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Fatal Obsessions: An Uncanny Look at Death and Aging

On the cancer floor at Georgetown Medical Center the doors are air-locked and visitors have to wear masks upon entering. Roaming these halls, you see emaciated faces and bodies of patients ravaged by chemotherapy, the walking dead. But the look of death is often one of emaciation and gauntness. Looking into their faces can be frightening. But, only those who have suffered the isolation and alienation of illness or age can understand the fear that accompanies it. Sickness and death can, and does, elicit fear, not only in the one suffering, but in the community around them. Often humor is used to deflect this fear and glib euphemisms for death abound: kicking the bucket, croaking, pushing up daisies, etc. Other times fear is not dealt with rationally and attempts are made to eradicate its source. To eliminate the aged and infirm in Nazi Germany as many as “260,000 were murdered within the framework of the Nazis' ‘euthanasia' program” and mass graves collected the emaciated and gaunt bodies of the dead. (Poore 22) Yet still at other times, a morbid fascination with death sets in and suicide victims are often drawn to and turn to death as an escape. Turning to literature and psychology to make sense of something so senseless makes, for lack of a better word, sense. Nobel Prize winners Thomas Mann and Gabriel Garcia Marquez both address themes of death, age and illness in their works. Specifically, in *Death in Venice*, Mann highlights issues of aging, illness and uses the symbolism of the skeletal both to portray death and to foreshadow it. The narrative begins with the protagonist alone and contemplating his life’s work. “Gustav Aschenbach-or von Aschenbach, as he had been known officially since his fiftieth birthday-set off alone from his dwelling to Prinzregentenstrasse in Munich on a rather long walk.” (Puchner, 87) So, when Aschenbach and the reader encounters the gaunt, emaciated and uncanny figure in the graveyard, it is from this sense of isolation and loneliness coupled with a heightened expectation that creates the foreshadowing. Moreover, when Mann references the ‘untenanted graveyard,” he seems to allude to the fact that soon Germany would provide tenants to mass graveyards in the form of the Jews, the aged, the infirm and homosexuals. “Recent historical scholarship has provided important additional information about the Grafeneck killing center and the transfers there. On October 14, 1939, the Samariterstiftung Stuttgart’s home for the disabled in Grafeneck was seized ‘for the purposes of the Reich.’ Within the next several months, a gas chamber and crematorium were constructed on the premises. On January 18 and 20, 1940, forty-seven patients from the Bavarian facility Eglfing-Haar, near Munich, were transported to Grafeneck and killed by means of poison gas. A few days later, on January 26, fifty-five additional patients were transported from the Reich Hospital (Heilanstalt) Weinsberg in Wu ̈rttemberg. They, too, were killed within a few days.” (Braune 459) In addition to this foreshadowing of death, Mann consistently creates an uncanny and supernatural tone which sends the subtle yet erroneous message that death is a panacea in itself. Alternately, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Love in the time of Cholera* presents death as something to be both feared and faced rather than lauded. (Marquez 31) And while Marquez's thoughts on love, death, illness, and aging echo Mann’s in some respects, his is a much more hopeful and restorative text thatmoves from a modernist to a more post-modernist view.

The subject of death lends itself particularly well to psychoanalytical analysis and Freud’s Uncanny and Death Instinct theories deal specifically with what makes texts frightening and death compelling, respectively. Although many might question the use of psychoanalysis when it comes to literary criticism, its validity is less suspect in literature that deals with works like *Death in Venice* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* that focus on supernatural events or the internal mental states of the characters as well as the author. In her article, Peel states that “the literature of the uncanny offers an excellent area in which to look at the appropriateness of psychoanalytic theory to the study of literature. An apparently supernatural event-in literature or life-may simply result from a psychological disorder in the perceiver. The uncanny also has a special literary status, because studies of the psychology of writer and reader have singled it out." (410) A psychoanalytical approach to death posits that “death is inaccessible to the mind” and that “it slides like oil on water and cannot penetrate the deeper levels of the mind.” (Razinsky 66) That death is a problem and not part of humanity’s original plan is a foundational belief of many of the world religions. Death’s inaccessibility and inability to be represented doesn’t deter philosophers, theologians and writers from making the attempt. Profoundly affected by the voluntary and involuntary deaths of those close to him, a major World War, and exile from his home country, Thomas Mann’s psyche and works are colored by large scale loss, and are overly preoccupied with sickness and a morbid fascination with death. Influenced by propagated German ideals of beauty and perfection, Mann subtly glorifies the suicide/euthanasia of the elderly in *Death in Venice* and downplays death by natural causes. And just as Aschenbach is rocked to an almost death-like slumber in the romantic but coffin-like Venetian gondola, Mann’s readers are almost lulled into accepting Aschenbach’s death as normal. But there is nothing normal in Mann’s account of an elderly man who chooses to die in Venice rather than leave a disease infested country to return home to face the aging process. And while Mann himself hated the German Nazi regime, as a German citizen he was subtly affected by it. As “what the Germans call a Nationalschriftsteller, a writer who serves as a kind of personified consciousness of his nation,” Mann’s modernist views of aging, illness, love and death are representative of the times he lived in and have had a tremendous impact on the society and culture in which he lived, but his views of death no longer have the same relevance in post-modern times as they had in the past. (Boes 431) “That death defies representation is the basic tenet underlying Freud’s approach.” (Razinsky, 64) But despite the seemingly Freudian influence in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice,* the author continues his attempts to represent death and illness in much of his work. However, Mann’s views on death, aging and sickness are not to be trusted. Though Thomas Mann's rendering of death in *Death in Venice* is romanticized with Greek idealism, it is also laced with a suicidal drive towards death brought on by a German fear of the aging, ill and foreign, a strong sense of the uncanny and an unbalanced love of youth and beauty.

Mann and Marquez are testaments to the field of literature and their works embody the spirit and soul of their culture and time. However, they address these global themes with disparate tones and emphases. Their different approaches to similar themes, and death specifically, point to the culture and times they lived in. But, more importantly it can be argued that a society’s view of death and its treatment of the aged and infirm has a direct correlation on how it is judged in history. And by casting death as a hero or a villain, Modernist and Post-Modernist writers implicitly reveal their stance on death. Mann, through his tone, casts Death as a hero and age as a villain in agreement with Bastille who, quoting Hegel, states that, “man fights against nature to establish himself as Man, and he can do so though his willingness to renounce his own animal existence. By accepting death, man turns himself from animal to human.” (Razinksy 67) Some could argue that in the final scene, Aschenbach is finally freed from his base animal instincts and is released to his truest humanity through death. “It seemed to him, though, as if the pale and charming psychagogue out there were smiling at him, beckoning to him; as if, lifting his hand from his hip, he were pointing outwards, hovering before him in an immensity full of promise. And, as so often before, he arose to follow him.” (Puchner 138) Here Mann ends his narrative with the imagery of hope. Nothing is lost in Aschenbach’s final moments, but all is gained. He dies in the throes of love and follows Tadzio to an ‘immensity full of promise.” But this supremely optimistic view of death is misleading. Viewing death as an escape from life is problematic. This ascribes a purpose to the death and decay of all life. Some believe that this is the purpose of man, animal and organism to recycle their organic material to nourish and feed future life and that is the purpose of death. But the petrifying decay and maggot infested progression of a decaying body presents a different image and signals a deeper problem. According to some religions e.g., Christianity, Judaism and Islam, man was never meant to die and death is not viewed in such favorable terms. And while Urbino views death through his faith, Aschenbach was a worshiper of art and found in death a release of his artistic soul.

Unlike Mann, Marquez paints death as a villain. Urbino was a believer and it is through this filter that he views death. His description of Jeremiah de Saint-Amour’s dead body is particularly grotesque, “Jeremiah de Saint-Amour was completely naked, stiff and twisted, eyes open, body blue, looking fifty years older than he had the night before. He had luminous pupils, yellowish beard and hair, an old scar sewn with baling knots across his stomach. The use of crutches had made his torso and arms as broad as a galley slaves, but his defenseless legs looked like an orphans. Dr. Juvenal Urbino studied him for a moment, his heart aching as it rarely had in the long years of his futile struggle against death.” (Marquez 4) Urbino studied death in this moment and realized that death is both terrifying and inevitable,

“On Pentecost Sunday, when he lifted the blanket to look at Jeremiah de Saint-Amour’s body, Dr. Urbino experienced the revelation of something that had been denied him until then in his most lucid peregrinations as a physician and a believer. After so many years of familiarity with death, after battling it for so long, after so much turning it inside out and upside down, it was as if he had dared to look death in the face for the first time, and it had looked back at him…and [he] realized that death was not only a permanent probability, as he had always believed, but an immediate reality.” (Marquez 31)

Because of Urbino’s spiritual beliefs and his profession, during his life he engaged in a “futile struggle” against this villain before realizing that in the end, death must be faced. Urbino realizes that although Death was never meant to be, in a fallen world, it is the ultimate and inevitable villain. In both of these accounts, what makes death uncanny is both death’s inevitability and its unnaturalness.

But despite the unnaturalness of death, Mann’s main character Aschenbach is driven towards it by his fear and revulsion of aging and a love of youth. Aging is an unattractive process that often makes people fearful and revert to an unbalanced exaltation of youth and beauty (e.g., mid-life crises). Age too carries with it a sense of the ‘uncanny.’ An aging body is ‘unhomely,’ and makes people feel not quite at home in their own bodies. According to Svenaeus, “the not-being-at-home with the body can make itself known at any time-through fatigue, hunger, thirst, pain, itches-but is intensified and brought to the point of being a major nuisance in various forms of illnesses.” (Svenaeus, 99) And Freud notes that, “the German word unheimlich [of which the nearest semantic equivalents in English are ‘uncanny’ and ‘eerie’, …etymologically corresponds to ‘unhomely’].” (124) Aschenbach becomes increasingly concerned with his appearance and out of place in his aging body and “several times a day he took lengthy care getting dressed and then came down to the dining room all bedecked, excited and expectant…his aging body disgusted him when he looked at the sweet youth with whom he was smitten; the sight of his gray hair and his sharp facial features overwhelmed him with shame and hopelessness.” (Puchner 134) Shame and hopelessness are often present in suicidal victims. Whether it is from physical illness or depression, these two emotions alter mental states and can lead to suicide.

In addition to his fear of aging, Aschenbach is also “troubled by a pressure within him pushing in a direction he could not quite grasp…and when he [sees] the ghastly old imposter he realize[s] with something like horror that this youth [is] not genuine.” (Puchner, 96-97) This ‘pressure’ the narrator feels is something outside himself propelling him to Venice where he would eventually meet his death. Freud calls this the ‘death instinct.’ And in some ways, the figures that guide him act as the embodiment of age and the vehicle that carries him to his death. But it seems that on a deeper level this pressure is something even more insidious. Mann penned his story during the time of Nazi occupied Germany. The Nazi Euthanasia program is well-known and documented. They felt that some people were not fit to live. According to Poore,

“During the Third Reich images of disability and, in a broader sense, of illness constantly circulated. This was one of the most significant ways in which the Nazis tried to define whom they considered to be authentic, "valuable" Germans and whom they considered to be inferior outsiders termed "lives unworthy of life.” (22)

As an aging German citizen and artist Aschenbach would have felt this pressure and his fear of aging and love of youth and beauty would have been heightened. You can sense his unbalanced exaltation of youth and beauty in the allusions to Greek mythology and in his praise of Tadizo. “Aschenbach noted with astonishment that the boy was perfect…it was a face reminiscent of Greek statutes from the noblest period of antiquity.” (Puchner 103) But, these same Greek statutes are frozen in time and are now crumbling from age and decay almost like Tadzio and Aschenbach themselves. While Mann may have written this novella as a criticism of these Nazi ideals, the ending of the story seems to cast Aschenbach’s death in a positive light and in so doing seems to support his choice to commit implicit suicide.

But in addition to emphasizing a fear of aging and hyper-exaltation of youth and beauty, with his rendering of Aschenbach’s life, Mann also subtly exalts suicide/euthanasia of the elderly. According to Freud’s Death Instinct theory, all organisms have a biological drive towards death. In Razinsky’s article, Hegel posits that “by accepting death, man turns himself from animal to human’ and ‘that life’s ultimate accomplishment will be its suicide…” But Razinsky finds this view problematic and concludes that using this theory as a justification for suicide/euthanasia is an “unjustifiable dead-end.” (67) But whether it’s Freud’s death instinct or some other drive, Aschenbach inevitably continues on this path toward death despite learning about the Cholera epidemic and the deleterious weather. He could have left several times, but refused. “For the second time, and this time definitively, it became clear that this city in this weather was particularly harmful to his health…[and he] reached the conclusion that he would have to leave Venice.” (Puchner, 110) So, in a way, by refusing to leave Venice when he knew that remaining would result in death, it is arguable that Aschenbach committed implicit suicide or euthanasia. To avoid aging, he allowed himself to remain buried in Venice with his idol of youth and beauty instead of letting age take its ‘natural’ course.

Similarly, in Marquez’s novel, there are arguably two age-induced suicides but youth and beauty are not idolized or elevated, rather they are demoted and age and mature love are praised. Although in his suicide note Jeremiah de Saint-Amour stated explicitly that he was departing this world to escape the ravages of the aging process, Dr. Juvenal Urbino’s ‘accidental’ death wasn’t so accidental. Having just learned of his friend’s suicide, he returns home and climbs a ladder to rescue his bird when he had just had to have men carry him across a muddy patio. “Like them he wanted to move from the carriage to the house by jumping from stone to stone across the muddy patio, but at last he had to accept the humiliation of being carried by Don Sancho’s men under a yellow canvas canopy.” (Marquez, 34) This shame and hopelessness is what leads to the implied suicides of both Urbino and Aschenbach. Urbino is humiliated at having to be carried over the patio and has just witnessed the dead body of his best friend who has chosen to take his own life rather than face the same humiliation. His perspective on life and death was skewed by his grief and his own aging body. Urbino is significantly older at this point and he was so shaken by Jeremiah de Saint-Amour’s death to the point that he let go of his previous precautions against the ravages of age. Here was a man who for years attempted to stave off old age by getting up “at the crack of dawn [to] take his secret medicines: potassium bromide to raise his spirits, salicylate for the ache in his bones when it rained, ergosterol drops for vertigo, belladonna for sound sleep. He took something every hour, always in secret, because in his long life as a doctor and teacher he had always opposed prescribing palliatives for old age: it was easier for him to bear other people’s pains that his own.” (Marquez 8) Both Aschenbach and Urbino were shamed by their age and knowingly continued on a course of action that ultimately lead to their deaths. Hopelessness and shame twist and skew perspectives. Mann was touched personally by the suicides of five family members, an astoundingly large number, and he lived through a period of mass genocide. This makes his views of death and that of the narrator either extremely suspect or trustworthy. It seems more likely the former. Grief, particularly deep grief, alters the psyche, shifts the perspective and fosters obsessive thoughts and actions in the one suffering. Aschenbach is grieving his youth and is obsessed with Tadzio who represents his youth and the cholera epidemic that lead to his death. These fatal obsessions ultimately lead to his death. But although Ariza is obsessed with Fermina, his obsession does not result in death.

But though both Mann and Marquez’s texts portray the attempts of major male characters to escape age by euthanasia, their tones differ. While Mann idealizes Aschenbach’s death, Marquez renders Jeremiah’s death a tragedy. Urbino’s sadness at the death of his friend and his confusion over Saint-Amour’s lover’s assistance with the suicide creates a sadness in both the reader and the character that makes it tragic and leads to Urbino’s own death. But in tragedy, there is hope. Paradoxically, the feeling that something is lost provides the reader with a revived sense of hope. And where there is hope there is life, but when hope is lost, death and suicide result. Alternately, Mann represents Aschenbach’s death as almost inevitable, even poetic. “His face took on the slack, intimately absorbed expression of sleep. It seemed to him, though, as if the pale and charming psychagogue out there were smiling at him, beckoning him…” (Puschner, 138) The tacit resignation in “Death in Venice,” doesn’t provide a path to hope. Aschenbach knows his love of Tadzio will never be consummated. There is no way for him to reclaim his youth, so he resigns himself to death. Modernist writers often wrote through periods of hopelessness. In a world beset by world war, suicide and mass murder, the presence death is inevitable.

As a Post-Modernist writer, Marquez realistically depicts the messiness of life. Moving away from the modernist sense of order and control, he depicts his characters as flawed human beings with aging bodies who transcend their limitations to find love. Conversely, Mann’s individualistic narrator is bound by the trappings of his art and cannot find a healthy form of love or perspective on aging and death. But despite their dissimilar approaches, Aschenbach and Ariza are both concerned with age and their images. Ariza notes that “no man of the time would have braved the ridicule of looking young at his age,” (Marquez, 259) And Aschenbach expresses horror at the elderly purporting to be young,

“[Aschenbach] realized with something like horror that this youth was not genuine. He was old, no doubt about it…did they not know, had they not noticed that he was old, that he had no right to wear their foppish and colorful clothes, had no right to pretend to be one of their own?” (Puchner, 97)

But while Mann’s novella leaves the reader with no way to escape the revulsion of age, Marquez’s novel expresses the undignified elements of aging while at the same time celebrating them. When Fermina and Ariza are on the ship at the end of the novel, (ironically just like Aschenbach was on a ship in the beginning of *Death in Venice),* they observe several young people on the ship who may have felt that their love was ‘indecent’ at a certain age. But they didn’t let their aging bodies stop them from consummating and enjoying their love. Marquez expresses that love does not necessarily result in death nor is it limited by aging bodies. The novel ends with two lovers previously separated by time, reuniting to spend the rest of their lives together. While both Mann and Marquez marry the themes of love and death in some way, Marquez makes the two synonymous. Ariza states that going to a funeral and being in love are one and the same and one of the prostitutes notes that “it was difficult to imagine the number of things that men left after love,” and lists intimate items, similar to what is left after death. (Marquez 77) In Aschenbach’s case, love leads to death. However in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, love is death.

In addition to similar themes, both Mann and Marquez render their accounts of death in an ‘uncanny’ fashion. In both *Love in the Time of Cholera* and *Death in Venice*, there are ‘uncanny’ figures: birds and guides. Three ‘uncanny’ guides lead Aschenbach through the aging process and his journey toward death: the man in the graveyard, the gondolier and the Italian performer. However, it could be argued that these three men are one and the same and through Mann’s depictions of their appearance and behavior they become uncanny representations of death and serve to fulfill the narrator’s death instinct. In his theory of the Uncanny, Freud posits that the Uncanny can be defined as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.” (124) Death is at the same time familiar and unknowable. But Aschenbach doesn’t seem to have an issue with death and welcomes it, but he abhors the vehicle of death, the aging process. So, Mann uses the uncanny to represent the ‘unhomliness’ of the aging process and he uses the three guides to embody this.

There are several things that makes the figure in the graveyard ‘uncanny.’ Freud quotes Jentsch who says, “one of the surest devices for producing slightly uncanny effects through story-telling is to leave the reader wondering whether a particular figure is a real person or an automaton, and to do so in such a way that his attention is not focused directly on the uncertainty, lest he should be prompted to examine and settle the matter at once.” (135) Aschenbach finds the presence of the figure strange but he does so “without entering to deeply into the question.” (Puchner, 88) Mann increases the sense of the uncanny by his description of the man. The man in the graveyard of “untenented residents” is described with the imagery of a skeleton or a type of ‘walking dead,’

“Moderately tall, thin, clean-shaven, and strikingly snub-nosed…with colorless red-lashed eyes, between which stood two-stark vertical furrows that went rather oddly with his short, turned-up nose…his lips seemed insufficient, perhaps because he was squinting, blinded, toward the setting sun or maybe because he was afflicted by a facial deformity-in any case they were retracted to such an extent that his teeth, revealed as far as the gums, menacingly displayed their entire white length…he was clearly not of Bavarian stock.” (Puchner 88-89)

This description is reminiscent of a skeleton. A turned up nose resembles a skull’s two nostril holes, the lack of lips and prominent teeth, the mouth of the skull and the two furrows, the indentation between the eyes of a skull. This figure is both a symbol and an element of foreshadowing. He is a symbol of death as he looks like a skeleton and ultimately leads Aschenbach to his death. He is the embodiment of age and is also used to foreshadow future events. It is as if he is one of the tenants of the graveyard arisen to hurtle the narrator to his death. The gondolier is also described in the same manner, identically as the man in the graveyard. Just as Mann creates an eerie tone with his location of a graveyard in the beginning, he now continues the same tone with his description of the gondola and combines the themes of love and death. Here the Venetian gondola, usually a symbol of romance, becomes in effect, a symbol of death,

“Who would not need to fight off a fleeting shiver, a secret aversion and anxiety at the prospect of boarding a Venetian gondola for the first time or after a long absence? This strange conveyance, surviving unchanged since legendary times and painted the particular sort of black ordinarily reserved for coffins, makes one think of silent, criminal adventures in a darkness full of splashing sounds; makes one think even more of death itself, of biers and gloomy funerals, and of that final silent journey. And has anyone noticed that the seat of one of these boats, this armchair painted coffin-black and upholstered in dull black cloth, is one of the softest, most luxurious, most sleep-inducing seats in the world? (Puchner, 100)

The gondolier is analogous to the boatman Charon who rowed the dead to the underworld. He is also, in essence, the same figure that appeared to Aschenbach in the graveyard, “his turned-up nose marked him as clearly not of Italian stock…rather slender of build…several times he pulled his lips back with the strain, baring his white teeth.” (Puchner ,101) Here again is the skeletal imagery. The man is thin, has a turned-up nose and bares his teeth. As this is the second time Mann repeats himself, he clearly wants to emblazon this image in the mind of his readers.

Finally, Mann repeats this imagery a third time and the guitar player is also represented in the identical manner of the man in the graveyard and the gondolier. Mann subtly creates a similar tone in his description of the location here. The minstrel appears after Aschenbach has gone through the city to find evidence of the disease that is killing its residents. While at the performance, there is food, music and celebration, not unlike a funeral, and Aschenbach sips on pomegranate juice, a fruit inspired by the queen of Hades and the world of the dead. In Greek times Thanthos had a cult following and here, there seems to be a similar celebration of death and the defensive humor that often accompanies it. Mann writes, “on the terrace an unfounded mirth set in, feeding on nothing but itself.” (Puchner 129) The musician here is described as a ‘man of lean build, and even his face was thin to the point of emaciation…he seemed not to be of Venetian stock.” (Puchner 127) When read in the context of the history of the time and country, this emphasis of stock or nationality hints at issues of nationality and ethnic elitism. As a Modernist writer, Mann writes about a narrator who is born into a certain class of elite European men. This gives greater weight to issues of nationality, class and gender. According to Irvine, Modernists have “faith in, and myths of, social and cultural unity, hierarchies of social-class and ethnic/national values.” Marquez’s novel, on the other hand, is a novel for both the common man and the intellectual which supports the Post-modernist tendency toward “social and cultural pluralism.” (Irvine)

But the guides aren’t the only uncanny creatures in these texts; the parrot, the prostitutes, crows and pigeons in Marquez’s novel are also harbingers of death. Like some prequel to the movie “The Birds” these unassuming creatures are the uncanny figures that drive people to their death. The amusing parrot in the beginning of the novel appears just before Dr. Urbino falls to his death, although the parrot itself falls into a pot of boiling stew without meeting the same fate. Here again we see evidence of the uncanny. The bird’s amusing antics belie his darker purpose. As he is about to fall into a boiling pot of stew he cries out “Every man for himself,” and humor distracts the reader from the fact that the bird ultimately leads Urbino to his death. (Marquez 24) Just as Aschenbach didn’t pay too much mind to the specter in the graveyard, Urbino follows the parrot blindly up the ladder to his death. The other birds in the novel also foreshadow the deaths of various characters in similar ways.

In keeping with the theory of the Uncanny, Tadzio also serves as a narcissistic mirror for the narrator for him to identify with. According to Freud’s theories on death, the only way to comprehend death is through an ‘other’ and that because of “the impossibility of representing our own death,” we can only approach death through “the possible death of the other…[and] although primeval man resembled us in that he did not grasp death as annihilation in his own case, he recognized it in the case of another much more willfully than we do-indeed he wished for the other’s death.” (Razinsky 65) Several times during Aschenbach’s rendering of Tadzio, the narrator wishes for the death of his ‘other.’ “He is very sensitive, he is sickly, thought Aschenbach. He will probably not live long. And he refrained from trying to account for the feeling of satisfaction and reassurance that accompanied this thought.” (Puchner 109) And later on in the account, Aschenbach notes again, “he is sickly; he will probably not live long…ingenuous solicitude mixed with a dissolute satisfaction filled his heart.” (Puchner 129) Here Aschenbach finds comfort in the thought of the death of his other and his “ingenuous solicitude’ begs the question of whether or not he actually loves the boy. Perhaps this joy at the death of his ‘other’ ameliorates his own fear of death and helps him to come to terms with his own death. This subtle mirroring is even hinted at in an allusion to Narcissus and in the final scene,

“Tadzio smiled. He smiled at Aschenbach , smiled eloquently, intimately, charmingly, and without disguise, with lips that began to open only as he smiled. It was the smile of Narcissus leaning over the mirroring water, that deep, beguiled, unresisting smile that comes as he extends his arm toward the reflection of his own beauty.” (Puchner 121)

According to the Uncanny theory one of the things that creates an uncanny effect is “the idea of the double…[and] a person may identify himself with another and so becomes unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other’s self of his own…the motif of he double has been treated in detail in a study by O.Rank. This work explores the connections that link the double with mirror-images, shadows, guardian spirits, the doctrine of the soul and the fear of death.” (Freud 142) The ending of the story shows this mirror-imaging between Aschenbach and Tadzio. Before his own death, Aschenbach witnesses what he believes to be the near death of his beloved and his own fading youth,

“Tadzio…seemed in danger of suffocating…lay still for whole moments, then tried again with no more than a twitch. The observer sat there as he had sat once before, when for the first time he had met the gaze of his dawn-gray eyes cast back at him from that threshold…now his head rose as if returning the gaze, then sank on his chest so that his eyes looked out from beneath…his face took on the slack, intimately absorbed expression of deep sleep.” (Puchner 138)

Reading this account the reader is struck by what appears to be the narrator looking at himself in a mirror. Immediately after the boy walks out onto the sandbar he looks back toward Aschenbach. “ and in an almost Medusean manner, death is reflected from Tadzio to Aschenbach in a truly uncanny manner.

But Mann’s descriptions consist of more than just a sense of the uncanny and eerily morbid descriptions of death. They also hint at German nationalism and fear of the foreign and homosexual. In each description Mann states that the harbinger of death is not of national stock and he draws attention to their ‘protruding Adam’s apples.’ When in Munich, he states that the graveyard man was “clearly not of Bavarian stock.” (Puchner 88) When in Venice, he states that the gondolier “was clearly not of Italian stock.” (Puchner 100) And when he was listening to the minstrel “he seemed not to be of Venetian stock.” (Puchner 128) None of these embodiments of age who inspired fear and brought death were of the nationality of the country they were in. While some could argue that this was Mann’s way of showing that these apparitions were otherworldly and therefore not human, Mann specifically focuses on the fact that they appeared foreign and were of ‘foreign’ nationality or ‘stock.’ “He was clearly not of Bavarian stock, and in any case the wide and straight-brimmed straw hat that covered his head lent him the appearance of a foreigner…” (Puchner 88) Ancestral heritage was a prominent factor in Germany during Nazi occupation and Mann’s word choice of ‘stock’ here is telling. He also describes the minstrel as being reminiscent of a race of “Neopolitan comics.” (Puchner 127) This reference to Napoleon, although slight, refers to a man who could be considered the father of German nationalism. But, in addition to foreigners, the aged and the infirm, many Germans also feared and persecuted homosexuals because they believed that they would stunt the German population. Mann mentions the Adam’s apple in each of his descriptions of the apparitions and uses a part of the anatomy that has become symbolic of the homosexual male. “With his head held up, so that his Adam’s apple protruded nakedly from the thin neck that emerged from his loose sport shirt, he gazed intently into the distance.” (Puchner 88) This points to the fact that Aschenbach seems to feel conflicted about both his sexuality and the professional path that he had chosen and wonders whether or not his ancestors would approve. When he thinks in the beginning lines of the story that “he had been overstrained by the difficult and dangerous morning’s work which had just now required particular, discretion, caution, penetration and precision of will,” readers might think that he was a soldier and not an artist. (Puchner 82) Mann further reveals Aschenbach’s conflict through his defensiveness and comparison of his life to a soldier later in the story,

“But then what would they have said about his whole life, a life that had so diverged, one might say degenerated, from theirs, a life under the spell of art…this life that yet so fundamentally resembled theirs? He too had done his service, he too had practiced a strict discipline, he too had been a soldier and a man of war, like many of them.” (Puchner 125)

Aschenbach’s alienation from society is evident. During the entire account, although surrounded by crowds of people, Aschenbach only spoke to people on the outskirts: the servants, the barber, the hotel attendant, his guides. So, in addition to his age, Aschenbach seems driven to his implicit suicide by feelings of loneliness, depression and alienation from society. Alienation is a feature of Modernist works and here it leads to the character’s death. But this sense of alienation isn’t as prominent in Marquez’s work.

Ultimately, both Mann and Marquez’s works are masterfully rendered and employ elements of the uncanny and literary elements like imagery, tone and symbolism to portray global themes of death and aging. But despite Mann’s eloquent depiction of the main character’s thanophilia, gerontophobia, pedophilia, and hyper-exaltation of youth, Aschenbach's inordinate and morbid fascination with death provides nothing of real societal or cultural benefit. While globally we are still beset by conflicts and disease, war on the scale of the one experienced during Mann’s time isn’t as imminent today. And scientific and technological advances have made illnesses more tolerable and in some cases irrelevant. But regardless of the age, fatal obsessions with death are dangerous without the tempering facet of rationality. When Razinsky writes that “life’s ultimate accomplishment will be its suicide [is an] unjustifiable dead-end,” he was correct. Whether or not the pun was intended, suicide and a morbid view of death is a dead-end. (67) Suicide as escapism is not an answer but a psychosis. And while Freud’s death instinct provides a psychoanalytical answer for a fascination with death, it fails to address spiritual aspects of death. However, where Mann leaves us at a dead-end, Marquez’s treatment of gerontophobia induced suicide and death provides a healthier approach that provides a way out of the problem of death without subscribing to euthanasia of the elderly and artistic redemption through suicide.

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