig, Walser’s Jakob von Gunten, Kaiser’s Von morgens bis mitternachts. You must base your argument on examples from the texts.
8. **Modern literature queries the value of traditions.** Discuss this with reference to two of the following texts: Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig, Walser’s Jakob von Gunten, Kaiser’s Von morgens bis mitternachts. You must base your argument on examples from the texts.

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* Trade, tourism, spread of disease, cultural geography- role of imagination
* Der Tod in Venedig leaves ‚Heimat‘ behind.
* Heimat as a spatial metaphor, conveys notion of umbilical connection with something larger than the self- eg. Family, locality, native dialect or language, which serves to secure a sense of identity, though may also become constraining and limiting.
* Aschenbach looks at his surroundings and reflects upon them, lending them meaning. These acts of observation and imagination in turn either sustain or undermine his sense of self.
* ‘The geographies themselves create more unease because boundaries, once drawn, might be transgressed’. Aschenbach tries to assuage anxiety by superimposing a geographical order upon his world. – meanings he attributes to places and his attitudes towards people whom he identifies through geographical categories.
* In Der Tod in Venedig the boundaries prove porous and hard to fix, control slips away as the markers of otherness binding identity threaten to collapse.
* Overlapping of places with different meanings- eg. Wafs of intermingled smells hanging in the air of Venice- cooking oil, perfume, cigarette smoke, stink of canals, sea air, the Sirocco.
* **Aschenbach-** born in Silesia, German nationality, identifies as European (ich und die europaische Seele p.447).
* **As a landscape of origin Silesia conveys a sense not of organic unity, but of a prize won and of contested and controlling borders-** like the discipline which Aschenbach exercises upon his body and in his life.
* **Until the attraction of Polish Tadzio breaks through the carapace-** Tadzio’s rank and his Polishness come across as authentic and unstrained compared with Aschenbach’s effortfully acquired ‘von’ and his persona as representative German.
* **Bohemian mother means split inheritance:** ‘Von ihr stammten die Merkmale fremder Rasse in seinem Aussern (p.450).
* **Geographical boundaries cut through Aschenbach‘s physiognomy,** so that his self- image bears the mark of otherness, **‘Die schone Stadt, die ihm zur Heimat geworden’** and his mountain summers in ‘**den rauhen Landsitz’** – further geographical sings of psychic fault lines between love of beauty and harsh self-discipline.
* **In travelling south, Aschenbach follows the tracks of the German literary imagination on a double quest:** as a European looking for cultural origins and renewal, and as a German looking for exotically erotic others- paradoxically, the erotic other he will encounter comes from just across the eastern border of his home province.
* **In civilised Venice and the cosmopolitan Lido hotel Aschenbach feels both more securely in his element than on a Balkan island-** and more interestingly abroad than when surrounded by Austrians. Double effect marked linguistically by ‘die Laute der grossen Sprachen’ (p.469). which Aschenbach either understands or, like Polish, enjoys as excitingly foreign, unlike the barbaric or all too familiar sounds on the island.
* **At first then, Venice and the hotel are comfortably familiar and pleasurably strange.** Familiarity is class- based: a common international bourgeois culture, signified by correct evening dress (Eine Uniform der Gesittung), table manners, afternoon tea, shared knowledge of English/ French.
* Pleasurable strangeness comes from the national stereotypes. These serve as boundary markers of difference which conform Aschenbach’s sense of self.
* All in all, though, national differences promote complacent self- satisfaction in the flaneur on holiday. Confirm him as German, as northern, and as western European, yet also European tout court, as a civilised and cosmopolitan traveller.
* Cultural turn in human Geography marks a shift from national and class geographies- construct objects of study by classifying shared features, to geographies of difference.
* **Stereotypes take on quality of conscious performance, rather than organic essence, so that observer is left fearing the unknown behind the performers mask.** Eg. When the singers perform, the vulgar Russians are sitting down on the same level, blurring the social boundary between wealthy guests and begging buskers.
* **Even more transgressive is the singer’s penetrating body odour-** Neapolitan singer smells of disinfectant paradoxically signals the arrival of disease. His smell is analogous to the Sirocco, a wind which travels up the south/ north axis bringing heat and smells from Africa, just as the cholera arrives on the east/ west axis. Disease and smell equally as penetrative.
* **His working days start with cold showers; his ‘Willensdauer und Zähigkeit’ are compared with the qualities that achieved the conquest of his ‘Heimatprovinz’ (p. 452). But in stinking Venice water rots solid foundations and the boundaries between inside and outside begin to crumble. The Ganges Delta, source of the cholera, is an enormously bigger counterpart to Venice as a place where land and water mingle. Such blurring of elemental boundaries constitutes a symbolic feminizing of space. Bodily penetration by sounds and smells, the loss of the difference between outer citadel and inner self, are an analogous emasculation of the subject.**
* **Venice, the city that once held the gorgeous East in fee, marks the crossing point of north/south and east/west axes. The African wind and the Indian cholera symbolize a vulnerability of western civilization to penetration by forces of destruction. Modernist mythopoeia figures Africa, the dark continent, as female space just as orientalism constructs a luxurious Arab or Asiatic femininity. Although Der Tod in Venedig is remarkably empty of actual women, ‘cherchez la femme’ still holds. For Venice is the deadly female other, ‘die schmeichlerische und verdächtige Schöne’**
* **Like geographies which create unease because boundaries, once drawn, might be transgressed, so too the prescriptions of gender ideology around 1900. Aschenbach has armoured himself with Weiningerian Charakter: after the death of his wife, his was an asexual life of cold showers led apart from women and in continuing denial of forbidden desire. Venice, by contrast, symbolizes Geschlecht: the city is a whore pimped by a sequence of men selling tourism and sex tourism.**
* **Space becomes a stage for the performance of identity in encounters between the self and others.** Whereas the childhood holiday resort is a place of blissful freedom from school, the grown-up holiday resort provides a liminal space of liberation from the normative practices and codes of working life, offering chance encounters with strangers and carnivalesque ritual pleasures which would be too risky at home.
* **Many motifs in Der Tod in Venedig gesture towards carnival and are potentially comic, like the Neapolitan singer. But the carnivalesque provokes not laughter in Aschenbach, but an eerie mixing of phobic disgust and desire. For in modern times, as Stallybrass and White suggest, carnival came to encode ‘that which the proper bourgeois must strive not to be in order to preserve a stable and “correct” sense of self’.** Here the cross-overs concern age: the old-young man on the boat and later Aschenbach dress up to pass as young, though their use of make-up and hair dye is by conventional standards also effeminate.
* **In Mann’s Novelle, Venice shifts in aspect along with the changing mood and intensity of Aschenbach’s desire. In part this is a matter of the difference between the city and the beach as spaces of desire.** The city is the scene of Aschenbach’s worst humiliation as a skulking paedophile stalker. No longer the western male subject, loses all ‘Charakter’ and merges with the corrupt feminised city.
* **On the beach, by contrast, vision prevails and Aschenbach maintains a minimal aesthetic distance. Here the eye may look at bodies less surreptitiously than in the city for the beach is a zone of the body liberated from the controlling signifiers of dress. Clothes sustain conventions, the breaking of which might signify defiance, but can also create painful embarrassment and loss of dignity. At the end of Der Tod in Venedig, the beach is lifted out of modern time and reconfigured as a timelessly classical space. In Aschenbach’s dying vision the figure of Tadzio stands out from the boundless element. As form emerging from formlessness, this image of Tadzio preserves distance and separation.**
* **If Der Tod in Venedig undoes ‘Europe’, it also unsettles the modernist/postmodern distinction. For the Novelle massively subverts the Western bourgeois subject and the master narratives of progress and enlightenment, drawing, as do postmodern commentators, on Nietzsche’s cultural criticism and deploying the characteristic postmodern device of parodic citation, here of Homer, Plato, or Platen. Yet the modernist sense of crisis paradigmatically represented in Der Tod in Venedig still speaks to readers in our globalizing times when cosmopolitan hopes for a borderless world meet fears of ‘grenzenlose Vermischung’ and when assertions of cultural identity can turn into violent exclusion of others. For the boundaries of Europe, whether defined as Christian or enlightened, remain deeply contested.**

**Masculinity in crisis:**

* **Aschenbach’s lust for a teenage boy appear as expressions of their masculinities in crisis.**
* **Western bourgeois male ideal developed during the late eighteenth century and still continues to inform conceptions of masculinity.** Comprised notions of courage, physical strength, honour, good manners, Bildung, self-confidence, heterosexual prowess, provider, wealth, serve in uniform.
* **Tod in Venedig written at a time when bourgeois male image was under attack in Western Europe.** In the early 20th century, industrialisation, women’s movement, urbanization- led to significant changes in bourgeois gender roles. Women gained more influence in the social, pol, econ and sexual arenas and challenged the traditional patriarchal system.
* **1950s, a time of shifting gender roles.** After WW2, many young men rejected their father’s soldierly ideal, instead embracing softer masculinity. **Mann does not refer to the twentieth century debate on masculinity explicitly but evokes notion of a male midlife crisis.**
* **Male ideal linked to youth. Thus, when physical and mental exhaustion hinder him from writing it makes it increasingly difficult for him to suppress his homoerotic desires, he sees the very basis of his masculinity and his social standing as a representative bourgeois writer at risk.** His anxieties regarding aging and masculinity culminate in his desire for Tadzio, a fourteen-year-old Pole. **Relationship purely visual.** Avoid verbal contact that could disturb his fantasy, gaze creates Tadzio as an object of ambiguous desires. On the other hand, sees the boy as the embodiment of youth and classical beauty. Simultaneously, constructs him as a figure that challenges the bourgeois order and gender roles and subverts values associated with youth. Thus, focus on Tadzio’s appearance and behaviour that allow Aschenbach to stylize him as a ‘verzarteltes Vorzugskind’, who disregards bourgeois principles of order and obedience and shows a level of care in his clothing traditionally associated with girls.
* **Construction of an image of Tadzio conferring him to fluid gender identity,** undermining basic duality of bourgeois culture while evoking androgynous boys who figured in contemporary homoerotic literature. Assigned features not specifically male or female (straight nose, lovely mouth, slim hands, grey eyes). Curly long hair associated with women at the beginning of the 20th century. Fact that Tadzio belongs to the female sphere of his mother, sisters, governess further underscores his blurred gender identity, as do the recurring allusions to Hermes, associated with sexual ambivalence.
* **Contrast between his aging body and the teenager’s young from prompts Aschenbach to become increasingly disgusted with his own physique.** This motivates A to minimize the differences in their physical conditions, even to identify with the teenager.
* **His efforts to be attractive to Tadzio reflects the central role that norms of masculine corporeality played in the contemporary male ideal and testify to the incompatibility of these norms w older age.** A wants his appearance to mirror that of the Pole. Tries to appear younger w help of accessories, perfume- narrator indicates this is futile. Still described as ‘den Grauhaarige’.
* **Aschenbach construes certain features of Tadzio’s physique as indications of bad health and premature aging.** Sees Tadzio as a weak constitution/ weak gender identity, both understood to characterize old age in men. Discovers his unhealthy-looking teeth, links to anaemia which was considered a female affliction around the turn of the century. Not surprisingly, subversion of Tadzio’s youthful masculinity leaves Aschenbach with a ‘Gefuhl der Genugtuung oder Beruhigung’, as he finds the boy corporeality not quite as superior to his own.
* **A dies from cholera because he ate overripe strawberries after losing sight of Tadzio in the Venetian maze,** text suggests he dies from the inability to integrate advanced age and homoerotic appetites into a male image that would command the respect of bourgeois society. Like the city of Venice, his life is not built on firm ground: he suffers from ‘nur halb korperlichen Schwindelanfallen’ and ‘einem Gefuhl der Ausweg- und Aussichtslosigkeit’.
* **Unable to deny his age and his desires, he cannot return to his previous existence, at the same time not prepared to accept the less favourable reputation that any defiance of social expectations would entail.** Still committed to the bourgeois worldview, this cannot imagine an alternate existence.
* **Tadzio’s impending departure at the end brings the ultimate crisis:** envisioning himself summoned to the boy to follow him into the unknown, A dies.
* **Aschenbach yields any responsibility to (fantasy of) Tadzio, yet does not have the strength to imagine, let alone face, the possible consequences of pursuing the boy.** Ironically culmination of writer’s crisis in death preserves his appearance as a perfect representative of bourgeois masculinity in the eyes of a public who remains ignorant of Aschenbach’s underlying struggles.