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Professor Eric Miller COLT 28: Mind Reading

**Final Paper Part 4: Death In Venice**

Pick a leitmotif (a recurring motif, theme, or symbol) from Death in Venice. How does it function in the story? What is its meaning for the story? How does it cast light on one (or more) of the deeper meaning - levels of the work as a whole? What is this deeper meaning? Why does the author use a leitmotif to show/reveal this, rather than just having the narrator state it explicitly?

Death in Venice is an artist novella by Thomas Mann that follows Auschenbach, a famous artist, on his trip to Venice. In Venice, he starts to fancy a young boy, Tadzio, and ends up staying in Venice to remain closer to Tadzio, despite the deadly outbreak of cholera in the city at the time. One of the primary literary tools discussed in this novel is the narrator conflict between Auschenbach and the narrator, which gradually shifts the narration of events from the domineering third-person narrator to a first-person narration from Auschenbach’s point of view. Another key aspect of the novel, however, is the numerous symbols placed by Thomas Mann throughout the story to reflect Auschenbach’s mental and emotional states. One such symbol is the decay of Venice to highlight the decline and decay of Auschenbach as he enters the final ‘sunset’ years of his life. One of the key advantages of conveying this message through the use of symbolism is that it provides the reader with a consistent way to understand Auschenbach from the start to the end of the story despite the change in narratory method and the shift in the narrator’s attitude towards Auschenbach and his actions.

Additionally, the use of symbolism helps Thomas Mann keep the readers engaged in the story without tiring us of the numerous repetitive explicit comparisons of the objects the symbols allude to. By “showing” the reader instead of “telling” the reader what is going on inside Auschenbach’s mind and how that influences his relationship with the world around him, Thomas Mann also gives the reader the ability to create their conclusions for the events in the novel and their explanations and/or justifications for Auschenbach’s actions. As a result, readers would be engaged while reading and engaging with this work long after reading the novel through debates and seminars. The numerous symbols in the story can also serve as a validation tool for the reader to understand Auschenbach objectively. The change in narratory perspectives highlights the subjectivity of how Auschenbach is portrayed to the reader because we can see the narrator's frustration as conflicts emerge between him and Auschenbach prompting the narrator to portray Auschenbach in a negative light. Auschenbach’s inner monologue, on the other hand, justifies all his ethically questionable actions, including stalking Tadzio and his family. The constant use of symbols in the novel helps the reader understand Auschenbach independently of the narratory perspective.

One of the symbols is the comparison of Auschenbach’s increasing fragility and old age to the decay of Venice to highlight Auschenbach’s true emotional and mental states despite his dressing up to appear younger than he is and his inner monologues to try and trick himself into believing that he is more youthful than he is. One quote that highlights this symbol is, "The city's beauty paled in the sunlight, and in its heart, there was a smell of decay. It seemed to him that he was growing old too, here in Venice as if the poison of the air had entered his body and was corroding him from within." The selected quotation connects the dying of Venice to Auschebach’s old age and physical fragility from the perspective of the external narrator. Besides stating that Auschenbach is decaying from within, the quote also brings in Venice as a symbol for comparison to Auschenbach’s physical, emotional, and mental states because the city is decaying. The city’s location has made it ideal for both the cultural and evil exchange between the mystical Eastern and modern Western cultures. The numerous canals in the city and the intersection of numerous cultures have made Venice an ideal place for diseases to spread to new populations. In the modern world, Venice can still be seen as decaying because of the gradual sinking of the city due to climate change and global warming.

In conclusion, there are numerous symbols present in Thomas Mann’s novel Death in Venice. These symbols are included to help the reader gain an objective understanding of Auschenbach’s psychological state and his motivations for his actions despite the narratological shift in the middle of the story. The symbols offer an objective understanding, giving the readers the ability to arrive at conclusions and develop their understanding of Aushchenbach.