

BOOK CLUB NEWS
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Death in Venice, by Thomas Mann

Discussion Leader: Richard Bass

"A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people." Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*

"I must tell you that we artists cannot tread the path of Beauty without Eros keeping company with us and appointing himself as our guide." Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*

"Solitude gives birth to the original in us, to beauty unfamiliar and perilous - to poetry. But also, it gives birth to the opposite: to the perverse, to the illicit, to the absurd." Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*

"Nothing is stranger or more ticklish than a relationship between people who know each other only by sight, who meet and observe each other daily - no hourly - and are nevertheless compelled to keep up the pose of an indifferent stranger, neither greeting nor addressing each other, whether out of etiquette or their own whim."
Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*



Our discussion leader was mysteriously absent. I sent an email hoping that all is well. As for the discussion, without having prepared to provide content, I focused on questions to stimulate thought and comments. I began by asking readers to share information about the author. This brief biography includes information offered by the readers and Wikipedia. Thomas Mann (1875 – 1955) was a German author, social critic, philanthropist, and winner of the 1929 Pulitzer Prize in Literature. In 1933, when Hitler came to power, he fled to Switzerland. When World War II broke out in 1939, he moved to the United States, returning to Switzerland in 1955. His highly symbolic and ironic works are noted for their insight into the psychology of the artist and the intellectual. Mann's diaries showed that he struggled with his homosexuality. Gilbert Adair, Scotch author, describes in *The Real Tadzio*, describes how, in the summer of 1911, Mann had stayed at the Grand Hotel des Bains on the Lido of Venice with his wife and brother, when he became enraptured by the angelic figure of Wladzio Moes, a 10-year-old Polish boy.

I followed by asking readers identify the historical context of the book, written in 1911. Ruth shared with us what her mother told her about growing up during that time. There was great pressure to behave according to the conservative rigidity of society. The Ottoman Empire was under great political and social pressure due to rapid modernization. Ruth also told us that she read the book in German and found the English translation to be a “different” story; Mann’s original German contained a great deal of politics. Discussion followed on the difficulty translators face to convey the author’s mood, style, and oftentimes content. There have been several translations, the latest being in 2005. A film version in English was made in 1971 featuring the music of Gustav Mahler who died the same year Mann wrote the book

Discussion then flowed randomly. What struck you about the story? Why did the 36-year-old Mann create an older main character? What is the significance of decay? How is the story Freudian? What is the meaning of the references to Greek mythology? Does Gustav von Aschenbach fear getting old? Discuss the themes of reason vs passion, aesthetics vs love, decay vs beauty, age vs youth. Explain the symbolism in the novella: cholera, the red-headed characters that so disturbed Aschenbach, Venice, the young Tazio, the aging Aschenbach. Compare *Lolita* written in the first person to *Death in Venice* written in the objective third person, both of which share the theme of older vs younger. Do you feel sympathy for Gustav von Aschenbach? Having no previous knowledge of the story, did you know who was going to die? Why Venice? Why did Mann have von Aschenbach die? Discuss von Aschenbach’s transformation; did he truly love Tazio? The story turned significantly when von Aschenbach decides not to tell the Polish family of the cholera; he says it was not to worry the family. Comments? Why did he decide to stay in Venice? One feminist reader noticed that the boys were freely playing, while his sisters were dressed like nuns and restricted by their clothes. Did Tazio know he was being observed? Did Tazio ever connect with von Aschenbach? Did they have a relationship?

Several readers found the book arduous, comparing the style to Henry James or James Joyce. Some admired the construction of the novella: as Mann moved from the cerebral to the emotional, the sentences became shorter. One reader identified two things that stood out: in the original German, Tazio is not likeable, and feelings cannot be controlled. One reader found it fascinating that we discussed the issues of translation. Others appreciated Ruth’s insights. Several readers appreciated the number of layers of meaning contained in the story. While our discussion was broad and lively, we couldn’t cover all that is contained in this classic. Some readers expressed emotional reaction to the story, a testament to the quality of Thomas Mann’s writing.

Next month, March, we will meet one hour early at 1 PM to nominate books for the following season. A nomination form will be provided. At 2 PM we will discuss *Tinseltown: Murder, Morphine, and Madness at the Dawn of Hollywood* by William J. Mann; Marilyn McElroy will be the discussion leader.

