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## **Freudian Psychoanalytic Reading of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*: The Clash of Id, Ego and Super-ego**

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#### **Abstract**

*Psychoanalytic literary criticism emerges specifically from a therapeutic technique which the Viennese neurologist Sigmund Freud developed for the treatment of hysteria and neurosis at the end of the nineteenth century. All of Freud's work depends upon the notion of the 'unconscious'- the part of the mind beyond consciousness which, nevertheless, has a strong influence upon our actions. Linked with this is the idea of 'repression', which is the 'forgetting' or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events, so that they are forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious. A similar process is that of 'sublimation', whereby the repressed material is 'promoted' into something grander or is disguised as something 'noble'. Later in his career, Freud suggested a three-part model of the human psyche dividing it into the 'ego', the 'super-ego', and the 'id'. The 'id' incorporates libidinal and other desires, the 'super-ego' internalizes social standards of morality and propriety, and the 'ego' tries as best it can to negotiate the conflicts between the insatiable demands of the 'id', the impossibly stringent requirements of the 'super-ego', and the limited possibilities of gratification offered by reality. This paper will focus particularly on some typical Freudian psychoanalytical features that are evident in the character of Aschenbach in Mann's novella *Death in Venice*.*

**Key Words:** *Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis, id, ego, super-ego, control, repression, sublimation, Thomas Mann, Death in Venice.*

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Thomas Mann, a modern literary giant, was probably the greatest of modern German novelists. The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929 stimulated world interest in his writings, which were translated into many languages. Students of German literature found that, in his philosophy, Mann was highly Germanic and at the same time a citizen of the world. This paper intends to employ some of the specific Freudian psychoanalytical interpretive tools to analyse Mann's novella *Death in Venice*.

*Death in Venice* chronicles the downfall of an aging German writer known as Gustav von Aschenbach. Being the son of a bourgeois father and a bohemian mother, Aschenbach has spent most of his life struggling to eliminate the bohemian aspects of his nature. After years of living a morally and artistically ascetic life dominated by reason, social courtesy, rigid outlook and discipline, Aschenbach finds himself afflicted with writer's block. One day, during the solitary visit

to a Munich cemetery, the sight of an exotic-looking man disturbs him, and he is seized with a profound longing to travel to the exotic.

Consequently, Aschenbach journeys south and reaches Venice. After his arrival at the hotel in Venice, Aschenbach encounters a fourteen-year-old Polish boy named Tadzio, who has also come to the same hotel vacationing with his family. The boy seems extremely beautiful to Aschenbach and he becomes obsessed with the boy, and follows his family on their excursions in the city and spies on the boy from afar. As Aschenbach succumbs to his long-repressed physical desire and spiritual thirst, he eventually begins to lose his sense of self, any sort of control over his own desires and actions, and experiences a disturbing nightmare in which he participates in a Dionysian orgy. Meanwhile, when rumors circulate that cholera is spreading throughout the city, he refuses to leave Venice and decides not to inform Tadzio's mother about the imminent danger that has foreshadowed the city, as he cannot even bear the very thought of being separated from Tadzio- the ultimate source of his affection and eccentricity. One day, Aschenbach eats overripe strawberries, knowing that they were likely infected with disease (as he gradually loses control over his own consciousness).

The novella exposes polarities of desire : impulse versus repression, transgression versus conventionality, exuberance versus restraint. From the very first reading of the novella, there exists the apparent conflict between the Freudian 'id' and 'super-ego' in the character of the protagonist Gustav von Aschenbach.

Aschenbach is a reserved, solitary, cerebral and distinguished German author who is stuck between the contradictory forces of his super-ego and his id. Consequently, the conflict between these two diverge elements of his psyche results in his tragic death in Venice. The clash between his id and super-ego is obvious in the very first chapter when Aschenbach, despite his strictly regulated and disciplined life, yearns for the "exotic". In the beginning of the novella, he contemplates a vacation and decides to spend his summer in the exotic Venice – the summers which he usually spends working. After watching the strangely looking man in the cemetery, Aschenbach is suddenly engulfed by his 'base' desires – a call for the 'wild', for the 'exotic'. This is, perhaps, the first indicator in the novella of his libidinal forces, which have long been suppressed by his strict bourgeois life-style, coming to the forefront and acting upon him:

If it was the wayfarer-like air of the foreigner working on his imagination or some other corporeal or mental influence that caused it : a strange distention of his soul unexpectedly made itself known, a sort of roving unrest, a juvenile thirst for the distant, a feeling, so novel and yet so long forgotten that he, hands on his back and his eyes fixed at the ground, stood transfixed to probe that emotion and its nature and aim. It was wanderlust, nothing more ; but verily coming in the form of a fit and ardently intensified, even to the point of an illusion. Because he saw, as a sample of all those wonders and horrors of the diversity on Earth which his desire was suddenly able to imagine, an enormous landscape, a tropical swamp under a moist and heavy sky, wet, lush, and unhealthy, a primordial wilderness of islands and mud-bearing backwaters that men avoid.....and felt his heart beating with horror and mysterious yearning (Death in Venice p. 4).

This yearning of Aschenbach is set against his image of a perfect and dedicated artist, who, must alienate himself from all sorts of pleasure of the outside world – he must stay away from his base

desires, even though that distancing leads to stagnation of the imagination. This self-alienation of Aschenbach is strictly regulated by his super-ego ideal which suppresses his longing to set his soul free from the social vanities, norms and binding rules of the society. Being the son of a bourgeois father, Aschenbach used to lead a life "tempered and corrected by the reason and restraint that he had exercised from his younger years on" (Death in Venice p. 5). He was:

...too much occupied with the duties imposed by his ego and the European soul, too overburdened with the duty of production, too little interested in distracting himself to be a faithful lover of that gay outside world, he had contended himself wholly with that knowledge of the Earth's surface that can be gained by anyone without ever having to abandon his circle and was never even tempted to leave Europe (Death in Venice p. 5).

Despite living a life repressing his desires to abandon such rules and regulations, Aschenbach at times is driven by an unknown thirst to transgress the peripheries of social conventionality as writes Mann - "It was a desire to fly, he had to admit to himself, this yearning for the distant and the novel, this desire for liberty, for being free of burden, for being able to forget – the desire to escape his work, the common place location of a rigorous, frigid, and ardent duty..... the unnerving, daily-repeating struggle between his tenacious and proud, so often tested will power and that growing weariness, of which nobody was allowed to know." (Death in Venice p. 5) perhaps because this desire to flee, to escape is a forbidden desire which he is supposed to repress to the outside world-the world which thrusts upon him the duties of being a so-called gentleman and expects him to veil his base desires with its artificial vanity. These desires which have long been repressed since his childhood, now begin clashing with the demands of his social life.

This is the first encounter evident in the novella between his id and super-ego which results in his sojourn to Venice where his innermost urges, his libidinal drives start eclipsing his super-ego ideal, and gradually his super-ego starts collapsing. His lonesome and solitary life, governed by a strict routine and reason, actually, haunts him while he is alone in his house:

He was afraid of the summer in the countryside, alone in that little house..... He feared the familiar sight of the mountains and steep cliffs that would surround his listless dullness. And so there was a need for something different, some living without a set plan, some fresh air from remote places, an infusion of fresh blood to make the summer more tolerable and productive (Death in Venice p. 6).

This sort of suppression of the inner drives ultimately turns everything chaotic and utterly disgraceful in Aschenbach's life. Aschenbach always succumbed to reason and a strictly disciplined life, underestimating his inner urges and desires. This discipline was inflicted upon him since his childhood:

Therefore since he had to carry the duties which his gifts burdened him with on tender shoulders and intended to go a long way, discipline was most important to him – fortunately, that kind of discipline had been running in his father's side of the family (Death in Venice p. 8).

Chapter Three of the novella typifies most perceptible encounters between Aschenbach's id, ego and super-ego, beginning from the moment when he first time catches sight of Tadzio in the opulent Venetian hotel. In that hotel, Aschenbach witnesses an exquisitely beautiful young boy of around fourteen. The artist in him cannot help but appreciate the young boy's beauty. At this point,

Aschenbach's attraction for the young boy is purely aesthetic – the young one's extraordinary physical charm soothes the artist in him and Aschenbach compares him to an ancient Greek statue :

It was a group of adolescents and bare adults.... And a long-haired boy of about fourteen years. With astonishment Aschenbach noticed that the boy was perfectly beautiful. His countenance – pale and gracefully reserved, surrounded by honey colored locks, with its evenly sloped nose, the lovely mouth, the expression of alluring and divine earnestness, was reminiscent of Greek statues from the most noble period, and with all its perfection of form it had such a personal appeal that the onlooker thought he had never encountered anything similar either in nature or in art (Death in Venice p. 23).

Thereon, Aschenbach constantly stalks Tadzio throughout Venice, wherever the young boy goes. He is so much intoxicated and obsessed with Tadzio's physical beauty that he falls in love with Tadzio at the very first sight, follows him like an ardent and possessive lover, and there are such minute details he observes about Tadzio just as a lover depicts his beloved in superfluous terms. Henceforth, he slowly and steadily develops insanity while driven by his inner desires – his forbidden yearning for the young boy. He succumbs to the call of his 'id' - his 'libido' – which he has been submerging inside him due to his high status in the society as a reserved man of letters. If he has to maintain his social status and vanity, then he is bound to obey the norms of conventionality. This sort of stifling life only represses the inner drives, which are, otherwise, prohibited and supervised by the ego ideal, in order to maintain the super-ego ideal. Controlling and suppressing the id from the very childhood eventually distorts and damages sometimes the very concept of 'sexuality' in us. That is what Aschenbach now starts experiencing (though he may not realize it in his conscious mind). His all actions are now dictated by his id – his desires and longings towards Tadzio – the forbidden love. It has been observed that, man has an innate urge or tendency towards the forbidden – towards self-annihilation, knowing every adverse side of it. Aschenbach, now, transgresses the social conventions and customs, and falls a prey to his base desires – his id. He does not suppress them anymore, and, rather, performs such actions like pursuing Tadzio like an insane person knowing very well about the impossibility of this relationship coming to any reality from both sides. Needless to say, Aschenbach, now, pursues Tadzio like a lunatic lover despite knowing the news about the outbreak of cholera in the city. His super-ego control of self is facing a constant threat from his id-ideal. The pleasure-principle (that is, pursuing his object of desire despite any obstacle) of Aschenbach starts eclipsing his morality- principle (that is, leaving the city as soon as possible and not going after the young boy):

So the confused one wished for nothing else except to pursue that object of his desire at all times, to dream of it in its absence, speak tender words even to its shadow. Loneliness, foreignness, and the excitement of a late and deep rapture enticed him to allow himself to do even the most bizarre things, without blushing or feeling shame....(Death in Venice p. 51).

But there are at times his ego clashing with his id as when he regrets his feelings and actions:

But still there were moments of pause and contemplation. What kind of road! He thought. What kind of road have I chosen!.... He also remembered them at that moment, involved in such an unfit experience, taken in by such exotic emotional debauchery... (Death in Venice p. 51).

The release of desires and gradual blurring of restraints now take place in his psyche. Aschenbach is now overpowered by the desire to follow his doom – his death by staying in the city. The collapse of his capacity to make any conscious and judicious decision leads him to his

death. Not only is his super-ego collapsing, now his ego is also collapsing. The ego normally takes care of self-preservation, fleeing in the face of danger. In the character of Aschenbach, this normal reaction is ignored; he is now being increasingly controlled by his id.

Aschenbach's secret and distant admiration of the beauty of Tadzio introduces in the novella the prohibited desires; the ego-instincts are now replaced with object-instincts. He idealizes Tadzio in superfluous terms. In Chapter Four, Aschenbach's obsession with Tadzio reaches its climax, and he declares his 'love' for Tadzio. As a result of the breakdown of super-ego control of self, he invades his prohibited and forbidden homosexual desires for Tadzio :

His sleep was short; the deliciously uniform days were separated by brief nights of happy listlessness. He went to bed early, since the day seemed finished to him as soon as Tadzio had disappeared at around nine o'clock. But in the beginning dawn a tenderly penetrating fright awoke him; his heart remembered his adventure... That wondrous event filled his soul, consecrated by the sleep, with devotion... (Death in Venice p. 44)

Tadzio is now gradually transformed from being an aesthetic object into an object of passionate desire. While stalking Tadzio like a lunatic lover, Aschenbach has abandoned his own, otherwise, strict ego-ideal –the distinction he throughout his life has worked so hard to achieve. He has also abandoned his super-ego control of self, and submits to the desires, which after having long been repressed and sublimated, now, return to his conscious mind so much more intensely to haunt him. Aschenbach 'idealizes' and 'idolizes' Tadzio – he lets Tadzio represent his (Aschenbach's) ego-ideal. This causes his downfall instead of preserving his own hard-won ego-ideal (his social dignity and a reserved, disciplined life), Aschenbach replaces this ego-ideal with 'idealized' Tadzio. Insofar as the ego-ideal is underpinned by the super-ego, his super-ego also begins collapsing.

Though the Venetian atmosphere does not suit him and after knowing about the outbreak of cholera, he should have escaped the place, he longs to stay there near Tadzio and, is reluctant and selfish to inform Tadzio's mother about the outbreak, so that Tadzio never leaves him - "For the second time and permanently the city had proven to be very harmful to him in that kind of weather" (Death in Venice p. 32).

Now he is indecisive of whether to leave the city and Tadzio for good or to stay there inviting the imminent death. He is torn inside between the binary forces of his id and super-ego. As a result, he is mortally infected by cholera and eventually dies.

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