

## Death and Beauty: Deliverance from Mortality in The Works of Thomas Mann and Yasunari Kawabata

Divided by nearly a generation and by culture, it is not surprising that Thomas Mann and Yasunari Kawabata each took death as a major theme. As products of nations with great martial traditions and ones steeped in a variously Christian and Buddhist/Shinto tradition, and confronting the challenges that the twentieth century with its fascist movements and cataclysmic wars presented, the works of Mann and Kawabata serve to illustrate how modern man confronts destructive and transformative change by turning to the certainties and traditions of the past. If, as Mann's biographer and Marxist critic Georg Lukács suggests, Mann described "the conflicts ...in the psychological and moral realms" connected to the historical developments of his day ("Bourgeois" 471), Kawabata, for his part vowed to write nothing but elegies following Japan's ignominious defeat in World War II (Petersen 155). Accordingly, death, with its intimate companions disease, loss and decay, becomes in both bodies of work a foreboding presence.

Unremitting gloom is not, however, what Mann and Kawabata deliver. While the characters in the stories studied here struggle with the dark aspects of life, they also experience moments of surpassing beauty. These moments are often depicted through secondary characters of youthful innocence and purity, virginal youth unsullied by the corrupting influence of sexual experience. These archetypal characters represent a connection to traditional values; through them the main protagonists grasp meaning as their reality shifts and time presses on them. They offer a promise of redemption from the loss and pain that are the ultimate gifts of time, and from illness and death itself.

Illness plays a pivotal role in the works of Mann, both literally and figuratively. In the essay "Thomas Mann and the German Tradition" by F. J. H. Letters, the author observes that all Mann's characters "are sick" (465). Following the development from Mann's earlier novella, *Tonio Kroger* (1903) to the later and more famous *Death in Venice* (1911) we can see how the author connects sickness and disease to the artistic tendencies in his characters, Tonio Kroger and Gustav Aschenbach, and how he represents qualities associated with the artistic such as subjectivity, romanticism, warmth and sentimentality.

In *Tonio Kroger*, the impulse towards artistic creativity is merely a weakness, one inherited from the eponymous hero's fiery, passionate, and significantly, foreign mother whose "blithe indifference" to practical matters he finds "wanton" even as a youth (78). The things he loves, the fountain, the old walnut tree, his fiddle, are those that are "effective in verse" although Tonio himself feels "his verse-making" is "extravagant and out of place...an unpleasing occupation" (78). He struggles with the "two crass extremes" of his nature: between "icy intellect and scorching sense" but is also aware that excesses in his nature only serve to sharpen his artistry until it grows "fastidious, precious, *raffiné*, morbidly sensitive" (92). For Tonio there is no easy integration of the bourgeois values of his German father and the unbridled passion and creativity of his distinctly un-Germanic mother. Life, for him, lies in the former; the path he follows as a writer is a "curse" that sets him apart from "the nice, regular people" (97). The young man concludes that "one must die to life in order to be utterly a creator" (97) and the life he is referring to, and that he must abandon, is the stable secure existence of the German middle class. As Lukács comments in his essay "In Search of Bourgeois Man," Tonio

“loves life and rates it higher than an art forced to stand aside from life” (23). When the Russian painter Lisaveta Ivanovna calls him a “bourgeois manqué,” she recognizes that her friend is rooted in the solid, composed life of the “regular” people he can never join, and that, for him, the creation of his art is a complete abandonment of hope to ever belong.

The debilitating effect of the artistic life is further illustrated through the symbolism of the ancestral home embodying three hundred years of stalwart adherence to the bourgeois values of Tonio’s male lineage, a lineage from which he is separated by his very name and by the blood of the foreign mother. When, after many years Tonio returns to the town of his youth, he retraces the familiar paths along which little seems to have changed until he reaches the manse “aloof from its neighbors, its gable towering above them; grey and somber” (111). He finds to his dismay that the home has become a public library and “the black lines of print” from the book he takes in his hand, “the flow of words that flowed with so much art, mounting in the ardor of creation to a certain climax and effect” (111) suggest the progress of disease. Literature is a cancer that has spread through the house and Tonio is the carrier of the fatal contagion that has uprooted him from his historical ground, leaving him alone like the old walnut tree that still stands “groaning and creaking” in the desolate garden. Decay, decrepitude and disinheritance from the past are the end results of his art.

This weakness that is “but a dream and tendency in Tonio Kroger Gustav Aschenbach brings to full flower” in *Death in Venice* (Lukács, “Bourgeois Man” 24). Like Tonio, Aschenbach is “the union of dry conscientious officialdom and ardent, obscure impulse” (8), but whereas Tonio still struggles with conflicting values, the older man has already clearly “died to life” by the time he embarks on his fateful journey to Venice. There are many echoes of *Tonio Kroger* here and foreshadowing of what is to come as when, early on, Aschenbach contemplates art: “She gives deeper joy, she consumes more swiftly...she will in the end produce...a fastidiousness, an over-refinement, a nervous fever and exhaustion...” (15). Aschenbach is simply Tonio twenty years from the time we leave the younger man.

From the title on, death and folly stalk the pages of *Death in Venice*, from the description of the “ancient hulk” whose passengers include the grotesque “young-old man” (17) whose age is only accentuated by the garish attempts to conceal it; to the gondola that awaits Aschenbach on his arrival, “black as nothing else on earth except a coffin” (20); to the “desolate and calamitous city” itself whose canals “sickened him with their evil exhalations” (34). As Aschenbach abandons himself to his reckless infatuation with the boy, Tadzio, he ventures deeper into the “city’s narrow streets where horrid death stalked too” (67). Even Tadzio with his carious teeth and delicate constitution is, despite his youth and god-like appearance, clearly not immune. In a final bleak scene the triumph of death even over youth and beauty is underscored as the pale boy, pinned to the ground by a rival, makes “spasmodic efforts to shake the other off,” lies still and begins a “feeble twitching” (72). Thus as Aschenbach, now himself a parody of youth, slowly expires, Tadzio too acts out his own death against the backdrop of an empty and “inane” expanse.

Ignominious as Aschenbach’s death seems, however, there is yet redemption to be found in it. With his death he experiences the culmination of his appreciation of classic beauty; death is the “pale and lovely summoner” beckoning him “into an immensity of

richest expectation” (73). Indeed it is Mann’s sense of beauty, on the one hand rooted in images of Greek mythology, and on the other in the ideals of the German bourgeoisie, that relieves the otherwise bleak tone of these two works.

In his essay “Myth Plus Psychology: A Stylistic Analysis of *Death in Venice*,” André von Gronicka contends that Mann’s characters “are rooted both in this-worldliness and in the realm of myth and legend” (48). Tadzio belongs to the latter category and is variously compared to Hyacinthus, Narcissus and Hermes: “The sight of this living figure, virginally pure and austere, with dripping locks, beautiful as a tender young god... it conjured up mythologies” (33). Emblematic of the mythological, the boy is also “the embodiment and symbol of beauty for the endangered artist” (Gronicka 56) and as such he is the key which unlocks Aschenbach’s imprisoned spirit. The intellectual’s preoccupation with form finds in Tadzio “beauty’s very essence; form as divine thought” (43). Tadzio is the vehicle which ultimately leads the exhausted artist to the “immeasurable, the eternal” and “the perfection of nothingness” that is death (56).

If Tadzio represents Mann’s otherworldly conception of beauty, his bourgeois ideal is embodied in the form of Ingeborg Holm in *Tonio Kroger*, a “blond, simple, pert and...commonplace little personality” (89). With Ingeborg Mann moves closer to home for his archetypal object of desire. Where Tadzio is rooted in images from classical antiquity, Ingeborg is connected to his own “race and type...this was the blond, fair-haired breed of the steel-blue eyes, which stood to him for the pure, the blithe, the untroubled in life; for a virginal aloofness that was at once both simple and full of pride” (126). She stands for “contemporary, bourgeois civilization” (Gronicka 48) and the “blessed mediocrity” (126) of that life. She is everything Tonio’s “sensuous, naïve, passionate and careless” mother is not (131). And because he is his mother’s son as well as his father’s, Ingeborg will remain always an unapproachable ideal. Still, as representative of all that is worthy in his culture, Ingeborg can be for him a source of “innocent bliss” even though he can never possess her personally. As an ideal of beauty she belongs to him by virtue of the culture they share.

We can see the same attachment to an ideal of beauty, and to both traditional and modern depictions of it, in the work of Yasunari Kawabata. Like Mann, Kawabata draws from a rich heritage of classical images, in this case going back as far as the eleventh-century Heian period masterpiece *Tale of Genji*. Moreover, in Kawabata, as in Mann, beauty and death are intricately linked. As Gwenn Boardman Petersen points out in *The Moon in the Water: Understanding Tanizaki, Kawabata, and Mishima*, the author is concerned with “the richly poetic implications of beauty and with fresh explorations of the traditional linking of beauty and sorrow” (162). And as in Mann, sorrow is connected to the loss and pain that come not only with death but with the consciousness of the inevitability of death.

While both writers can be said to employ “language that is cleansed of the colloquial and the commonplace” (Gronicka 46), Kawabata presents the reader with layers of meaning embedded in richly allusive prose. As Petersen points out, “a single reference” to a seasonal word “is sufficient to evoke a mood, to introduce a cluster of enriching associations, or to imply a character’s feelings and actions (31). While some of these translate easily and cross cultures with little difficulty, others are more elusive. Where in *Death in Venice*, for example, the references to death are obvious from the title

on, in *Sound of the Mountain* and *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, they appear repeatedly in small but painstakingly-placed details throughout the novel.

The Japanese are known for their highly developed sensitivity to nature and Kawabata makes masterful use of seasonal markers to suggest death in both *Sound* and *Sleeping Beauties* through numerous references to autumn and winter. There is repeated mention of maple leaves in *Sound of the Mountain*, references to autumn or winter skies, observations of insects associated with the season and links to the death of the main character, Shingo's, youthful love, who not coincidentally died in autumn and whose emblem is also a maple tree. Even Kikuko, the embodiment of youth and life, is linked to "sagging gourds" in the closing pages, a clear reference to the inevitability of her own decline. Other elements of the natural world provide clues to the direction the stories will take. In *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, the "wind blowing down over the hill behind the house," the reference to the sound of the waves crashing, and dreams of red dahlias all prefigure the eventual death of the visitor to the house, Eguchi, and the actual death of the dark-skinned girl with whom he lies.

While autumn may be a fairly universal symbol of death, the color white is not; and, as Petersen cautions, the significance of references to such innocuous items as a white butterfly, the white cap of an infant, or the white obi of the procuress in *Sleeping Beauties* can easily be missed (163, 166). Thus, the scene of winter snow in the alcove, recently changed from an autumn scene, and the vision of a swarm of butterflies transforming into a white field of flowers also presage death. A very minor detail in *Sound of the Mountain* is easy to overlook as well, the simple crossing of the kimono with the right side overlapping, a custom only for the dead and thus alarming when Shingo forgetfully arranges his own this way.

Along with the more subtle allusions to death, Kawabata weaves a rich tapestry of other references including, in *Sound*, reflections on the funerals of friends, dreams of the dead, comments on the painful aftermath of the war, interactions with war widows, and passing comments on stories in the news of suicides and abortions. Variations of these themes are skillfully interwoven into the action taking place in Shingo's own family, such as the way news of Kikuko's abortion and the son-in-law's suicide coincide with Shingo's dreams and with news reports and accounts from the office girl and other acquaintances. As for *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, the overt symbolism of the virgins in their unnatural sleep and the memories of the dead evoked by Eguchi's visits to the house converge to create a bleak tale of "loneliness tinged with sorrow" (21). Although we must agree with Petersen's assertion that "death always has richly poetic implications in Kawabata's work" (157) this is a story unrelieved by the celebration of beauty we find in *Sound of the Mountain* and other works by Kawabata.

Still, as we can find redemption through beauty in Mann, so we can find it in Kawabata, even in his darkest of stories. *House of the Sleeping Beauties* for example, may seem morbid and even misogynistic with its plot of senile and decrepit old men passing the night with drugged and naked girls. But if we understand that beauty in Kawabata's works is "Frequently represented in the person of a girl" (Petersen 128) we can see that it is not the girl herself that is the object of desire, it is beauty and the promise of life that beauty offers. As Boardman asserts, "The girls in their deathlike sleep...were a dream of life for the men who came to lie with them" (167). Indeed, as Eguchi lies next to the dark-skinned beauty who will die, a spasm passes over him "as if

to say: ‘Initiate me into the spell of life’ (91). Add to this an understanding of *aware* or appreciation for the transitory nature of life honed over a thousand years of Japanese aesthetics, and the story becomes less a prurient tale than a sad but beautiful testament to the invincible human spirit that will not stop questing. It is not the death of one of the beauties that matters here, it is the idea that what exists for a moment, whether a lovely girl or a cherry blossom, is exquisite precisely because it is fleeting.

In *Sound of the Mountain* beauty is also represented in the character of a young woman, the innocent and youthful Kikuko. Not only does Kikuko represent youth and life, she is the personification of the ideal of Japanese traditional, female beauty; what Tadzio is for Aschenbach, Kikuko is for Shingo. In a deeply poetic series of images, he links Kikuko to the *jido* mask, symbol of eternal youth. When Kikuko puts on the mask, she becomes for Shingo the essence of female beauty as defined by a thousand years of tradition: seeing her “pale, delicate, childlike face” floating before him, he feels a “flash like heaven’s own wayward love” (160). Later descriptions of “the graceful curve of her hairline” and “the division between the fine skin and the even, rich hair” (203) reinforce this image as do the numerous references to her beautiful shoulders and to her cleanness and maidenly freshness.

The treatment of the character of Kikuko is like the multiple layers of a Heian court kimono, each one revealing when folded back another yet more exquisite below. Built up through reflection and memory, the images of Kikuko provide a glimpse into the way we compensate for the loss and pain that aging brings. Petersen is correct in identifying Kikuko as yet more than Shingo’s window “looking out of a gloomy house” (37). She is his connection “to memory and meaning and life itself” (Petersen 170). After Kikuko arrives, Shingo’s memories are “pierced by moments of brightness, like flashes of lightning” (17) and through her the elusive memories of his early love, the dead sister of his wife, are restored to him. Moreover, through Kikuko the old man gains a kind of immortality as he ponders the possibility that her aborted child could be the spirit of the dead woman come back, “a beauty refused life in this world” (179). Though the baby has been aborted, Kikuko is still “riding the wave of life” (211) and, though the young woman’s eventual decline is hinted at, the reader feels that Shingo will continue to experience a connection to the immortal through her.

This sense of the immortal is what comes through in the works of Kawabata and before him Mann and we can apply the comments of Gronicka, writing of Mann, to both literary greats: Each “draws equally from both fountainheads of truly great art, from the immediate, sensible present and the endless vistas of the past, from the fleeing reality of life and the timeless reality of art” (61). Both authors also employ a masterful command of thematic contrast: death and life, beauty and decay, values of the present and traditions of the past. As Kawabata’s protégé, the brilliant and outrageous Yukio Mishima, writes in the introduction to *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, “the ‘radiance of life’ can only appear in the realm where death and eroticism are together” (9). Neither author feared to explore that realm to its fullest.

## Works Cited

- Gronicka, André von. "Myth Plus Psychology: A Stylistic Analysis of Death in Venice." Thomas Mann: A collection of Critical Essays. Eaglewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice, 1965. 46-61.
- Kawabata, Yasunari. The Sound of the Mountain. New York: Vintage, 1996.
- - - . House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1969.
- Letters, F. J. H. "Thomas Mann and the German Tradition." The Stature of Thomas Mann. Ed. Charles Neider. New York: New Directions, 1947. 457-466.
- Lukács, Georg. "In Search of Bourgeois Man." Essays on Thomas Mann. New York: Grosset, 1965. 13-46.
- - - . "In Search of the Bourgeois." The Stature of Thomas Mann. Ed. Charles Neider. New York: New Directions, 1947. 470-473.
- Mann, Thomas. Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Mishima, Yukio. Introduction. House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories by Yasunari Kawabata. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1969. 7-10.
- Petersen, Gwenn Boardman. The Moon in the Water: Understanding Tanizaki, Kawabata, and Mishima. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1979. 121-200.