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Professor Eric Miller COLT 28: Mind Reading

**Paper 1: Death in Venice**

Death in Venice is quite intentionally and explicitly an artist-novella. Why? Why an artist? What kind of meaning can/could the story then have for all of us non-artists?

Death in Venice, an artist novella by Thomas Mann, was written to show the intricacies of human nature, which produces beauty in our lives that artists capture through their various artworks. The story follows Aschenbach, the protagonist, who fancies a young boy, Tadzio, on a visit to Venice and remains there until his death. Though slightly exaggerated, this story is based on Thomas Mann’s trip to Venice with his wife in 1911, when he began to fancy a young man (Study.com). Aschebach, a famous writer like Thomas Mann, is represented as an artist fully embracing all the aspects of life, including the civilized and sensual, to show the intricacies of personalities that artists openly embrace and that non-artists are scared to do. Through this story, I believe Thomas Mann is telling us non-artists to fully embrace all aspects of ourselves, even if it means going against societal norms, and that many things in life, particularly emotions and personalities, are not as binary as we make them out to be.

Thomas Mann tells non-artists to openly embrace our eccentricities by showing us the conflict between Auschenbach and the narrator and sharing Aushenbach’s thoughts and emotions directly with the reader. In Venice, represented as the intersection between restrained and “civilized” Western Europe and the sensual and exotic Eastern Europe (SparkNotes), we see the conflict between Auschenbach and the authoritative narrator. One such area of conflict that shows Auschenbach embracing his love for Tadzio while the narrator expresses societal disappointment is shown through the quote, “When the crowd was streaming out through the opened portals into the brilliant square with its swarms of pigeons, the lover hid in the vestibule; he kept trader cover, he lay in wait … He was drunk, and his steps followed the promptings of the demon who delights in treading human reason and dignity [underfoot].” (Mann). In this quote, we can see the dramatization of events at the start by Auschenbach. The paragraph finishes with the narrator offering a societal outlook on Auschenbach’s obsession with Tadzio. The narrator’s voice always has a more practical and judgemental tone, contrasting Auschenbach’s narration of events and emotions. Auschenbach, however, is not afraid to embrace his love for Tadzio despite the narrator’s/societal judgment and gets bolder in stalking Tadzio with each passing day. As chapters 4 and 5 progress, the conflict between the narrator and Auschenbach gets more intense, and the narration of events slowly shifts from the authoritarian narrator’s perspective to Auschenbach’s. The perspective shift allows us to see Auschenbach embrace his complete self and “understand” why he pursues his actions.

I believe that Thomas Mann used an artist to convey this message because society accepts an artist’s eccentricities while acknowledging their humanity. In chapters one, two, and three, we see the “human/sensible” side of Auschenbach, which would have been very relatable to a person from the early 20th century. As the story progresses, we see Auschenbach indulge in his passions as a conflict emerges between him and the narrator. By building a connection earlier with the reader and then showing Auschenbach’s eccentricities, Mann makes the reader doubt their knowledge and understanding of Auschenbach. Through the earlier connection with Auschenbach, Mann makes us examine our complete selves to identify and embrace parts of our identity that we hide from the rest of society. After all, artists are humans; through this connection, we can become more accepting of ourselves and others for who they are and not just parts we can relate to.

The connection and contrast with Auschenbach show us that every person is multifaceted. The narrator is often judgemental of Auschenbach’s actions and emotions like any member of society would. As Cohn writes in Transparent Minds, “No sooner does the narrator mention an inner happening … than he imposes a value of judgment.” (Cohn 24). This outlook is primarily because of the narrator’s binary outlook on life. He views Auschenbach as sensible or not, proper or scandalous, civilized or passionate, to name a few categories. In reality, people and life tend to be far from binary. The narrator’s inability to understand this is shown through the line, “Who can explain the stamp and the nature of an artist? Who can understand this deep instinctive welding of discipline and license?” (Mann). Although the narrator talks about Auschenbach, this misunderstanding of categorizing things, like people and emotions, that often cannot be categorized binarily applies to all sections of society. Thomas Mann not only conveys this message but is also able to show it through the life of Aschenbach.

In conclusion, Thomas Mann leverages our existing connection with artists to convey a message of acceptance and antibinary classifications of human emotions, choices, and life itself. By relating us to Auschenbach and artists in general, Mann shows that even we (nonartists) have an artistic side we can bring out by embracing our eccentricities. Although conveyed through Auschenbach in 20th-century Europe, this message still holds for 21st-century society.

Works Cited

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